

## Chapter 3

# Planning Ethics in the Age of Wicked Problems

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### ABSTRACT

*Ever since the publication of Rittel and Webber's Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning in 1973, the discourse on wicked problems has grown steadily in planning and other disciplines. Despite this, there has been little attention paid to the ethical dimensions of wicked problems. What are the ethical dimensions of wicked problems in planning and specifically, in e-planning? To answer this question, the author examines planning ethics in relation to the discourse on wicked problems. Following Hendler's framework (2001) on planning ethics, which comprises of five distinct discourses—namely, (i) the ethics of everyday behavior; (ii) the ethics of administrative discretion; (iii) the ethics of planning techniques; (iv) plan making; (v) normative planning theory—the author discusses each in relation to the discourse of wicked problems to draw out their ethical dimensions in the context of urban and regional planning. Through these discussions, the author argues that e-planning should engage with the discourse of planning ethics, and further, that e-planning can begin to develop its own ethical discourse in the face of wicked problems in planning today.*

### INTRODUCTION: ASSESSING THE STATE OF WICKED PROBLEMS TODAY

Inadvertently, the 40th anniversary of Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber's Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning (1973) coincides with the hard reality of intractable problems on many fronts today. A fragile global economy, a devastated environment, and a compromised

state of global and social justice are reminders that these intractable problems are wicked problems, and wicked problems have become ubiquitous in almost every pressing issue that matters to the human society (Xiang, 2013). Wicked problems can be defined as problems that defy solutions and that are constantly being transformed into other problems (Verma, 2011), and where apparent improvements at one level of problem-solving can lead to exacerbations at

another level (Allenby & Sarewitz, 2011). Recent studies in engineering and technology (Allenby & Sarewitz, 2011), environmental management (Balint, Stewart, Desai & Walters, 2011) and the policy sciences (Shellenberger & Nordhaus, 2013) have documented the extent of wicked problems. Quite fittingly, we are living in an age of wicked problems today (Kaesler, 2013).

Collectively and spanning nearly forty years across different disciplines<sup>1</sup>, a plethora of responses to wicked problems exist. Generally, these responses can be categorized into one or more of the following focus areas (see Balasiano, 2011): (i) responses to the formulation challenges of wicked problems (i.e., how should one formulate, or define the wicked problem?); (ii) responses to the solution challenges of wicked problems (i.e., how one should deal with the after-effects and side-effects of wicked problems?); and finally, (iii) responses to the assessment challenges of wicked problems (i.e., has the wicked problem been solved? To what extent was the solution effective?). These focus areas are however unevenly reflected in recent literature on wicked problems. Preponderantly, recent literature tended to focus on the formulation challenges of creating appropriate processes, methods and techniques that can deal with the realities of wicked problems. Starting with, and perhaps owing to, Rittel's original Issues Based Information Systems (IBIS) that later spawned a field of its own (Rith & Dubberly, 2007), responses to the formulation challenge range from creating learning networks (Balint, et al., 2011), to developing participatory tactics and interdisciplinary collaboration (Thompson & Whyte, 2012), or even to the search for "clumsy solutions" (Hartmann, 2012). In contrast, little emphasis—within or outside of planning theory—has been devoted to understanding the backend of wicked problems: the after and side-effects of wicked problems, and the assessment challenges of wicked problems.

## **THE ETHICAL GAP OF WICKED PROBLEMS IN PLANNING**

Despite this recent momentum on wicked problems, C.W. Churchman's original concern on the moral challenges of the wicked problem remains under-examined (Wexler, 2009). Churchman claimed that wicked problems entail moral responsibilities very different from one formulating and solving a routine or 'tame' problem (Wexler, 2009). Specifically then, what does this mean for planners and therefore, what are the ethical dimensions of wicked problems in planning?<sup>2</sup> And what should be the ethical theories relevant for planning in the age of wicked problems? Ethics, which is concerned with what is morally good, what is right and what a planner is obliged to do, is often obscured by the complex processes behind urban and regional planning decisions (Kirkman, 2010)—and this is even before one imputes wicked problems into planning. And although Rittel alluded to the ethical dimensions of wicked problems in different writings, and ethics was close to his research and teaching (Protzen & Harris, 2010), Rittel did not consolidate his thinking on the ethical dimensions of wicked problems in planning. Nonetheless, answers to these questions are important because the nature of the planners' ethical obligations will depend in part on the ethical theories used to understand and guide planning today.

But according to Campbell's recent claim, planning ethics as a whole, "aside from a few exceptions", has foundered:

*The fundamental normative question of what should be done [in planning] remains as pressing today as two decades ago. However, engagement with ethics both within the profession and the academic community has been patchy and most recently has somewhat foundered. The momentum which culminated in the publication of Hendler's Reader has tended to evaporate, aside from a few exceptions. (Campbell, 2012a, p. 393)*

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