

We will start  
at 2 p.m.

# Wicked Problems: What are They and What Can Public Health do About Them?

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Webinar | November 26, 2015

Teleconference:  
Canada  
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Val Morrison  
National Collaborating Centre  
for Healthy Public Policy



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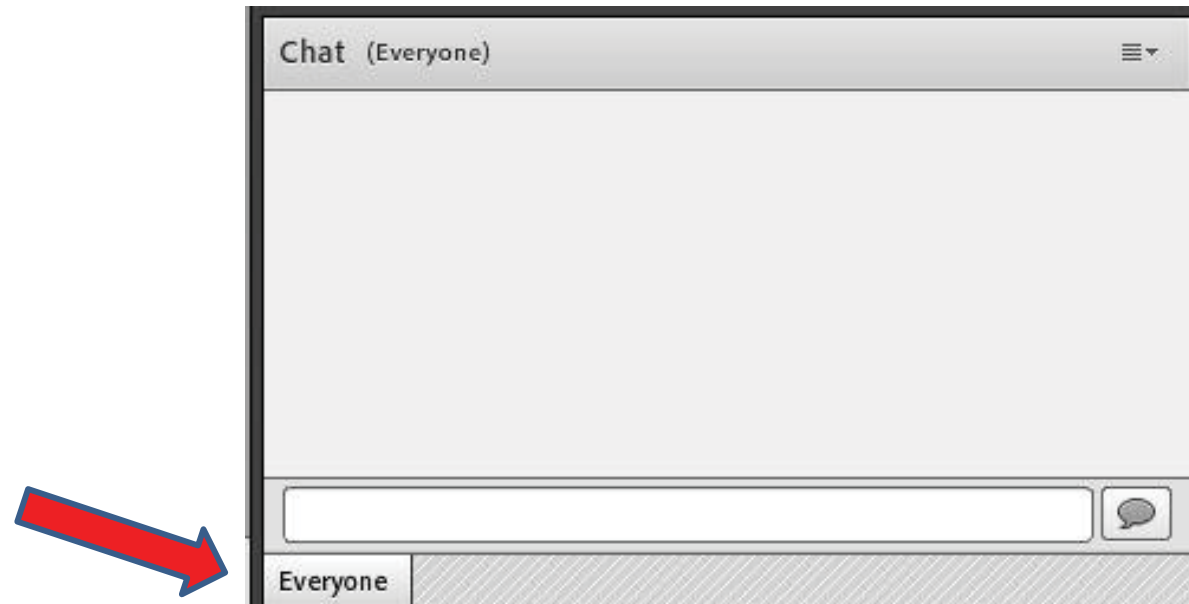


