

New developments on the concept of “wicked solution”

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Introduction

On 18 September 2018, [Mistra Urban Futures](#) and [Business Region Gothenburg](#) organized a [seminar](#) in the Urban Research series, with a panel of three invited international guests. The seminar was the second track in a dual research endeavor dedicated to the increased need to think about sustainability differently, the first being [a special issue in the Bulletin of Geography](#) (co-edited by Mirek Dymitrow and Keith Halfacree). Both the special issue and the seminar arose as a response to real-life problems and challenges encountered by the EU project [Urban Rural Gothenburg](#), with which Mistra Urban Futures is associated through a [research forum](#). In view of the specific socio-economic characteristics of the place of the project’s deployment – the North-East parts of Gothenburg – with high levels of segregation, unemployment, failing health, low education scores and high crime rates, has led the Research Forum to open up to scientific debate on how to best strive for sustainability in such settings.



Left to right: Rene Brauer, Jadwiga Biegańska, Dimitrinka Jordanova Peshevska, Mirek Dymitrow

Background: Sustainability—differently

The special issue attracted 25 researchers from all corners of the world, resulting in [12 cutting edge articles](#) reviewed by an international cadre of 40 scholars. During the work on the special issue, a number of important points arose, including several developments on the concept of “wicked problem”. Wicked problems are real-world problems that acknowledge the complex interdependence of diverse factors and stakeholders, rather than simplistic, linear cause-and-effect abstractions that

isolate the intervention from its context. This ever-so-relevant concept was taken to a new dimension, namely that sustainability in itself may be considered wicked if it is elevated to the status of a special currency or simply turned into an empty rhetorical 'tick-box' that does not take ample consideration of the context in which it is being deployed. It is during these divagations that the first signs of new conceptual developments began to emerge.

Wicked problems or wicked solutions?

The next step was to move away from the constricting format of the written word and open up to the dynamic format of an open forum. For the seminar, three international scholars were invited to share their experiences and ideas about sustainability and how it can be understood and approached through the prism of deprivation; in other words – differently.

- Prof. **Dimitrinka Jordanova Peshevska** from the American University College (Macedonia), shared the taunting story of Skopje, the world's most polluted city. Particle pollution in Skopje is more than ten times higher than the air quality standards set by the EU. The problem escalates every winter due to industrial emissions, smoke from wood-burning stoves and exhaust fumes from old cars. Air pollution in Skopje exceeds acceptable levels for 270 days/year, causing more than 1,300 premature deaths per year. Despite this, as well as in spite of Macedonia's problems of abject poverty, the last 10 years saw a slew of different priorities, including the use of illiquidity, which created the material and moral conditions for subjection to a system of corruption. These years also saw Macedonia's scarce resources being spent on rather controversial projects. The flagship investment was "Skopje 2014", an urban development project aiming to give Skopje a pseudo-nationalistic super-urban appeal, rivalling only North Korea for eccentricities. Involving massive construction of governmental buildings, museums and monuments depicting contested historical figures, the project was heavily criticized, not least for constructing historicist kitsch. The project has been accused of mixing different styles in cumbersome proportions and with slipshod finishes, using cheap, easily degradable materials, and by imposing an aura of 'monoculture' – a 'mini Las Vegas', a 'megalomaniac Disneyland' or a 'master hyperreality' of heritage clichés. Most importantly, it has been widely believed to be a distraction from real problems. Dimitrinka outlined both the dangers and prospects of development in view of the upcoming Macedonian name-change referendum (30 September).

