

# “A Clean Fish in a Dirty Pond?”

## Designing Your Collective Action Engagement

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- Based loosely on recent work with:
  - the Water Futures Partnership
  - the Water and Development Alliance
  - the Rotary International-USAID H2O Partnership
  - BPD's own work over 15 years



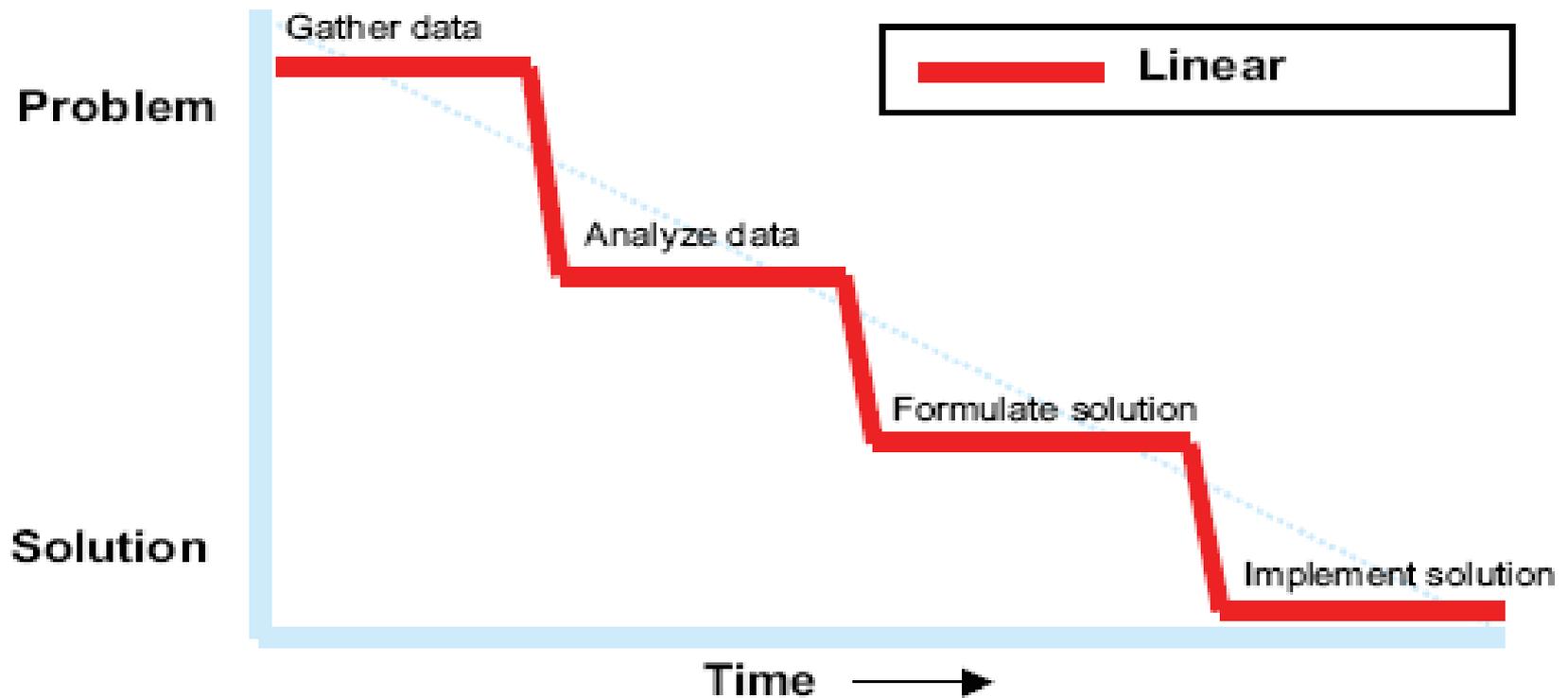
# Opening Assumptions

- ... that if circumstances continue along their current trajectory, then the water risks for a range of stakeholders will become untenable
- ...that incentives / risks for all partners are strong enough to join a Collective Action initiative
- ...that incentives / risks galvanize senior level buy-in and organizational cohesion to ensure that the support needed within each participating organisation is forthcoming

