

# WICKED PROBLEMS AND NEW WAYS OF ORGANIZING: HOW FE Y ALEGRIA CONFRONTED CHANGING MANIFESTATIONS OF POVERTY

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## ABSTRACT

*Wicked problems are causally complex, lack definite solutions, and re-emerge in different guises. This paper discusses how new ways of organizing emerge to tackle changing manifestations of wicked problems. Focusing on the wicked problem of poverty, we conducted a longitudinal study of Fe y Alegria (FyA), one of the world's largest non-governmental organization, which provides education for the poor across 21 countries in Latin America and Africa. Drawing on archival and ethnographic data, we trace the historical narratives of how FyA defined poverty as a problem and developed new ways of organizing, from its foundation by a Jesuit priest in 1955 to its current networked structure. Our findings reveal the ongoing cycle of interpretive problem definition and organizing solutions for wicked problems. First, since there is no "true" formulation of a wicked problem, actors construct narrative explanations based on their understanding of the problem. Second, organizational solutions to a wicked problem are thus reflections of these narrative constructions. Third, emerging*

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Organizing for Societal Grand Challenges

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*and changing narratives about what the problem is inspire new organizational responses. Our findings provide insights into the dynamic relationship between organizing for wicked problems, narratives, and the changing manifestations of wicked problems and grand challenges more broadly.*

**Keywords:** Narratives; wicked problems; grand challenges; poverty; education; ways of organizing

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen increasing interest in understanding how organizations deal with wicked problems (Dorado & Ventresca, 2013; Ferlie, Fitzgerald, McGivern, Dopson, & Bennett, 2013; Grint, 2014; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). Wicked problems are defined as societal issues that are extremely difficult or maybe even impossible to solve due to their incompleteness, ambiguity, and changing nature (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Previous studies on wicked problems have revealed the importance of framing the problem and its root cause(s) in ways that mobilize action amidst conflicting stakeholder values (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016), as well as the challenge of knowledge uncertainty when information regarding the problem and its solutions is incomplete (Brook, Pedler, Abbott, & Burgoyne, 2016; Camillus, 2008).

However, scholars have recently begun to explore how organizations manage the dynamic complexity of wicked problems, which results from the unpredictable and unexpected ways in which wicked problems unfold due to interdependencies between known and unknown factors (Dentoni, Bitzer, & Schouten, 2018). Contextual complexity requires organizations to adapt and increase their own complexity accordingly (Schneider, Wickert, & Marti, 2017). Thus, organizing for wicked problems cannot be static, as wicked problems continually change and re-emerge in new guises. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the following question: How do organizations deal with the changing manifestations of wicked problems?

The exploratory scope of the research question called for a qualitative inquiry. We chose to conduct a historical narrative analysis of the multinational non-governmental organization Fe y Alegria (which literally translates as “Faith and Joy,” and is hereafter abbreviated as “FyA”). Since its creation in 1955 in Caracas, Venezuela, FyA has been attempting to alleviate poverty through education in developing countries. We combined archival documents with semi-structured interviews of FyA members and ethnographic observations in FyA schools. This data set enabled reconstruction of the historical narratives defining poverty at different periods in the organization’s history, the changing organizational responses, and the organizational contexts in which these responses were elicited.

Our findings reveal three critical insights on organizing for the changing manifestations of wicked problems. First, wicked problems such as poverty are constructed based on actors’ confrontation and interpretation of the problem in concrete action contexts. Second, how a wicked problem is constructed is intertwined with how responses are organized. Third, emerging and changing

narratives about what the problem is inspire new organizational responses. These three points explain why the cycle of problem definition and organizing solutions is ongoing.

This paper contributes to the literature on organizing for complex societal problems such as grand challenges and wicked problems by challenging us to rethink our objectives and understandings when studying them. Whereas these problems are currently studied as single entities whose solutions can be standardized and deployed, we emphasize their uniqueness and the narrative construction that shapes organizational responses, encouraging scholars and practitioners to embrace the dynamic complexity of the problem.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

### *Wicked Problems*

Organizational scholars have recently focused on large-scale problems that are extremely complex, present little clarity, and involve multiple stakeholders (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016). Unlike the concept of grand challenges, which encompasses the possibility of solving an important societal problem through widespread implementation (George et al., 2016), the class of problems classified as “wicked” (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016) have no solution by definition. To illustrate, overcoming COVID-19 by developing a vaccine is very challenging but achievable in principle (and thus a grand challenge), whereas the wider problem of providing equitable access to medicine and vaccines across the world is wicked because it involves collaboration and interaction between multiple actors with different interests and priorities. Notwithstanding debates about whether wicked and tame problems can be ontologically demarcated (Alford & Head, 2017), the notion of “wickedness” provides a conceptual challenge to the ideology that all problems are solvable through proper managerial interventions.

First introduced by Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 106), the concept of wicked problem denotes a social problem which is “ill-defined” and “never solved.” Examples of wicked problems include poverty (Dorado & Ventresca, 2013), inequality (Reinecke, 2018), climate change (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013; Schüssler, Rüling, & Wittneben, 2014), humanitarian crises (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016), illegal drug use (George et al., 2016), and health inequalities (Ferlie et al., 2013).

Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the notion of wicked problems to critique systems theory and two of its tenets: the belief in the possibility of establishing “explicit goals” (p. 156) and the belief in the “makeability” (p. 158) of the future. According to Rittel and Webber (1973), these two tenets of modern systems theory apply only to tame problems. Wicked problems, by contrast, always manifest a set of characteristics which all point to the impossibility of clearly defining the problem and, consequently, of solving it. For Rittel and Webber (1973, p. 161), “problem understanding and problem resolution are concomitant to each other.” This means we can only solve the problems which we can fully define. However,

wicked problems have multiple explanations, with none being completely accurate. This complicates attempts to create diagnostic frames that define their cause, prognostic frames that identify possible solutions, and motivational frames that mobilize action if the problem seems intractable (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016).

