

• Food and dilemmas

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Background

At the heart of sustainability issues is the question of decision-making for agriculture and world food, particularly in relation to changes in production and consumption patterns. This issue can be tackled using the concept of the dilemma – not widely used by the scientific community – to illustrate the various stages in the cycle. This provides an inspiring and innovative framework for organising multi-stakeholder actions. In the era of sustainability, this complex approach seems both necessary and long overdue if we are to open up a fruitful dialogue between science and society.

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Further reading

JANIN P., ACLOQUE D., EL NOUR S., forthcoming – Dilemmes agricoles et alimentaires en temps de transition et de crise. *Canadian journal of development studies/Revue canadienne des études du développement*, 43.

RITTEL H. W. H., WEBBER M. M., 1973 – Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Science*, 4: 155-169.

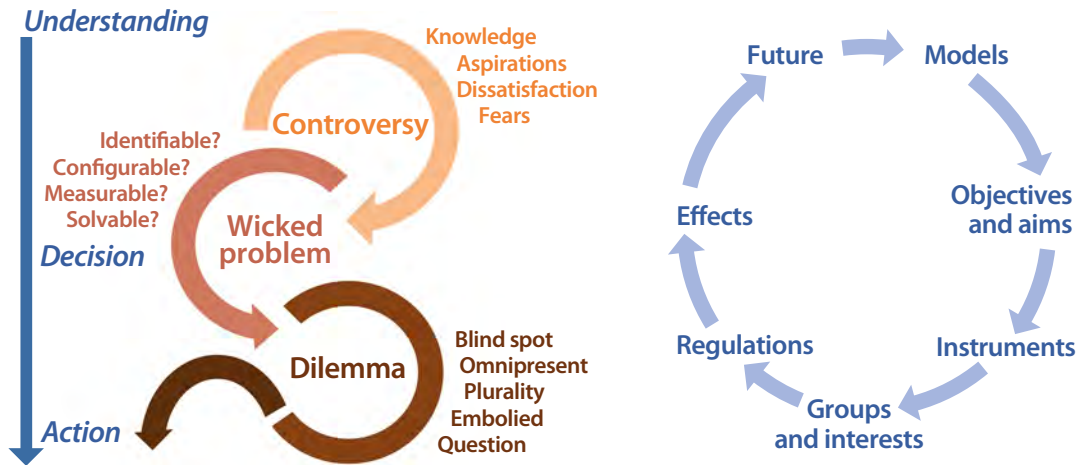
Broader, more far-reaching thinking

In these times of interconnected crises (environmental, energy, food, economic, migratory, etc.), taking action seems both somewhat futile and yet more necessary than ever. Agricultural and food issues are the focus of many challenges: dealing with emergencies, allaying concerns, meeting expectations (Janin et al., forthcoming), building adaptations and transformations, thinking about the way forward. A major shift in our production and consumption patterns to build resilience against shocks, uncertainties and crises involves two essential categories of action: time and space. The first involves linking the short and the long term without pitting them against each other. The ability to expand the time horizon, and even to plan ahead, makes it easier to deal with crises. It also means “thinking more broadly”

(in a holistic and systemic way), while taking into account the specific characteristics of territories and societies. The second category of action, space, takes account of locations and distances, giving them a new relevance in an era of deglobalisation. The local, regional and national levels are once again becoming functional, desirable and even indispensable for action (whether by the state, businesses or citizens).

From controversy to dilemma

Producing food to feed the world at the time of the Agenda 2030 means facing up to numerous debates, doubts and pressures, with the risk of either discouraging all action or wanting to do everything without setting priorities. In fact, making an informed choice can quickly prove problematic. It all starts with debates: based on



The controversy/dilemma continuum (left) and the dilemma cycle (right).

knowledge (established, challenged, distorted, flawed, unequal, etc.), accompanied by aspirations and dissatisfactions (multiple, growing, legitimate or not), not to mention fears (real, imagined, reinforced, and so on). Because of this tangled web, certain debates can sometimes turn controversial. This moves us away from searching for solutions and building compromises. The expression “wicked problem” takes on its full meaning. It refers to something that is poorly identified, often a nagging issue, but also one that is difficult to set up and resolve. This wicked problem is likely to turn into a strategic dilemma (Rittel and Webber, 1973) if the need to act becomes pressing without identifying a way forward and then implementing it. The dilemma is often misunderstood, invisible and rarely explained, yet it is omnipresent. All the individual and collective stakeholders in the food system (individuals, producers, processors, developers, governments) are exposed to it and confronted with it. The dilemma is at once technical, political, moral and ethical, and it thrives on the complexity of the challenges and issues at stake in the era of transitions and sustainability. In return, it feeds on its own logic, opposing interests and on the fears, slowness and inertia that it produces. It therefore raises questions of responsibility, equity, accountability and legitimacy, and not just questions of efficiency.

The dilemma cycle

A dilemma can be broken down into several phases. The cycle is a good way of (re)presenting them. Each stage has its doubts, hesitations, negotiations and trade-offs. The first stage involves choosing between different

socio-technical models (for food production, processing and consumption) and linking them together, taking into account the plurality of food systems. The second is to prioritise the objectives in a non-discretionary way (after debating or not, negotiating or not, reaching consensus or not). The third is to select and prioritise the various instruments for action (incentives and disincentives). The various protagonists involved will then have to arbitrate between groups and categories (of communities, of stakeholders) with non-convergent, opposing or even conflicting strategies and interests. This will be followed by a stage where the different regulatory methods (market and liberal, state, participatory and citizen) can be hybridised (or not) according to what is appropriate, possible and acceptable. The penultimate stage is even more strategic: it takes into account all the effects – positive and negative, immediate and future – inherent in any action. It is often on these effects that critical observations are focused and resistance crystallises. Lastly, to complete the cycle, time must be devoted to imagining the common unknowns of the future (what might happen, what we hope and wish for, where we are trying to go) and to anticipating how farming and food systems will develop together. From there, it is a matter of examining and testing the contexts, making the cycle explicit, embodying and reappropriating it, and encouraging decision-making.

KEY POINTS

“Sustainability” has a major impact on agricultural and food issues through the reconfiguration of models and modes of action that it implies. The concept of the dilemma provides a heuristic framework and an inspirational tool for co-constructing participatory actions at the various territorial and stakeholder ecosystem levels. The dilemma is not specific to the field of food and can be applied to health and environmental issues. It aims to ensure that appropriate and acceptable solutions emerge from the field, as close as possible to the stakeholders. It encourages actions to be taken “with full awareness of the cause”, thereby strengthening sustainability.

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