# Collective Action Contexts

- An increasingly complex environment in which modeling is very difficult
- Breaking such problems down into smaller problems may be insufficient
- Study alone (gathering more data) leads to “analysis paralysis”
  - can’t take action until we have more info
  - can’t get more info until someone takes action

# Traditional Linear Problem Solving



# Wicked Problems

# Wicked Problems

Based on original article in *Policy Sciences* magazine by  
Horst W.J. Rittel & Melvin M. Webber (1973)

Interpreted by John C. Camillus in  
Harvard Business Review – May 2008

And

Chapter entitled *Wicked Problems & Social Complexity* in  
Dialogue Mapping: Building Shared Understanding of  
Wicked Problems by Jeff Conklin ([www.cognexus.org](http://www.cognexus.org))

# “Tame” Problems

1. Have well-defined and stable problem statement
2. Have a definite stopping point (when the solution is reached)
3. Solutions can be objectively evaluated as right or wrong
4. Belong to a class of similar problems which are all solved in a similar way
5. Solutions can be easily tried and abandoned
6. Come with a limited set of alternative solutions

- Finding the shortest route between A & B
- Repairing a computer
- Selecting a new doctor

# 6 Properties of Wicked Problems

1. No definitive formulation. Wicked problems have innumerable causes and are tough to describe.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule –
  - a. We stop when we run out of resources.
  - b. Our understanding of the problem continues to evolve (forever!) even as the problem is changing and growing.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, but good, less good or bad.