Therefore, it is impossible to determine whether a wicked problem has been solved. Because there is no way of testing eventual solutions to wicked problems, they can only be “re-solved” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160) once the consequences of eventual solutions unfold over time. The unfolding of an eventual solution always produces collateral effects or unintended consequences, which may be irreversible, thereby generating new eventual solutions. The fact that this cycle repeats indefinitely points to the uniqueness of the wicked problem.

### *Organizing for Wicked Problems*

The implication of Rittel and Webber (1973) definition is that there is no single way of organizing for a wicked problem. Tackling a wicked problem entails facing the unknown, requiring the ability to organize for constant changes and increased levels of conflict among stakeholders. Hence, wicked problems require delving into social processes and collective dynamics (Weber & Khademian, 2008) that are extremely complex and impossible to simplify.

Moreover, “solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 162). Multiple actors will always “differ widely” about any solution, not least because of their differing “value-sets” (p. 163). The proposed solutions for wicked problems are therefore highly normative and emotional (Grint, 2014), and might emerge from “a dynamic dialogical process in which relations between moral schemes are constantly (re-)negotiated through dynamic exchange” (Reinecke, van Bommel, & Spicer, 2017, p. 33). Such a dialogical approach can lead to normative compliance (Grint, 2014), resulting in some form of alignment of the multiple actors’ value regimes (Levy, Reinecke, & Manning, 2016). However, this normative alignment can only be achieved where all involved actors want to tackle the problem: “you cannot force people to follow you in addressing a Wicked Problem because the nature of the problem demands that followers have to want to help” (Grint, 2014, p. 245).

For these reasons, organizations must resist the temptation to try to convert complex problems “into tractable managerial challenges” (George et al., 2016, p. 1887). Instead, organizations must find ways of dealing with three interlinked challenges that stem from the nature of wicked problems (Dentoni et al., 2018): (a) organizing for the unknown, (b) constantly (re-)aligning the value regimes of multiple actors, and (c) tackling the dynamic complexity that results from the unfolding character (i.e., constant change) of the wicked problem. We expand on these three characteristics below.

First, wicked problems challenge an organizational design approach because “one cannot first understand, then solve” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 162). In a complex problem setting, actors confront new problems that are unforeseen and possibly unforeseeable at the time they begin attempting to tackle the original problem. Drawing on pragmatist philosophy, scholars have conceptualized this

as a problem of uncertainty. Grounding on Dewey, James, Mead, and Peirce, uncertainty diminishes as experimentation in the heart of social processes provides truth-value meanings for practical consequences. In this sense, organizing for wicked problems occurs not through abstract planning and theorization but, instead, through responding to concrete, situational problems that require engagement in problem-solving activities. A continual problem means that organizational solutions are always works in progress, rather than final products. Hence, organizing for wicked problems is a process of dynamic, ongoing interactions between emerging challenges and attempts to address them in concrete situations (Ansell, 2011).

Second, organizations tackling wicked problems must find ways of accommodating different values and interests. This is important as the multiple actors involved may differ widely about the cause of the problem, possible solutions, and who should be held responsible for addressing it. Scholars have argued that “responsibility can be attributed to a target by framing an issue and its root cause in ways that allow such an attribution” (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016, p. 299). This can lead to framing contests and definitional struggles. Moreover, some actors are more likely to engage with wicked problems, for instance, when public awareness provides specific advantages in terms of reputation or sales and when there are clear benefits resulting from collective action (Dorado & Ventresca, 2013).

Theoretically, drawing on pragmatist ideas, Ferraro et al. (2015) propose that accommodating different values and interests can be achieved through a participatory architecture and multivocal inscriptions. A participatory architecture comprises a structure and a set of rules that enable constructive interaction over time, while multivocal inscriptions privilege discursive and material activities representing a wide range of heterogeneous actors, thus promoting coordinated action. By providing a degree of common ground, participatory structures guide the plurality of projects and goals of different constituents in a common direction.

Finally, organizations tackling a wicked problem must address its unfolding nature, namely its constant changes over time. Rittel and Webber (1973) suggest it is impossible to determine whether a wicked problem has been solved. This poses challenges in terms of the allocation and exhaustion of resources. Moreover, the solutions deployed can create unintended consequences changing the nature or understanding of the original problem. The infinite cycle of responding to what the problem was and creating unintended consequences means that the problem to tackle is never the same.

Some scholars have focused on the role of organizational forms and structures in tackling wicked problems. Schneider et al. (2017) argue that organizations may respond to environmental complexity by creating internal complexity or also collaborative complexity. One form of collaborative complexity are networked governance structures, which enhance opportunity discovery, innovation, and decentralization by promoting inter-organizational learning and joint problem-solving (Ferlie et al., 2013). It may also be argued that hybrid organizations, which combine different institutional logics (Gümüşay, Smets, & Morris, 2020), are better equipped to deal with value plurality and adapt faster to internal and

external changes. Our study expands on the organizational challenge by exploring how organizations deal with the changing manifestations of wicked problems.

### *Poverty as a Wicked Problem*

Poverty is a good example of a wicked problem, not least because it is hard to find agreement on its definition, cause(s), and solution(s) among academics. As reflected in Goal 1 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (“End poverty in all its forms everywhere”), poverty is a widely recognized social problem. Yet from a historical perspective, the social and material conditions that we today associate with “poverty” had to be first transformed into an identifiable social problem through historical frames and narrative explanations before they could be problematized (Wadhvani, 2018).

What we term “poverty” is rooted in multiple social, historical, structural, political, geographic, economic, and other patterns and conditions (Woodward & Abdallah, 2010). It has many symptoms and can be the consequence of other problems. Poverty is commonly conceptualized in terms of measurable income or resources (Townsend & Gordon, 2000). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2016) defines poverty as the lack of necessary goods and services for an individual’s well-being, leading to material and physical deprivation. Based on this income-based definition, international agencies have defined poverty in terms of poverty lines, average household income, and international comparatives for the price of goods (Woodward & Abdallah, 2010).