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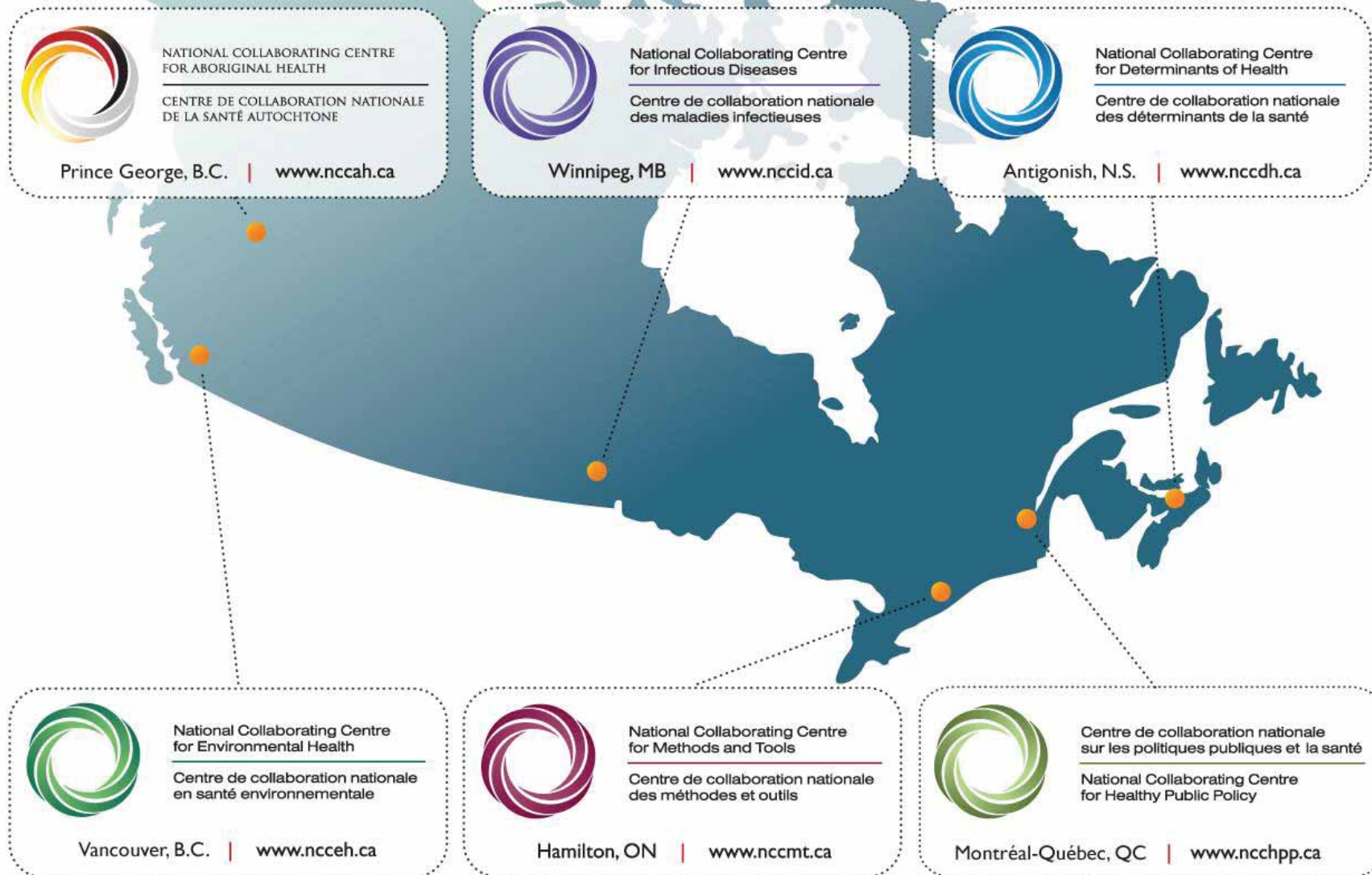
Please note that we are recording this webinar, including the chat, and we will be posting this on our website.



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# The National Collaborating Centres for Public Health



# National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCCHPP)

## Our mandate

- Support public health actors in their efforts to promote healthy public policies

## Our areas of expertise

- The effects of public policies on health
- Generating and using knowledge about policies
- Intersectoral actors and mechanisms
- Strategies to influence policy making



# Presenter: Val Morrison

With:

Alizée Rico (INSPQ): technical support

Marianne Jacques (NCCHPP): webinar  
organization

# Declaration of real or potential conflicts of interest

Presenter:  
Val Morrison



I have no real or potential conflict of interest related to the material that is being presented today.



# Checking in...

What is your level of (u]o]0\$  
y\$A\$E?<\/p><\/div>

Expert?

Intermediate?

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# Webinar Objectives

- Understand the origins and usefulness of the concept of wicked problems.
- Define wicked problems and distinguish them from other types of problems.
- Recognize the key factors necessary to dealing with wicked problems.