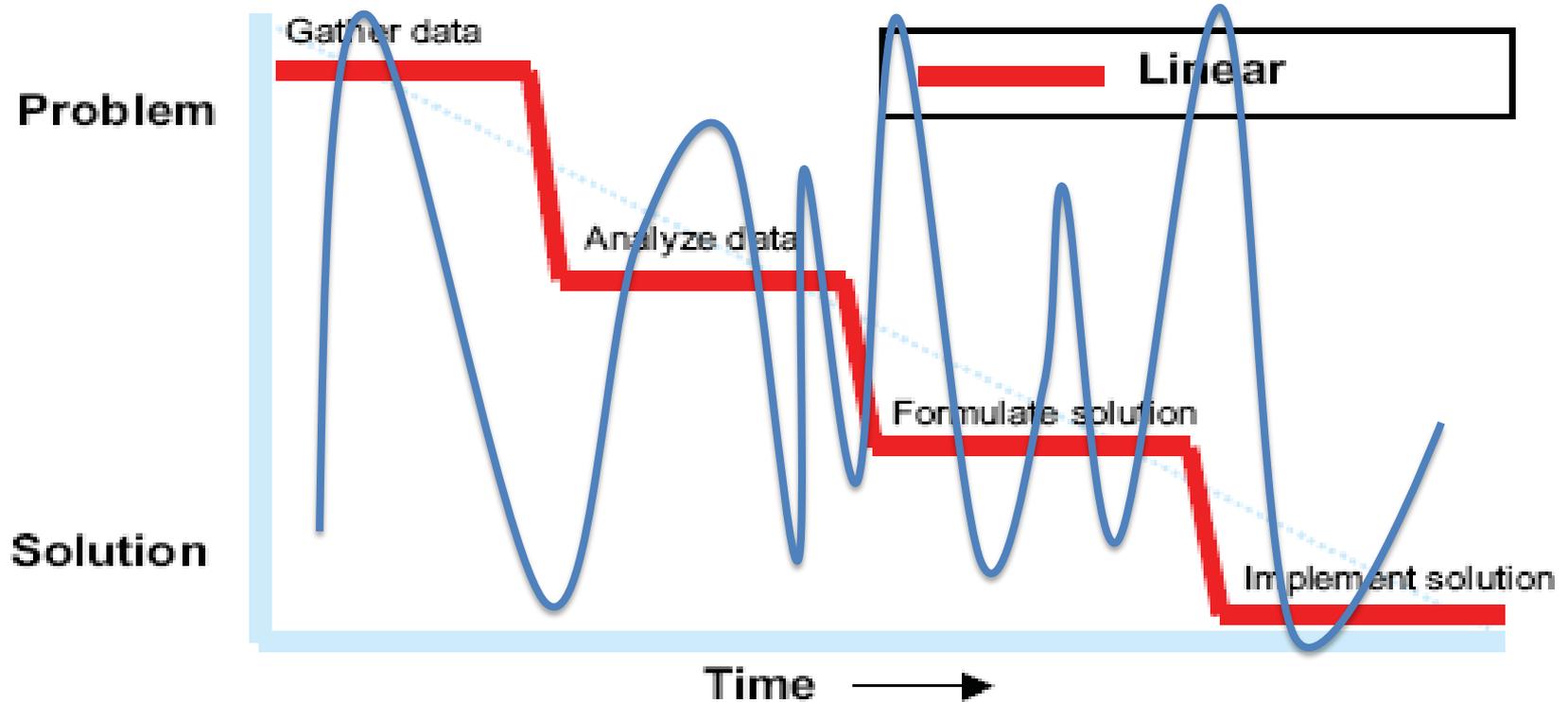
# 6 Properties of Wicked Problems

4. Every solution to a wicked problem is a “one-shot” operation – no opportunity to learn by trial & error, every attempt counts significantly, is probably expensive and may have lasting unintended consequences.
5. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
6. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.

# Wicked Problems & Social Complexity

- Wicked Problems occur in a social context
  - What the “problem” is depends on who you ask and if a solution is acceptable depends on who you ask
  - Number & diversity of players creates communication challenges with confusion, discord and lack of progress making them tough to manage
  - This social complexity requires new understandings, processes and tools that are attuned to the fundamentally social & conversational nature of work

# Traditional Linear Problem Solving



1. No definitive formulas
2. No stopping rule
3. More or less good solutions (not true/false)
4. No trial runs
5. Unique
6. Symptom of another wicked problem

# Characteristics of Collective Actions



Magritte

<b><i>Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)</i></b>	<b><i>Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives (MSIs) / Collective Actions</i></b>
<b>Contracts-based (clear vertical accountability structures)</b>	<b>Less emphasis on transactions with significantly more emphasis on horizontal accountability</b>
<b>Specific performance targets, deliverables and timeframes</b>	<b>Greater flexibility around targets, deliverables and timeframes as expected to evolve organically</b>
<b>Within legal / regulatory constructs</b>	<b>Partners operate within legal / regulatory construct but partnership itself is unregulated</b>
<b>Limited stakeholder engagement expected</b>	<b>Extensive stakeholder engagement generally considered a critical success factor</b>

# Defining Our Terms

**Collective Actions / Partnerships involve two or more organisations that enter into a collaborative arrangement based on....**

- 1. Synergistic goals and opportunities that address particular issues or deliver specified tasks that single organisations cannot accomplish on their own as effectively.**
- 2. And in which individual participating organisations cannot purchase the appropriate resources or competencies purely through a market transaction.**

AccountAbility/UK

# Dependency

LOW

HIGH

Informative

Consultative

Collaborative

Integrative

External Interest / Capacity Requirement

**Desired Collective Action Process**  
*Informative* → *Consultative* → *Collaborative* → *Integrative*

*Reserve  
Capacity/  
Interest*

*Reserve  
Interest/  
Capacity*

Internal Interest/Capacity Requirement

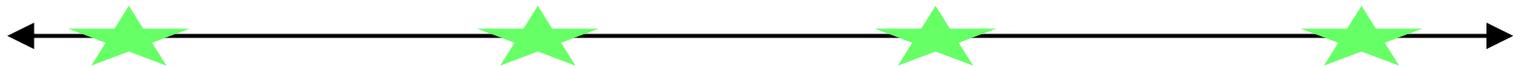
# The Nature of the Relationship



- Greater Commitments
- Higher Level of Interdependence & Blurred Branding
- Higher Level of Risk and Reward
- Generally more specific deliverables
- Stronger accountabilities