Scholars have increasingly challenged defining poverty in economic terms. Most prominently, Sen (2000) redefined poverty as lack of freedom, rather than income, focused on the deprivation of basic capabilities or genuine opportunities that an individual has reasons to value. Others such as Hills and Stewart (2005) define poverty as the conditions that exclude individuals from the normal functioning of society. Finally, Woodward and Abdallah (2010) describe poverty as the absence of individual human rights. This array of competing definitions indicates that there may be no ultimate definition. Instead, each definition rests on specific interpretive accounts to make sense of social and material conditions.

Relatedly, there is no consensus on how to “solve” poverty. The specific interpretive accounts or frames defining poverty as a social problem motivate and legitimate certain institutional and organizational solutions (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). If the poverty problem is interpreted as a lack of income, then solutions target increasing income through employment, entrepreneurship, and market-based strategies. These strategies can be seen in terms such as “inclusive capitalism” or “inclusive markets” that integrate the *aspiring poor* into the market economy through “bottom of the pyramid” approaches (Prahalad, 2004).

If the problem is further broken down and framed as a lack of capital, which prevents the poor from increasing their income through entrepreneurship, then micro-finance seems a plausible solution to lift people out of poverty by providing access to capital resources. Conversely, if the problem is seen as norms that prevent market access, such as gender norms obstructing women from pursuing employment or entrepreneurial opportunities, then the solution could be to change these norms.

However, attempts to ameliorate poverty often backfire. [Hall, Matos, Sheehan, and Silvestre \(2012\)](#) study of entrepreneurial tourism ventures in poor communities in Brazil shows how these often led to destructive outcomes for the communities, rather than empowerment. Many solutions do not work because the problem they target is only a symptom or manifestation of another problem. Thus, there are no “one-size-fits-all” or even “right” solutions to wicked problems: for such problems, solutions can only be better or worse.

Following [Rittel and Webber \(1973\)](#) characterization of wicked problems, [Table 1](#) details poverty as a wicked problem and identifies which dimensions of the problem account for the three ways of organizing we advanced above: for the unknown, for constant (re-)alignment of differing value regimes, and for dynamic complexity.

## METHODS

To explore how organizations deal with the changing manifestations of wicked problems, we draw on a longitudinal case study of FyA, which has been devoted to education for poverty amelioration for over 60 years. Two main reasons motivated our approach. First, and as explained above, poverty is a paradigmatic example of a wicked problem: it is impossible to fully identify “the nature of the poverty problem” ([Rittel & Webber, 1973](#), p. 161) or its solution. Second, FyA’s longevity makes it a “revelatory” case ([Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007](#), p. 27) that allows us to understand the changing nature of the wicked problem over time, and to examine the complex interplay with ways of organizing.

### *Research Setting*

FyA is a satellite organization of the Society of Jesus, a Catholic religious order commonly known as the Jesuits. Founded by a Jesuit priest in the outskirts of Caracas, Venezuela, FyA’s core purpose has always been to alleviate poverty through education. Embracing the spirit of popular education ([Freire, 1968/1996](#)), FyA is premised on the belief that education empowers the poor and excluded. FyA expanded in the 1960s and 1970s into other Latin American countries. In 1987, the national autonomous nodes of FyA formed the International Federation of Fe y Alegria to bundle and coordinate their efforts. FyA currently operates more than 2,500 schools and technical centers in 21 countries. Though most of their operations are in Latin America (16 countries), FyA has recently expanded into Africa (3 countries) and Europe (2 countries). In total, FyA provides education for circa 1.5 million individuals ([Federacion Internacional Fe y Alegria, 2016](#)).

### *Data Collection*

We assembled a longitudinal data set that spans from 1955 to 2017. We used historical methods, conducted semi-structured interviews, and analyzed the notes from ethnographic observations made during our visits to FyA locations.

**Archival data:** We gathered 224 documents produced by FyA from 1960 to 2017. We were granted access to the FyA’s official archives in Bogota, Colombia,

**Table 1.** Characterizing Poverty Using Rittel and Webber's Dimensions of Wicked Problems.

Dimension	Explanation	Way of Organizing
1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem	Defining poverty is impossible. Moreover, there will always be incomplete information about the causes	For the unknown
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule	Poverty is an ongoing problem. The challenge of tackling poverty has never stopped, and many actors have always had different understandings of the problem	For the unknown
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false but good-or-bad	There are different ways of ameliorating poverty, like education, but it is not possible to fully determine the truthfulness of such a claim. We can only say that educating the poor is good	For the unknown Differing values
4. There is no immediate and ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem	No clear-cut cause-effect link can be established between a solution and an alleged poverty amelioration. Solving poverty is not about testing hypotheses but about constant improvement	For the unknown
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot" operation; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly	Every time an eventual solution for poverty is implemented, there will be unintended consequences which cannot be undone	Dynamic complexity
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable set of potential solutions	There are no criteria to determine that all possible solutions to poverty have been identified	Differing values
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique	Poverty manifests according to specific, local circumstances. Therefore, there are no "one-size-fits-all" solutions	Dynamic complexity
8. Every wicked problem can be a symptom or consequence of another problem	Poverty is a phenomenon involving social, historical, geographical, institutional, and economic problems	Dynamic complexity
9. The choice of explanation of a wicked problem determines the nature of its resolution	Poverty can be explained in numerous ways. For instance, the UNDP (2016) addresses poverty in terms of health, education and income, while Woodward and Abdallah (2010) address it as a human right issue	Differing values
10. The planner has no right to be wrong	Eventual solutions implemented to ameliorate poverty generate consequences, with great impact on those affected	Dynamic complexity



which contain many original manuscripts recording FyA's history. These include letters by the founder, in which he explains his journey of tackling poverty across 10 Latin American countries, documents from each FyA national office, educational materials, strategic and operative plans, and promotional materials. Using archival documents produced at different points in time provided valuable insight into the evolving narrative constructions of the poverty problem.