# Wicked problems

*Policy Sciences* 4 (1973), 155-169  
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## Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning\*

**HORST W. J. RITTEL**

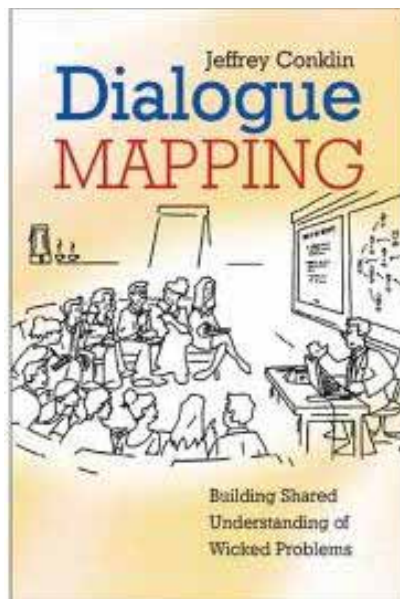
*Professor of the Science of Design, University of California, Berkeley*

**MELVIN M. WEBBER**

*Professor of City Planning, University of California, Berkeley*

### ABSTRACT

The search for scientific bases for confronting problems of social policy is bound to fail, because of the nature of these problems. They are "wicked" problems, whereas science has developed to deal with "tame" problems. Policy problems cannot be definitively described. Moreover, in a pluralistic society there is nothing like the undisputable public good; there is no objective definition of equity; policies that respond to social problems cannot be meaningfully correct or false; and it makes no sense to talk about "optimal solutions" to social problems unless severe qualifications are imposed first. Even worse, there are no "solutions" in the sense of definitive and objective answers.



## Knowledge Mapping for Complex Social Messes

A presentation to the "Foundations in the Knowledge Economy" at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, July 16, 2001  
<http://www.stanford.edu/~rhorn/SpchPackard.html>

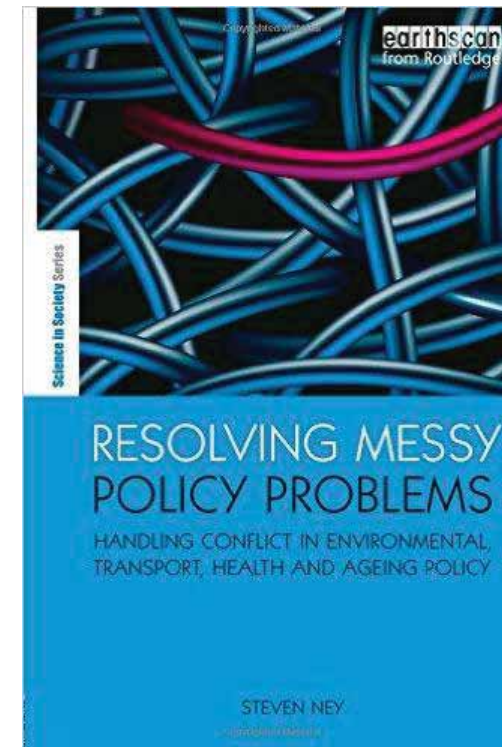
By

Robert E. Horn  
Visiting Scholar, Stanford University  
[hoenbob@earthlink.net](mailto:hoenbob@earthlink.net)

### Social Messes

They've been called "wicked problems," (by Horst Rittel) They've been called "ill-structured problems," (by Ian Mitroff) I call them "social messes," (after Russell Ackoff, who simply refers to them as "messes")

What they are *not* is merely problems. Problems have solutions. Messes do not have straightforward solutions.



# Wicked problems defined

Wicked problems cannot be defined once and for all.

# Wicked problems defined

They have no precise stopping point when they are solved.

# Wicked problems defined

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' solutions, only better or worse ones.

# Wicked problems defined

Each wicked problem is unique and specific to its context.

# Wicked problems defined

Each attempt to solve a wicked problem is unique and may affect an infinite set of related problems.

# Wicked problems defined

They are essentially unstable and resistant to policy solutions insofar as interventions involve multiple stakeholders.