- Dr **Jadwiga Biegańska** from the Nicolaus Copernicus University (Poland) depicted the dire situation of "rural-urban thinking" in Poland, a perspective which saturates every level and dimension of policy and planning. Programs supporting innovation and largescale investments are conceptually designed to further a growth-oriented brand of development widely understood as 'urban'. Conversely, so-called 'rural' programs revolve around the restructuring of the primary sector, and only to a lesser extent support more general activation schemes. Moreover, rural-urban thinking affects salary levels between rural and urban areas, enforce certain spatialized bans (e.g. on livestock in "urban areas" or on grants for revitalization of "rural areas") and subventions (e.g. free school transport for "rural children"), as well as other, more pervasive, stereotypic attitudes toward spatial planning, including the people affected by it. Consequently, the rural-urban dichotomy in Poland has created *two Polands* (a "rural" and an "urban" one) and has been described as the main factor destabilizing Poland's development and the functioning of democratic institutions in the longer term. In effect, although few Europeans have gotten so much better off in so short a time as the Poles, the mental rural-urban gap has come to poison the politics. Jadwiga illustrated the problem through examples from two socio-economically deprived areas in Poland (one formally "urban", the other formally "rural"), where the undertaken "rural" or "urban" actions, informed by rather dated and naïve social theories, have come to impinge negatively on policy formulation in areas exhibiting *the same* of *very similar* symptoms of deprivation.

- Dr **Rene Brauer** from the University of Hull (UK) recalled the case of [Urban Rural Gothenburg \(Stadslandet\)](#) and the media frenzy that struck the project in early 2017. Despite overtly good intentions, innovativeness and inclusivity, Urban Rural Gothenburg has faced opprobrium and a torrent of vitriolic comments, including some academic interventions. The project has been accused of fuzzily formulated goals with questionable evaluation markers and unmeasurable targets. It has been mercilessly characterized as “green, locally grown intercultural waste” and as an “exotic circus with immigrants, animals and cultivation plots”, or simply as colonialist (“Had I wanted to work with animals or farms I would return to Namibia”), an articulation that has initially placed the project into some disrepute. Despite being led and developed by reputable investors, this level of critique has acutely raised the suggestion that sustainability truly is one of society’s wicked problems, in need of much detailed attention if we are to realize its imperativeness. Using an Actor-Network-Theory style of deconstruction, Rene first drew a timeline of the controversy and identified gaps in miscommunication as well as evidence of misunderstanding and its dynamics. Next, borrowing ideas from philosophy of science, evolutionary psychology and social theory, Rene provided an interpretive framework for how to make sense of the Stadslandet case by elucidating how the breakdown in communication occurs, whilst outlining ways to avoid talking past each other and ultimately aiding in addressing the posed sustainability pursuits.



New conceptual developments

Departing from the concept of “wicked problem”, the seminar discussion led by **Mirek Dymitrow** (Chalmers University of Technology / University of Gothenburg) crystallized a new conceptual development, namely that of a “wicked solution”. Based on the three, much different, keynotes, the following bold hypothesis could be posed: While the social problems of today have gone wicked, we still tend to think of them as tame (solvable). Tame approaches to wicked problems, in turn, may give rise to “wicked solutions”. What this means is that the deployed “solution” may be so preposterous

that it may overwhelm the wickedness of the problem it is trying to fix. This adds up to the precariousness of the situation, making it twice as difficult to amend. The three keynotes pointed to three different, yet fundamentally similar, types of wicked solutions:

- *Atavism*: When fundamental existential values are threatened, co-existent tame problems may be left behind in pursuit of primordial yet abstract values; such dispersion of priorities, in turn, creates a wicked problem (Skopje – identity politics in view of failing health);
- *Layering*: When culturally ingrained perspective-optics totalize all or most societal operations, they can act as artificial filters, obscuring problems that require seemingly straightforward solutions (Poland – deprivation and the rural-urban trap);
- *Subversion*: While wicked problems require new ways of thinking, an new idea that becomes “too bold” in view of ‘tame problem thinking’ may instead trigger subversive counteractions in place of contained tolerance (Gothenburg – media frenzy against Stadslandet).

The above ideas will be further developed in a new upcoming paper, while the film from the seminar will be available on-line shortly.

Take-home message

The seminar engaged with the consequent need to recognize the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of various aspects of social life, not least when reflected in policy and planning. It assembled three brave takes on problems bedeviling conventionally conceptualized paths towards sustainability. Arguing against oversimplification in unquestioned practices and rhetorics, its aim was to foster explorations into new territories from which we may learn. The main contribution of the seminar was to launch the concept of “wicked solution” – a type of damaging counteraction deployed to solve a “wicked problem”. By acknowledging wicked solutions as different from wicked problems, it is possible to mitigate the negative effects that may arise when the two intertwine.