Networks

Partnerships



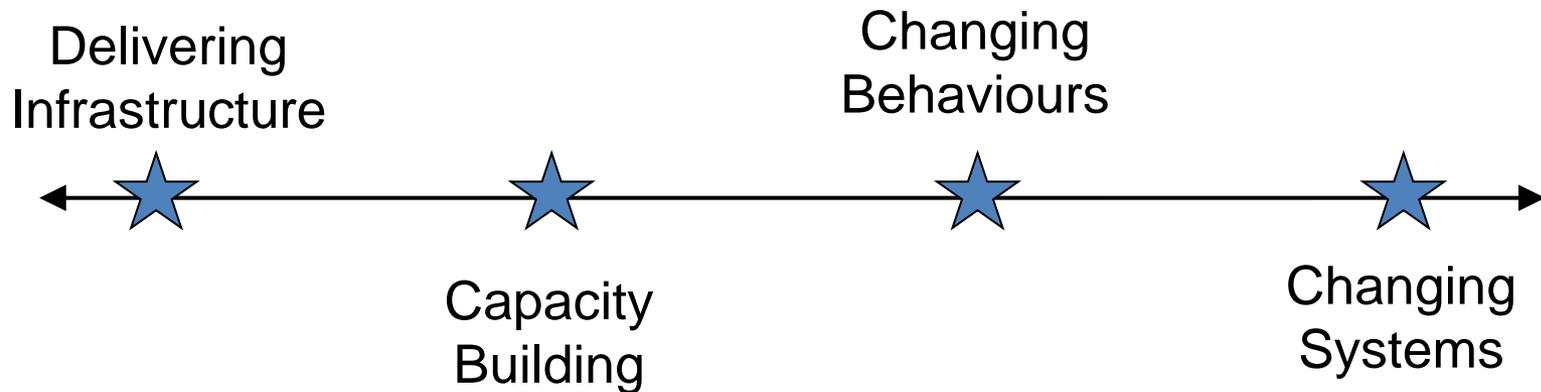
Coalitions

Joint Ventures /  
New Institutions

# Levels of Ambition

Specific Task-Oriented Projects

Systemic Change



- Is Collective Action the most appropriate mechanism?

- The terminology suggests a number of positive relational attributes – harmony, consensual decision-making; mutual trust and mutual accountabilities; valued contributions; and mutually agreed common goals...
- **“... [though the concept] may be very attractive ... in practice the *language* may conceal far more than it facilitates...”**

David Runciman, Professor of Political Theory,  
Trinity College, Cambridge University (September 2004)

# Collective Actions...

- Rarely simple & often involve an understated and unresolved competition between partners.



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- Rarely simple & often involve an understated and unresolved competition between partners.
- Must be tailor-made based on each particular context.
- Must be based on respect of partner contributions.
- Rely on sufficient incentive analysis that compels partners to participate. The term “voluntary” is misleading.
- Requires agreement on overarching mission. Partners will rarely share a common vision of how to get there.

# The Common Vision Thing



The design of Education & Awareness activities:

- a private company that sees users as **customers**,
- a public sector body that sees users as **constituencies**,
- and civil society groups that see users as **empowered communities**.

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- Requires agreement on the overarching mission. Partners will rarely share a common vision of how to get there.
- **Are not meant to be permanent but a transitional mechanism until policies, practices and behaviours become institutionalized or transactions-based.**

# Discussion

1. When is Collective Action not the right approach?
2. Are there (national) cultural features that could make Collective Actions work or fail?
3. Are there particular skills that organizational representatives require to engage in Collective Actions?

# The Partner Representative

“unenviable position of having to speak on behalf of our organisation with confidence (bravado?) whilst knowing that we may only have minimal or short- term institutional backing...

at the same time having to represent the partnership robustly within our own organisation even when progress is slow and the organisational benefits far from certain.”

(Ros Tennyson)

- First Follower?