(Rittel & Webber, 1973; Roberts, 2000; Blackman et al., 2006; Conklin, 2006)



## Wicked vs. Tame Problems – Key Features

<b>WICKED PROBLEMS</b>	<b>TAME PROBLEMS</b>
There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.	<u>have</u> a relatively well-defined and stable problem statement.
Wicked problems have no stopping rule.	<u>have</u> a definite stopping point, i.e. we know when the solution or a solution has been reached.
Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but better or worse.	<u>have</u> a solution which can be objectively evaluated as being right or wrong.
There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.	<u>belong</u> to a class of similar problems which can be solved in a similar manner.
Every wicked problem is essentially unique.	<u>have</u> solutions which can be tried and abandoned.
Wicked problems have no given alternative solutions	Comes with a limited set of alternative solutions.

(adapted from: Ison & Collins, 2008 and Conklin, 2006)

# Tame Problems

- Tame problems are those where stakeholders agree on the nature of the problem and on the best way to solve it.



# Complex Problems

- Complex problems are those where stakeholders agree on the nature of the problem, but not on how to best solve it.



# Wicked Problems

- With wicked problems, stakeholders agree neither on the nature of the problem, nor on its solution.



# Taming wicked problems

« attempting to tame a wicked problem, while appealing in the short run, fails in the long run. » (Conklin, 2006, p.22)

# Name that problem

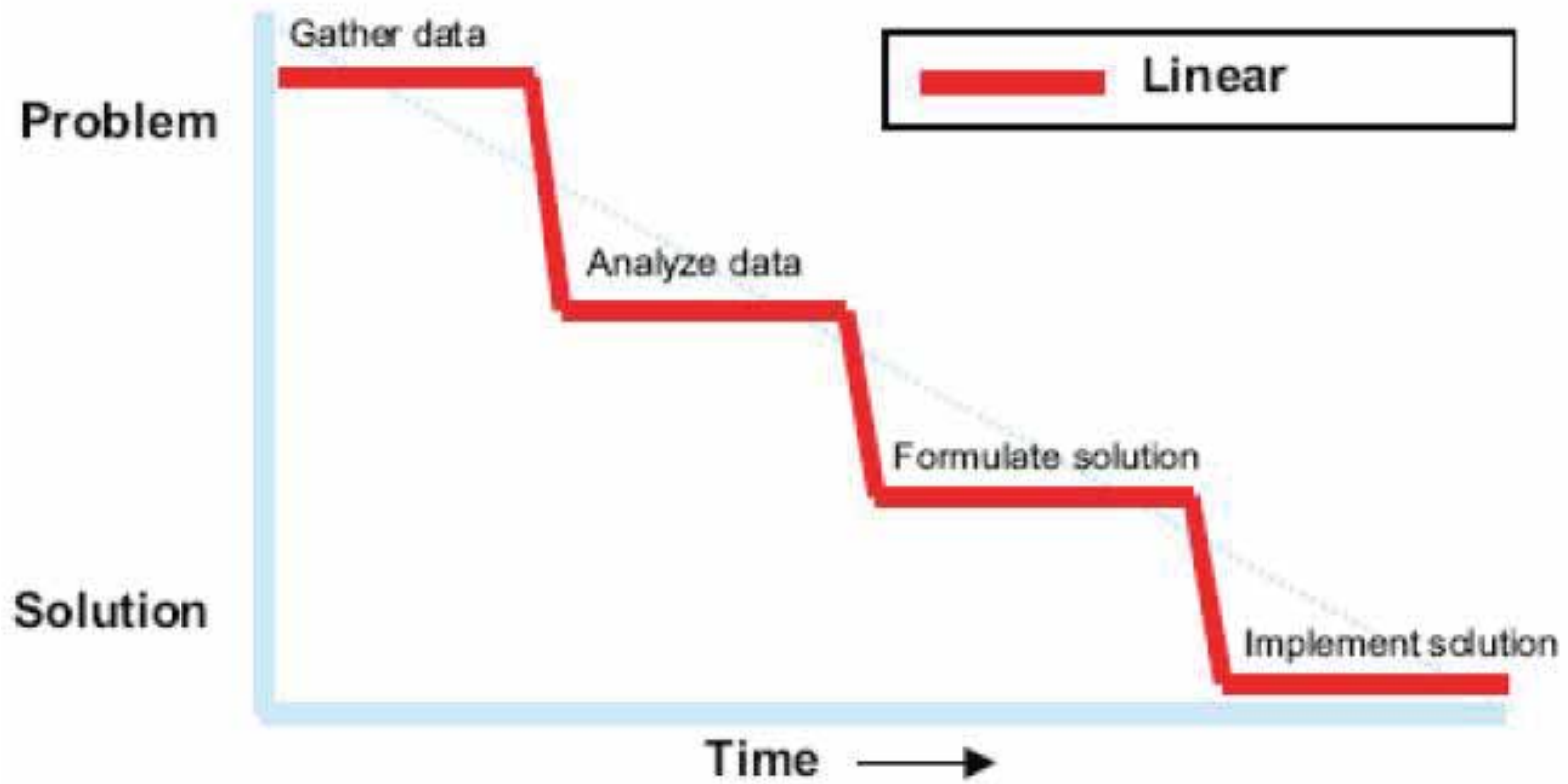
Are the following problems wicked, tame, or complex?

