

Evolving Cities for Human Health and Wellbeing

Barry Newell and Katrina Proust*

© by the authors

* Fenner School of Environment and Society
The Australian National University
barry.newell@anu.edu.au
katrina.proust@anu.edu.au

Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on “The Ideal City: between myth and reality. Representations, policies, contradictions and challenges for tomorrow's urban life” Urbino (Italy) 27-29 August 2015. <http://www.rc21.org/en/conferences/urbino2015/>

Abstract

The establishment of close collaboration between public health professionals and urban planning professionals is a critical enabling factor in the evolution of healthier cities. We suggest that the present situation, where these professions often operate in separate management silos, reflects the natural tendency for polycentric governance structures to develop in complex urban systems. The problem is that polycentric governance does not necessarily involve polycentric order.

The establishment of a well-balanced polycentric order, where local management groups have maximum freedom to produce innovative policies that are finely tuned to local conditions, but that are constrained and co-ordinated by over-arching rules and goals, requires a feedback-systems approach. Feedback interactions play a dominant role in urban dynamics, but can be invisible to policy makers and managers who are not systems thinkers. Actions taken in one sector can propagate around unseen pathways, looping through other sectors, to come back and amplify or undercut the original actions. Once this possibility is glimpsed, it becomes obvious that management by silos cannot work. Urban environments are far too complex, far too connected. That realisation is enough to show the way forward—a systems approach is an essential part of the over-arching conceptual framework that managers need if they are to create sustainable polycentric governance.

In this paper we briefly describe *Collaborative Conceptual Modelling (CCM)*, a practical approach to the development and application of systems thinking and analysis skills (Newell & Proust 2012). CCM encompasses six co-evolving activities that can support a research or management group's attempts to take account of two sets of critical interactions—feedback interactions between selected parts of their system-of-interest, and knowledge-sharing and knowledge-building interactions between the members of the group. These sets of interactions are nested, in the sense that an analysis of feedback structures requires the co-

production of knowledge. No one person can see the whole system, but everyone is an expert in some aspect of the human experience.

We report part of the output from CCM workshops where public health and urban planning professionals explored the challenge of developing healthy cities. The workshop resulted in the identification of two system variables that together play a significant role in determining the state of a city's governance regimes—*the extent to which urban policy and planning is integrative (systemic)* and *the extent to which the health sector is proactive*. The way that these variables interact and change over time can be used to track the evolution of urban governance from fragmented-reactive to integrated-proactive.

In general terms, we conclude that improvement in urban health and wellbeing requires public health and urban planning teams to work closely together, using a feedback-systems approach.

Reference

Newell, B. and Proust, K. 2012. *Introduction to Collaborative Conceptual Modelling*. Working Paper, ANU Open Access Research.
<https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/9386>