**Interviews:** We conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with the following individuals: the former and current secretaries of the International Federation FyA, with respective tenures of 5 and 15 years; the three longest-serving country managers of FyA; the FyA's coordinator; and four project managers with over 10 years' experience each. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours and focused on interpreting the challenge of poverty alleviation and FyA responses.

**Ethnographic observations:** Observational data were derived from visits to seven countries where FyA has been operating: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Spain. We conducted observations at 22 schools in remote rural areas, slums, high-security prisons, and areas controlled by drug cartels and guerrillas. Visiting these places provided first-hand experience of the different challenges encountered and the types of organizational responses deployed to deal with the wicked problem of poverty in concrete local action contexts.

### *Data Analysis*

Our data were subjected to narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993), which is particularly useful for examining efforts to create plausible accounts of a wicked problem, such as telling a "causal story" about what it is and how it can be made amenable to intervention (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016; Stone, 1989). Narratives contribute to the construction of social problems and their solutions because the narrative form inherently establishes causal claims regarding the objects and actions they represent (Wadhvani, 2018). By analyzing the case of FyA through a narrative perspective, we not only explored what happened and when but also revealed how events and experiences may relate to one another (Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

Our narrative analysis involved four stages. First, to develop an understanding of FyA's organizational development, we chronologically ordered key historical events, such as the foundation of FyA, the creation of a network of radio stations, and the expansion of FyA's portfolio of activities. Second, we analyzed the narratives that evolved around each of these major events and explored their impact on the story's plot (Riessman, 1993). This helped us to identify and locate shifts in the meaning of the wicked problem over time. For instance, the period from 1950 to 1970 favored an economic conception of poverty, whereas the years from 2000 to 2016 emphasized discrimination and exclusion as the major forms of poverty. We refer to the periods as the "economic poverty phase," "invisible poor phase," and "new forms of poverty phase." Third, we focused on FyA's responses to the changing manifestations of poverty over time, and the narrative explanations of the need for each specific response. Table 2 presents six key organizational responses deployed across the three phases; three of these responses will be

explored in the Findings section. Fourth, to refine our understanding of how FyA responded to the changing manifestations of the wicked problem, we drew on classic pragmatist ideas such as James's (1904) notion of experience as "a process of change." We traced how experience shaped the narrative constructions of the problem and affected FyA responses. Table 2 summarizes our findings.

## FINDINGS

### *The Process of Organizing for Tackling the Dynamic Complexity of Wicked Problems*

In our analysis of FyA and its ways of organizing for managing the dynamic complexity of poverty, we uncovered that the process followed the following steps. Initially, actors define a problem based on their confrontation and understanding of it. When they agree on a preferred definition of the problem, a form of organizing is deployed. However, when external conditions put pressure on the preferred definition, a new definition emerges. This new definition causes the organization to find a new way of organizing, thus creating an ongoing cycle.

#### *Phase 1: Poverty as the Lack of Education*

**Location:** Venezuela.

**Defining poverty as the lack of education:** The first step when dealing with dynamic complexity is characterized by constructing a definition based on actors' confrontation and understanding of the problem. In our case, this step emerged in December 1954 when the Jesuit priest José María Velaz and some of his students started to frequently visit an urban slum in Caracas called "Gato Negro" (Black Cat) (Saez, 1999). According to Velaz, the Gato Negro was a forgotten place where "there was nothing...garbage piled up everywhere and black water running down the hill guided only by the law of gravity. The air was filled with dirt and stench" (Perez Esclarin, 2010, p. 100).

During his visits, Velaz offered Mass and First Communion to the neighborhood children. However, throughout his interactions with the inhabitants, he realized that religious exercises could not change anything. In the words of Velaz:

It was a horrible picture of degradation and social debasement. What at first sight caught my eyes was only the purulent skin of a deep disease whose most tragic symptoms were generalised unemployment, undernourishment, family disintegration, abandoned childhood, unhealthiness and ignorance before all the demands of life. (Perez Esclarin, 2010, p. 100)

Gato Negro residents frequently asked Velaz and the university students why they visited such an abandoned neighborhood, devoid of services (Perez Esclarin, 2010). The closeness that Velaz showed through his frequent visits generated dialogues in which people aired some of their problems. Recurrent complaints concerned the lack of water and electricity. However, as Velaz engaged with the villagers, a new way of perceiving poverty unfolded: "after afternoon of contemplating the landscape of horrifying poverty, we think about its causes..."

**Table 2.** Data Analysis.

PHASE	ECONOMIC POVERTY		THE INVISIBLE POOR		NEW FORMS OF POVERTY	
PERIOD	1954-1961	1961-1976	1980-1996	1984-1986	2000-2017	2008-2017
LOCATION	Venezuela - urban slums and rural areas	Ecuador, Bolivia, Panama, Peru, El Salvador, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala	Venezuela, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia	Latin America	Latin America	Chad, Madagascar, DR Congo, and Guinea
POVERTY PROBLEM	Absence of public services (water, electricity, education, health, etc.) in the urban periphery of Venezuelan cities	Latin American countries experience a lack of governmental investment in rural areas, an increase in the population of urban slums, and high rates of violence and illiteracy among poor people	Cuts in social welfare make it difficult to educate prisoners and adults with no knowledge of work skills	Countries with high levels of social disparities and lack of social policies	Changes in the meanings of poverty to reflect systemic and historical issues of social exclusion and lack of equality and opportunities	People of different ages, genders, and demographic profiles are illiterate; governments cannot sustain public investment; rural areas are left behind in development
RESPONSE	Construction of primary and secondary schools	Empower communities to construct their own schools	Build radio stations that provide complementary education	Design an international federation	Projects focused on gender, minorities, and violence topics	Creating small, medium, and large initiatives
ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT	Autonomous schools in urban slums and rural abandoned areas	Autonomous local and national organizations	Independent radio stations with strong links to autonomous local and national organizations	A federation of independent organizations that aim to propose local and national policies	Autonomous organizations start to work based on a project methodology	A network of independent organizations that work collectively to support and learn from one another

Everywhere we found the correlation of misery and ignorance” (Perez Esclarin, 2010, p. 102). Velaz concluded that the most serious problem for Gato Negro inhabitants was a lack of agency and freedom of spirit, which could not be addressed through material things but required a change in people’s mindset and, hence, education (Perez Esclarin, 2010). He then “discarded aids in form of food or sanitary type... and decided to create a school” (Saez, 1999, p. 32).