1. You are tasked with removing mould from a school building.
2. Your team is working on finding a cure for breast cancer.
3. Your team is designing a policy meant to reduce health inequalities in your community.

# Tackling wicked problems

- If wicked problems are different from tame and complex ones, how do we approach them?
- The classic scientific approach may not work.
- Wicked problems are compounded by **technical** and **social** complexity.

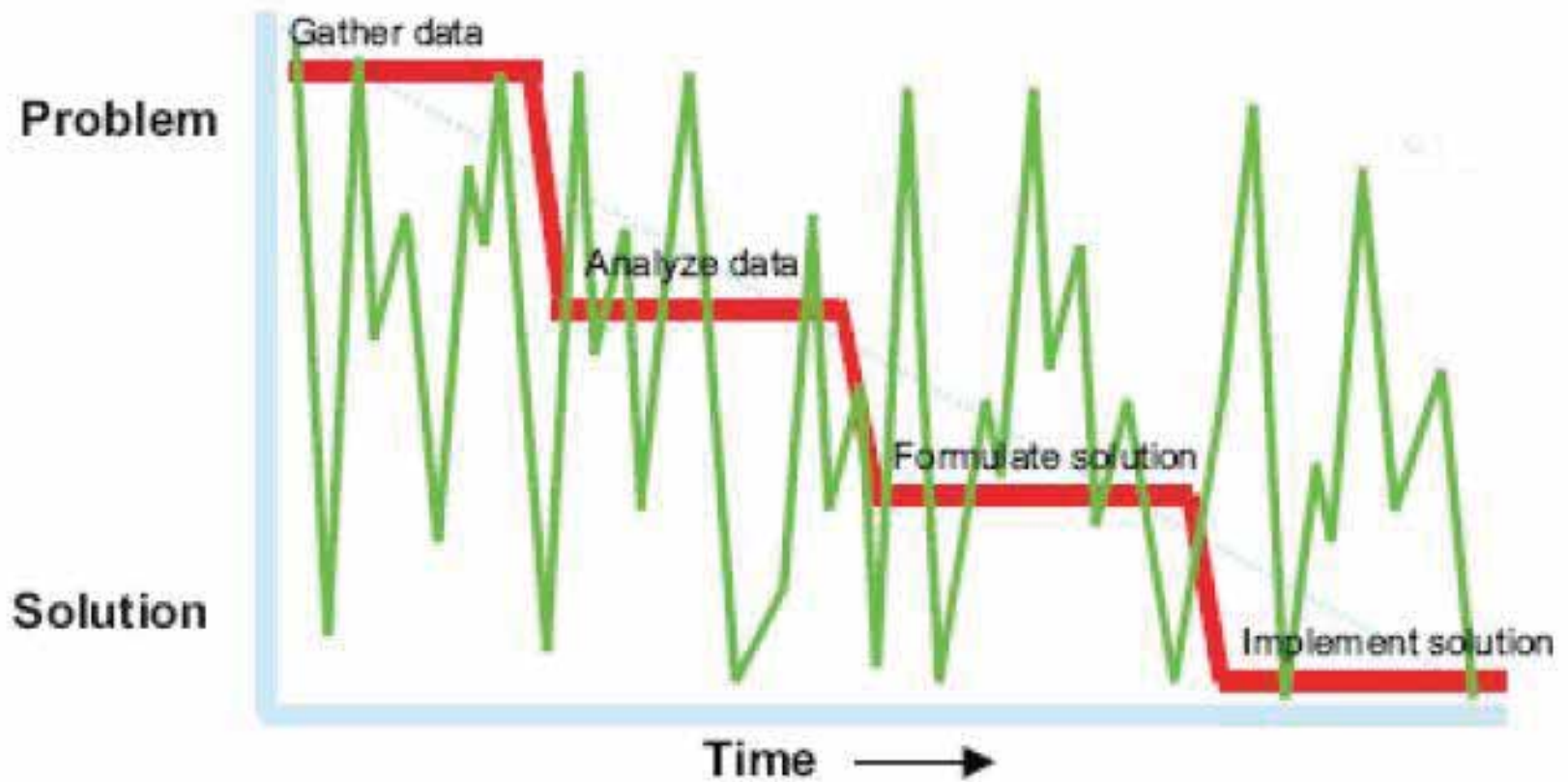
# Traditional /Linear problem solution



(Conklin, 2006 p.9)



# Opportunity-based problem solution



(Conklin, 2006 p.10)

# Strategies for coping with wicked problems

- Authoritative



# Strategies for coping with wicked problems

- Competitive



(© iStockphoto.com/ porcorex)

# Strategies for coping with wicked problems

- Collaborative



# Strategies for coping with wicked problems

- Key ingredients
  - Collaboration
  - Dialogue
  - Shared Understanding

# Dialogic communication

- Key elements
  - Engaging contact
  - Active listening
  - Mirroring
  - Exploratory questions

Discussion	Debate	Dialogue
Present ideas	Succeed or win	Broaden perspectives
Seek answers/solutions	Look for weakness	Look for shared meaning
Persuade others	Stress disagreement	Find spaces of agreement
Share information	Focus on 'right' and 'wrong'	Bring out ambivalences
Solve our problems	Advocate one perspective	Invite/allow differences of opinion and expertise
Give answers	Search for logic flaws	Discover collective meaning
Achieve preset goals	Judge other perspectives as inferior or distorted	Challenge our preconceived notions
Listen for disagreement	Listen in order to counter	Listen in order to understand
Avoid areas of conflict and difference	Focus on conflict and difference as advantage	Articulate areas of conflict and difference
Retain relationships	Disregard relationships	Build relationships

(Adapted from Kachwaha, 2002)

# Dialogue Mapping

(Conklin, 2006)

- A technique for developing and mapping shared understanding of a problem
- Works outward from a basic question
- Questions / ideas / pros, cons / decisions