# Jointly Moving Forward

- Defining and studying the problem
- Agreeing the way forward
- Getting communications right
- Structuring the relationship
- Transition and exit strategies

# Defining / Studying the Problem

- Integrate the distinct perspectives of potential partners to recognize related challenges & their interdependence
- Clarify the practical geographic boundaries of the problem: Natural, Administrative / Political, Economic
- Review hydrological, environmental, socio-economic, cultural, political and institutional dimensions
- Explore trends, time projections & likely escalations
- Review existing structures meant to address the issue: Policies / Laws / Regulations, Capacity of institutions, Other initiatives

# Studying the Problem

- Almost all initiatives start with a series of studies
- These help to determine which watersheds to focus on first, which infrastructure investments would have the greatest impact, which issues affect which stakeholders, etc.
- Mixed methods of collection & verification generate greater buy-in

# ***Defining / Studying the Problem***

- **Different views of the problem may exist within the same organisation (between departments or across levels of authority) particularly around sensitive issues**
- **Incentives within an organisation could be different (cost savings, social license to operate, building skillsets, leveraging funds/fundraising...)**
- **Different partners will emphasize different elements that reflect their assumptions, core values, risks, etc.**
- **Paralysis by analysis**
- **Who funds what?**

# Agreeing the Way Forward

- Skills audit & Resource Mapping – Determine what and who is missing
- “Evidence-based dialogue”
- Allocating Roles and Responsibilities
- Map onto other initiatives

# *Agreeing the Way Forward*

- Top down approaches may struggle to gain traction – particularly, but not only, with local government
- Cycles (political, crop, shareholder, funding, seasonal, etc.) need to be taken into account
- Clearly understand “make or break” points or non-negotiables – (may include acceptable benefits for partners)
- Partners will have different levels of ambition
- A focus on finance distorts other resource discussions
- Challenge of bringing new players in
- Inclination to create new initiatives

# Structuring the Engagement

- Decision-making forum?
- Binding documents?
- Frequency of meetings
- Secretariat
- Finance mechanisms

# ***Structuring the Engagement***

- Usually woefully under-resourced
- Managing perceptions around the power of the company
- Any recourse mechanisms in case of failure to deliver?
- Delegations of authority
- Partner internal rules

# Focusing on Communications

Need to negotiate...

- the main messages
- intellectual property rights
- use of logos (own & partners')
- confidentiality & transparency practices
- levels of (in)formality / comms styles
- how information (progress, financials, etc.) will be shared (internally & externally)

# ***Focusing on Communications***

- Each organisation handles internal communications differently – some more hierarchical, some more horizontal
- Some partners will want to downplay the initiative to manage expectations. Others may need to publicize early
- Partner representatives will have different communications styles
- Partners operate at different speeds
- Cultural factors can shape communications
- Focusing on short term wins is fine but may gradually marginalize wider ambitions
- “Sanctioned discourse”

# Why would stakeholders not participate?

Non-participation or low participation could suggest that partners are:

- *Indifferent* - if so, need to review incentives
- *Intimidated* - review partnership culture
- *Undervalued* - risks/contribution not recognized
- *Disenfranchised* - review governance structures
- *Incapable* - review implicit criteria for participating (time commitments, funding demands, etc.)
- *Waiting* - need to anticipate triggers for participation

# Participant Compatibility

- Compatible goals, objectives, project / solution definition
- Attitudes to risk & learning – including experimentation, control, failure...
- Attitudes towards social development, environmental management, government responsibility, etc.
- Attitudes to media / wider (community) exposure & attribution (managing the brand)
- Time frames...

# Conflict / Disputes...

Based on accountability:

- Lack of compliance (being held to account) – not following the rules, underperforming or not delivering on commitments
- Lack of transparency (giving an account) – not communicating / sharing information [about internal processes]
- Lack of responsiveness (taking account) – not responding to or empathizing with partner or wider stakeholder concerns or suggestions – not linking into wider context

# Discussion

It is early in the life of a Collective Action. You know it is best practice to discuss completion, exit and transition early on. As a facilitator brought in to lead these discussions, what questions do you put on the table for the partners?

# Discussion

Understanding the challenges that Collective Actions face, recognizing that measurement is often on tangible outputs, and imagining that they could achieve more if processes are most effective:

How would you measure the effectiveness of Collective Action processes?



# Key Takeaways

Collective Actions are needed, no doubt, but:

- They are not easy – they require time, energy, initiative, some discomfort... they are loose, often non-binding, etc.
- They need to be context specific
- Government involvement is critical to embed / institutionalize change
- Tend to operate at the pace of the slowest partner
- The human element is what makes them work

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