**Organizing to tackle poverty as the lack of education:** Viewing education as a much more powerful tool for social change than handouts or economic aid, Velaz decided that the best way to tackle poverty was through constructing autonomous primary and secondary schools. However, how to construct those schools posed a massive challenge. Velaz’s problem was disclosed after one of his last catechisms exposing the need for impact by turning these catechisms into a real school (Perez Esclarin, 2010). A local bricklayer called Abraham Reyes, together with his wife Patricia, approached Velaz and told him: “look father, I have a ranch here that I built with my wife. It is yours if you want to see it” (Perez Esclarin, 1992, p. 5). For Velaz, that simple place, with the rustic concrete floor that Abraham Reyes had built with his own hands, burying in it the savings of seven years, represented an example of tenacity and generosity (Vilda, 1987).

The next step was to look for teachers. Diana and Carmen, who had just finished high school, offered their services as unpaid teachers (Saez, 1999). On March 5, 1955, a small poster was displayed outside Abraham’s house: “school: we admit boys” (Saez, 1999, p. 32). On that day, around 100 young boys attended school for the first time in their lives, even though they all had to sit on the rustic concrete floor (Vilda, 1987). Days later, Abraham donated half of his house for a girls school (Saez, 1999). Responding to the new call, 75 girls joined. These boys and girls were the first students of FyA. Velaz observed the joy of giving and receiving education and the faith of believing that we all have more good than bad in our hearts (Lazcano, 2013).

This organic and community-driven way in which the first FyA school was founded was repeated numerous times. Throughout Latin America, FyA expanded through the will, work, and donations of the same poor that the schools were supposed to serve. In his letters, Velaz remembered that most of the schools opened in Venezuela

started in hired ranches, in sheds that grew on precipices and ravines, next to garbage dumps or rivers of black water, in inhospitable mountains, namely in those places that nobody cares about. (Perez Esclarin, 1992 p. 10)

For the inhabitants of these places, forgotten by the government, Velaz made them see that they were worth it, that they were not garbage, that they were not a thing thrown out there, worthless (Vilda, 1987).

Overall, the way of organizing deployed by FyA aimed to create autonomous schools that not only provided education for the economic poor living in slums but also empowered young people to become agents of change. More important, however, is the process that explains how responses are highly linked to the preferred definition of the problem. This might represent a double-edged sword, as it includes certain causes but leaves others untouched.

*Phase 2: Poverty as Reaching the Invisible Poor*

**Location:** Venezuela, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Bolivia.

**The evolution of poverty outside FyA's initial definition:** By the 1980s, most of the Latin American countries where FyA operated were experiencing critical economic situations. Their economies were growing less than in previous decades and debt levels were becoming untenable. Consequently, most of these countries' governments executed strict cuts in social welfare. This new panorama unveiled problems for other actors, such as prisoners and people without any skills education for work, outside the scope of FyA's original definition of poverty.

**(Re-)Defining poverty as the invisible poor:** The construction of over 500 schools had allowed FyA to reach impoverished communities in 13 countries across Latin America. Yet this had not solved the poverty problem in any of those countries. The massive financial cuts executed by governments across Latin America made visible some other neglected social actors. Among the newly identified communities, two received attention from FyA: adults without education and prisoners. According to Velaz, parents were a crucial cornerstone in changing reality as if they did not have the means for feeding young people, children will need to find a job and stop their education (Vilda, 1987). Also, for other Jesuits who directed FyA operations in Bolivia and Panama, government cuts exposed and compounded the lack of opportunities for prisoners: though most would return to society after serving their time, they could not be considered as productive members of society.

This shift that made visible some actors neglected by the economic definition of poverty and the educational alternative preferred by FyA influenced a (re-)definition of poverty. In this sense, the original definition gradually transformed to reflect the need to account for invisible actors.

**(New) Organizing to tackle poverty by reaching the invisible poor:** A particularly unusual, but probably the most successful, response to the above problem was the implementation of distance learning through educational radio stations. Radio stations could bring education to a much greater population of the poor. The creation of radiophonic education was driven by both FyA's founder Velaz and some national nodes. Velaz saw the radio as a way to expand FyA without increasing pressure on already deprived schools. In his words, "if Fe y Alegria was born on a ranch, the radio would allow us to convert each ranch into a school" (Perez Esclarin, 2010, p. 197). The main source of inspiration to embrace radio learning came from "Radio ECCA," a cultural broadcaster in Islas Canarias, Spain. Velaz was amazed by the station's innovative educational programme, which complemented radiophonic classes with books and monthly personalized assistance (Vilda, 1987). For Velaz, the already operating network of schools in Latin America could offer classes at night or on weekends to provide education for most of the illiterate adults living in slums, or for those who had abandoned their studies (Perez Esclarin, 2010).

The second process was initiated by the national directors of FyA in Bolivia, Guatemala, and Panama, who had worked at Jesuit radio stations before joining FyA. The radio had played a significant role in Jesuit evangelization in some Latin American countries during the 1960s and 1970s. The Jesuit directors of

FyA had thus experienced the radio's benefits in terms of coverage and impact (Perez Esclarin, 2010). Still, the FyA's structured response of delivering radiophonic education only materialized in the early 1980s. The initiative was launched in Venezuela. The new "Instituto Radiofonico FyA" (IRFA) had a clear aim: to offer access to education each semester to people aged 15 and above at primary, high school, and complementary levels (Saez, 1999).