# Types of questions

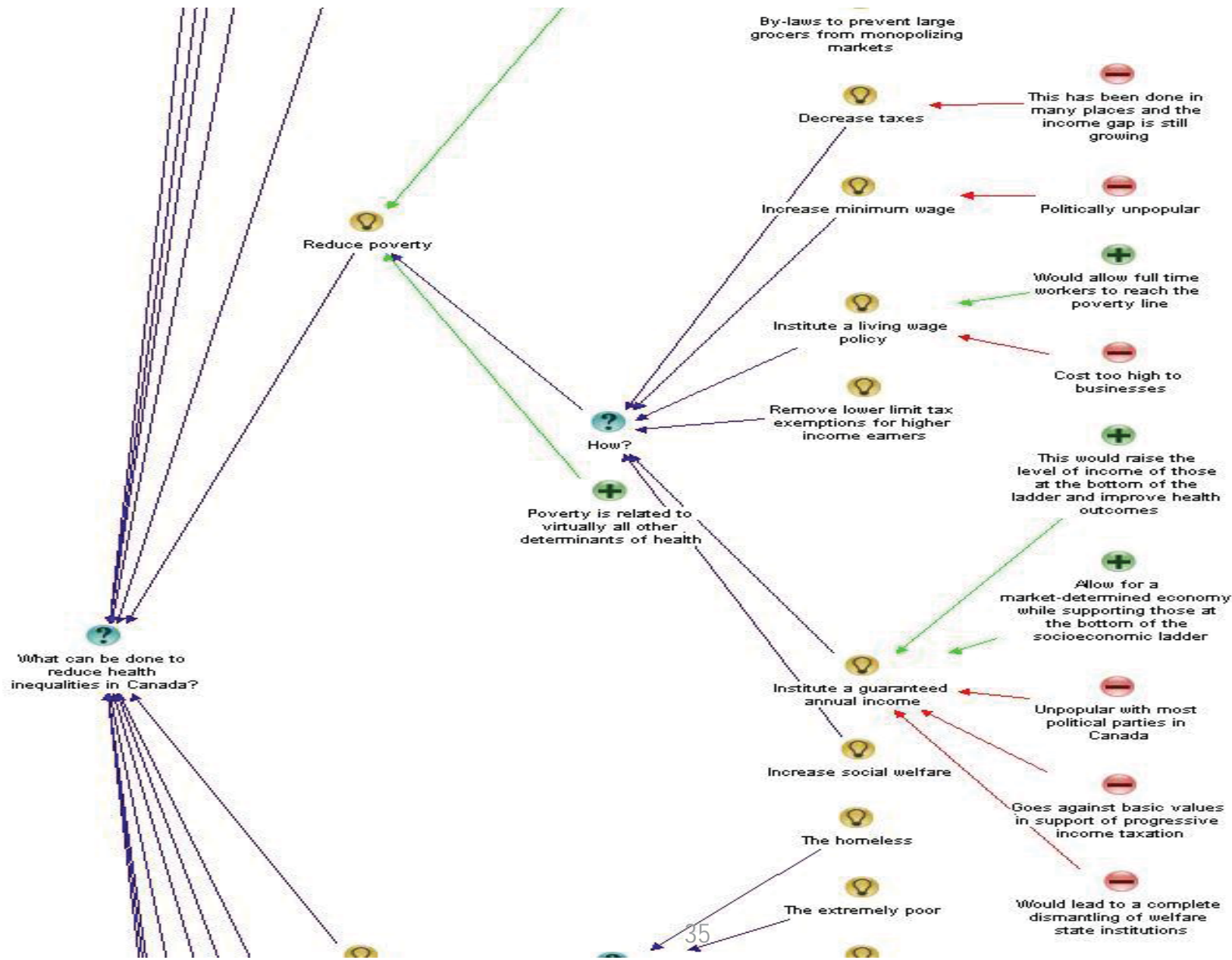
- Deontic (What should we do?)
- Instrumental (How should we do it?)
- Criterial (What are the criteria?)
- Conceptual (What does 'X' mean?)
- Factual (What is X? Is X true?)
- Background (What is the background to this problem?)
- Stakeholders (Who are they?)
- Future (What will happen...?)

