Chapter 4
An Exploration of Thinking About Complex Global Issues and Then Taking Action

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ABSTRACT

There are many problems and challenges facing the world. They go beyond problems that can be solved. They present as continual challenges that perpetually shift and transform themselves. The word we use for these situations are issues and they are by nature complex and large scale – they are global and long term. However, action does follow thinking and talking, even if that action is internalized. This chapter explores thinking about complex global issues and taking action.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about complex global issues, what are they, their nature and the patterns they present. It considers what it means to act – to do something about them, whether at the global level, which is almost impossible to achieve, or at some smaller, national scale right down to local action in one's own neighbourhood, which is more likely to create an immediate change, however small, and so contribute to improving the issue.

The committed writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change … the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object

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which has thus been laid bare …. The function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say he is innocent of what it’s all about. Sartre, 1948 - What is Literature?

According to the Greek writer Plutarch, the Egyptians used to place a skeleton at the table during a feast, to remind them that they would die one day. This spectre at the feast is something that makes people feel uncomfortable, it is a symbol of impending doom. So it seems with modern discussions of policy and politics that there is an uncomfortable spectre of, say, ‘climate change’ at the table. If only it were just climate change. There are a host of ghosts, threatening our existence, large scale problems, not quite here yet but looming. Although mixed in with the doom are some fascinating and exciting visions of a better world than we have today. We are going to call these mixed up apparitions, these glimpses of the future, complex global issues.

These complex global issues ‘play out’ at a local level (action only happens in the here and now) and different systems approaches are appropriate and useful in many different parts of these situations whether it is trying to understand the large-scale driving forces or the organisational problems of trying to cope at the grassroots with practical improvements to tackle the consequences.

We will look at real problems and we will look at the generalisations of them (the concepts and nature of complex global issues), we are concerned at how we are tackling or exploring both the specific and the general issues (our concern of course is to advance systems thinking), beyond this we are looking at the level of the processes of systems thinking (that grand word, methodologies), and finally there is the level of ourselves and the question of the future (what do we want to emerge). All the time we have to consider whom we are addressing at each level (the audiences being policy makers, practitioners, academics … and many more). The idea is to explore how systems sciences might inform and support policy making - particularly for universal or global scale problems that manifest at national and local levels.

Hopefully we will have some double-loop learning going on (Argyris, 2005), which is when we change our own mental model of the ‘what’ and we then gain a shift in understanding by questioning what we are doing in the first place.

The message is to care about those people who are trying to manage complexity – deal with these issues. These people are in decision-making roles and they include politicians, policy makers, and the so-called C-suite executives and senior managers and behind them are the decision support roles and behind them the advisors in organisations like think tanks and consultants but, lest we forget, it is ultimately the individual who acts. Our task is to enable this vibrant community of potential systems practitioners to explore complex global issues using a deeper understanding of their systemic nature.
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