For Velaz, the FyA could alleviate poverty by not only empowering children but also meeting the learning needs of adolescents and adults who could not study in conventional ways (Lazcano, 2013). Although IRFA started with classes from primary to high school level, it found that most listeners preferred the complementary courses. By 1992, IRFA was providing classes in carpentry, masonry, electricity, and knitting. One of the most popular broadcasters was located in Guasualito (East Venezuela) and reached nearly 25,000 inhabitants. Velaz commented that providing people with small tools will allow them to be productive in the society (Vilda, 1987). IRFA thus reached a population that the schools could not address. More importantly, it made FyA members aware that tackling poverty was a complex process of intertwined activities aimed at addressing several causes and actors.

Inspired by the success of radio broadcasts in Venezuela, FyA launched similar initiatives in other countries. The radio soon became FyA's primary medium to provide education to prisoners (Perez Esclarin, 2010). The fact that one simple broadcast could reach multiple homes, restore people's dignity, and contribute to reducing geographical distances was a reality beyond imagination (Vilda, 1987). The next country where FyA adopted the radio as an educational tool was Ecuador, followed by Bolivia and Paraguay. In each country, the radio was used to address specific problems. For instance, in Paraguay, it was used in penitentiaries as a means to reintegrate prisoners into society. Courses aimed to not only develop skills but also inculcate values. In Ecuador, radiophonic education focused on technical education for (among others) rural workers, which was complemented by some FyA educational centers offering additional training (National director, 2016 – interview).

Overall, using radio was an organizational experiment that moved beyond traditional forms of organizing. Through radio stations, FyA found a new way to reach people who were "invisible" but could be considered as poor according to economic definition. This experience revealed the need to change the previous definition of poverty in order to continue tackling it. In this sense, the organizational experiment highlighted that poverty was a highly complex challenge that required not only providing education but also reaching out to as many actors as possible and addressing several causes simultaneously.

### *Phase 3: Poverty as Social Exclusion and Marginalized Actors*

**Location:** Latin America.

**The evolution of poverty outside FyA's definition of invisible poor:** The beginning of the twenty-first century brought many changes to Latin America. Among the most important is the change in the meaning of poverty. Identifying the timing of this change is difficult, although it mostly manifested at the end of the

1990s, when new discourses moved poverty from a pure economic phenomenon to a socio-political one. This new conceptualization of poverty emphasized different causes of the marginalization of social actors. Poverty came to reflect systemic and historical issues involving lack of equality, the marginalization of people with disabilities, and social exclusion. Exemplar cases are the fights for disability rights, women's equality, and protection of minorities.

**(Re-)Defining poverty as exclusion and marginalization:** Although FyA had been offering formal and technical education, most target communities still experienced high levels of undernourishment, broken families, social violence, and exclusion of specific actors. FyA's (re-)definition of poverty was informed by the local experiences of its employees and teachers in the various operating locations. The following ethnographic vignette illustrates that even if economic deprivation still dominates, FyA now confronted other and potentially more threatening forms of poverty:

Alexis (pseudonym) and I were driving through El Chaco in Paraguay, one of the most sparsely inhabited areas in South America. At some point, Alexis, who runs the local FyA school where we were heading, tells me, "*you see how the asphalt here comes to an end? We will now drive many kilometres without asphalt.*" Even though the end of the asphalt seemed to symbolise the beginning of poverty, our conversation as we drove was centred on other types of problems. We were heading towards an area controlled by some guerrilla groups and drug cartels. "*Money here is not necessarily the problem. Violence is,*" Alexis told me. Interestingly, that is not what I saw. I saw the end of the asphalt and poor neighbourhoods. However, as I started speaking with people, it was not poverty that they mentioned but the fact that many school pupils worked for the cartels at night. [...] It was getting dark, and we were rushed to the car: "*we have to leave while we have sunlight; after that it's too dangerous.*"

Based on new experiences of poverty, FyA started to analyze the manifold related challenges that actors faced in their communities. Through a long process of reflection, which started with the design of the first federative strategic plan in the 2000s, the organization's approach was evaluated and questioned. After several meetings in different countries, and the production of multiple documents in yearly congress since 1995, a new conceptualization of poverty emerged. This explicitly acknowledged a wider range of forms of exclusion, including marginalization, gender violence, gang-related violence, drug consumption, and forced migration. In this process, FyA managers and other actors realized that poverty now referred to inequality and systemic exclusion.

**(New) Organizing to tackle poverty as exclusion and marginalization:** Up to this point, FyA had been a network of autonomous schools and radio stations that provided formal and technical education. However, addressing the new definition of poverty demanded a radical organizing. This resulted in emphasizing more decentralized projects focused on nutrition, peace and citizenship, gender, and minorities, as seen in the federative strategic plans from 2000 to 2015. The construction of those decentralized projects followed two processes.

The first process involved FyA members starting to include the community more formally in constructing agendas and visions for development, with discussions focused on the needs of the community and ways to improve it. This led to the emergence of several social development projects, which have been seen as ways to learn about life and the world by establishing social and natural relations.

From 2000 to 2016, FyA developed four federative strategic plans (i.e. Plan Global de Desarrollo y Fortalecimiento Institucional I (Global Plan of Development and Institutional Strengthening), 2000; Plan Global de Desarrollo y Fortalecimiento Institucional II, 2005; Plan Estrategico de la Federacion Internacional Fe y Alegria (International Federation Fe y Alegria's Strategic Plan) III, 2009; Plan de Prioridades Federativas (Federative Plan of Priorities) IV, 2015) that pay special attention to nutrition, health, and citizenship construction. For example, nearly 350 projects emerged that aimed to address drug abuse, lack of aspiration, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and child exploitation (International Federation secretary, 2016 – interview), while also emphasizing the construction of ethical citizens. These projects have underscored the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and construction of socially desirable values ([Federacion Internacional Fe y Alegria, 2016](#)).

The second main process undertaken by FyA focused on tackling the discrimination confronted by social actors with cognitive and physical disabilities when trying to access education. In this endeavor, FyA Bolivia has played a particularly meaningful role, accumulating more than 16 years of experience dealing with education for the blind and the deaf. For this purpose, it has created six centers of special education and adapted 47 schools to incorporate inclusive policies (former national director, FyA Bolivia, 2016 – interview).

To summarize, organizing to tackle poverty in this period demanded a new understanding of the problem based on contextual readings of the situation. Accordingly, organizing involved a series of small- and medium-sized projects that aimed to be one-shot operations in which the response was determined by the communities experiencing poverty.

## DISCUSSION

Societies face wicked problems that are extremely complex and may not have a definite solution ([Rittel & Webber, 1973](#)). Even though widespread consensus may emerge that highlights probable causes, advocates plausible solutions, and assigns responsibility for tackling wicked problems ([Reinecke & Ansari, 2016](#)), there are often many possible ways of addressing such problems. This makes it extremely difficult to formulate organizational responses.

### *Theoretical Contributions*

To understand the process through which organizations deal with the changing manifestations of wicked problems, we conducted a longitudinal study documenting the narratives that shaped how FyA organized to respond to poverty in Latin America. This case yields three important discoveries. First, a wicked problem is always constructed based on experiences as there is never a “true” formulation. Second, how a wicked problem is constructed is intertwined with how responses are organized. Third, emerging narratives about what the problem is inspire new organizational responses as the cycle of interpretive problem definition and organizing solutions is ongoing (see [Fig. 1](#)).



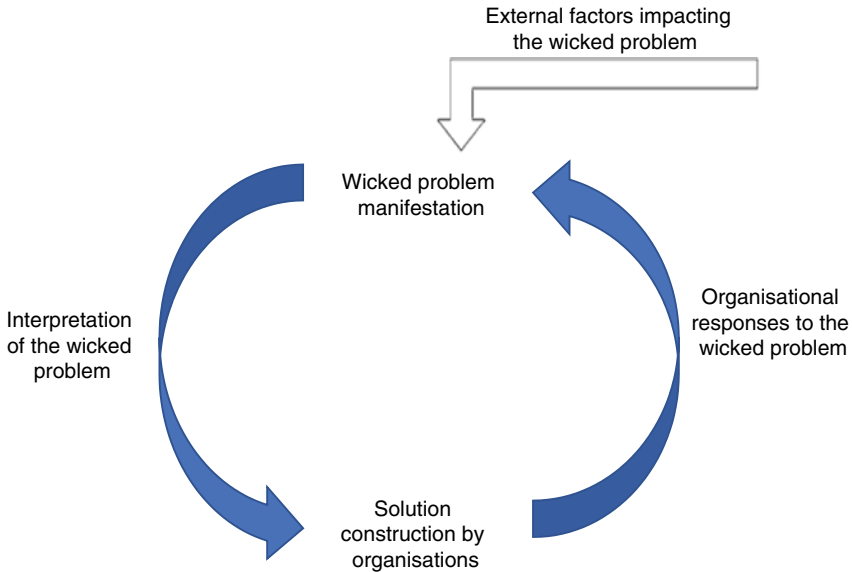


Fig. 1. Organizing for Gaps Between Policies and Practices: Dynamic Complexity of Wicked Problems.

*There is never a true formulation, only a narrative construction that informs the interpretation of a wicked problem.* Recent studies on complex problems tend to propose frameworks (George et al., 2016), theory-based solutions (Ferraro et al., 2015), and a more detailed understanding of the variables of these social issues (Alford & Head, 2017). However, our case study of FyA challenges us to rethink how to understand the particularities of wicked problems. For example, the fact that wicked problems can have up to 10 identifiable dimensions (Rittel & Webber, 1973) does not mean that these can be standardized to foster a problem's understanding and possible solution.

Our study shows how a wicked problem is defined based on a narrative construction, which establishes causal claims regarding the objects and actions that the narrative construction represents (Wadhvani, 2018). Since there is no one true and objective formulation of a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973), organizations construct certain narratives about what they understand as the problem. Thus, wicked problems are defined not just by identifying certain material conditions at different points in time but also through the construction of narratives that establish links between certain causes and consequences. These narratives may not fully capture the problem, focusing on only one of its multiple causes and consequences.

The case of FyA highlights that narrative constructions of wicked problems are mediated through actors' involvement while acting in contexts where the problem is embedded. In line with the classic pragmatism of Dewey and James, there is no absolute way to access immediate knowledge of a matter and it is only

through experience that primary awareness of raw givens can be gained. Hence, it is through experience that reality becomes meaningful; as [James \(1904\)](#) postulates, it is within the stream of experience that knowledge is created which generates expectations for action.

***The importance of the narrative construction that sustains the wicked problem and its intertwinement with the responses deployed.*** Theoretically, the literature tends not to distinguish between complex problems, treating them as if a single entity (e.g., climate change, global hunger, poverty) to narrow their focus. However, given the contextual, social, historical, and economic roots of these problems, the way that each is experienced cannot result in one comprehensive construction explaining all contexts. Here, we highlight the need to avoid dominant narratives about how to deal with or respond to wicked problems. Each manifestation of a wicked problem will involve a unique narrative construction that reflects different experiences and language games.

Thus, responses to wicked problems are neither “right” nor “wrong,” but “good” or “bad.” In this sense, the construction of the problem frames actors’ understanding of responses by temporalizing experience ([Rorty, 1982](#)) while projecting the expected future through the unfolding nature of the narrative. A “good” response will be one that offers a plausible way of acting to impact on the causes identified in the constructed narrative. Conversely, a “bad” response will be one that is imposed by external agents or does not consider the experience of the actors involved. For example, moving to address the problems of marginalization and exclusion while leaving behind an economic understanding of poverty represented a good response.

Finally, if responses are intertwined with narrative constructions, it is easier to highlight the small wins achieved, as suggested by [Ferraro et al. \(2015\)](#). One of the core postulates when attempting to tackle wicked problems is the ability to avoid failure. Recent alternatives that have failed, or are in a deadlock underscore the mismatch between the experience/interpretation of the problem and the solutions deployed.

***An ongoing cycle between the external environment and the construction of new narratives.*** The way a wicked problem is defined changes over time. This mainly happens because actors encounter new manifestations of the problem, new causes are discovered, or new experiences confront organizations with new realities. In this regard, most changes in the narrative construction relate to changes in the external environment. Hence, new narratives are constructed, such that problem definition and organizing solutions is an ongoing cycle. This aligns with [James \(1904\)](#) fundamental fact that experience is a process of change and, although built on the past, constantly progresses forward.

In this regard, most studies on organizations responding to wicked problems ([Dorado & Ventresca, 2013](#); [Ferlie et al., 2013](#)) use a static frame, obscuring that wicked problems are not “definition static” and so responses cannot “solidify” in time ([Dentoni et al., 2018](#)). The relationship between the external environment and what is experienced, and then narratively constructed, is dynamic and fluid. This highlights the importance of understanding change and time when dealing with wicked problems.

*Future Research*

As organizational scholars, we are only beginning to understand the types of re-organizing toward the new forms of coordinated, collaborative, and collective efforts (Aslan Gümüşay & Haack, 2020) needed to tackle wicked problems and other grand challenges. By focusing on the important interplay between problem definition and organizational response in a context of dynamic complexity, our study suggests the need to focus more on how ideas, discourse, and understanding of issues are interrelated with modes of organizational design and collective action. Two future research avenues seem likely to be particularly fruitful. First, we call for research into how the dynamics of the external environment affect problem definition. As the case of FyA demonstrated, how a wicked problem is defined is fundamental to addressing its dynamic complexity. Institutional contexts differ widely as they reflect the attempts of governments, non-governmental organizations, supranational entities, and communities to impose a desired narrative construction of the problem. Hence, examining power struggles between actors' competing narratives and how one of these narratives solidifies, or perishes, can explain what leads to the transition from one dominant definition to another. We contend that a closer look at antenarratives can explain these definition changes. Antenarratives constitute fragmented, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculations that serve to mediate between actors' localized experience and external narratives (Boje, Haley, & Saylor, 2016). Hence, antenarratives have the power to differentiate and reconcile new characteristics and minimize old ones. Relatedly, we suggest focusing on the concept of constitutive-polyphony (Trittin, & Schoeneborn, 2017) and narratives' temporalities (Stjerne, Wenzel, & Svejenova, 2022) to understand the discursive representation of different voices, opinions and viewpoints when tackling a wicked problem.

Second, we suggest focusing on the diagnostic tools, heuristic devices, and other methods that actors use to analyze and produce knowledge about wicked problems, and how this influences narrative constructions of definitions and solutions for wicked problems. Since "wickedness" requires the creation of some cognitive shortcut to grasp the problem's complexity and inspire collective action (Camillus, 2008; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016), the type of heuristic tools employed to facilitate this are consequential. For example, the UNDP's Human Development Index deliberately moved away from sole focus on economic growth to include a much wider range of indicators, including education and health. Nonetheless, by capturing statistical data, it creates a rather static measure that oversimplifies what human development entails. Ethnographic methods, as employed in our case, or diary studies (Rauch & Ansari, 2022) would lead to a very different focus and understanding. Another pressing question is the significant impact of AI and algorithmic data in re-wiring forms of knowledge production and thereby understanding of wicked problems and social challenges. Thus, studying the role of diagnostic tools in shaping problem definitions and collective organizational efforts is another promising area for future research.

### *Practical Implications*

***Tackling wicked problems and causal narratives.*** Despite our specific focus on FyA, cases provide opportunities to elucidate more general principles, with implications for a wider set of phenomena. Because there is no ultimate definition of a wicked problem, the processes of narrative construction are central to determining what comes to be seen as a major social problem, what is assumed to be its root cause, and what might come to be seen as a plausible solution. This insight is important for practitioners who seek to tackle wicked problems and motivate other actors to support their efforts. Practitioners must acknowledge their active role in the social construction of a wicked problem, and the associated responsibility. The framing and definition of wicked problems is, therefore, a challenging task that requires a skillful balancing act. If wicked problems are seen in their full complexity, they might appear as intractable and a “lost cause,” thus complicating actors’ ability to mobilize wider action. To avoid a sense of powerlessness, practitioners have to offer causal narratives that identify plausible causes and solutions. These need to be framed in ways that have wide appeal and generate consensus among multiple stakeholders and audiences, motivating widespread support for and commitment to tackling the problem.

***Tackling wicked problems and the flaws of “one-size-fits-all.”*** Some narratives might oversimplify a wicked problem and associate it with a single cause, even if there might be many. While it is necessary to create narratives that portray the problem as solvable, this can also lead to narrow solutions that only treat a problem’s symptoms, or in the worst case aggravate it over time. The well-known problem of “one-size-fits-all” also results from the oversimplified framing of complex problems. Similarly, mission-driven organizations may become so invested in their narrative of the problem and its solution that it becomes difficult to revise approaches and well-worn solutions.

It may then be tempting to find problems that fit existing solutions, rather than seeking new solutions. Our study encourages scholars and practitioners to recognize the dynamic complexity of wicked problems, for which solutions are at best preliminary attempts. This calls for greater reflexivity to examine our own values, beliefs, and assumptions in the process of constructing wicked problems and practices of organizing (Stjerne et al., 2022), so as to be open to revising our own definitions and solutions. In sum, organizing for wicked problems requires ongoing encounters with manifestations of the problem in concrete action contexts, and willingness to revise frames and adapt organizing efforts as these manifestations change.

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