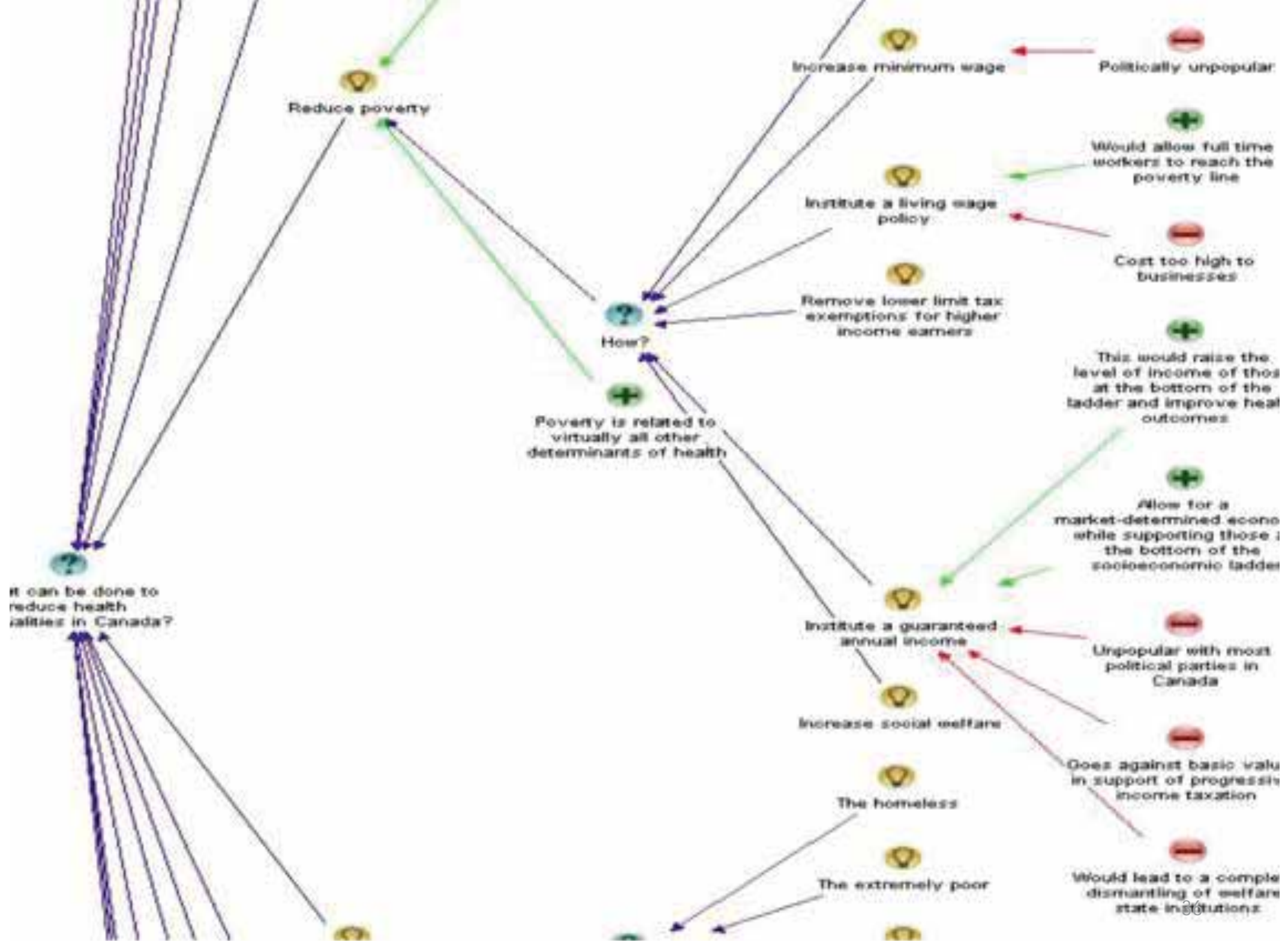
(Adapted from, Cognexus, 2010.  
p.29-30)

# Example of health inequalities

- How can we reduce health inequalities?
- What are our targets?
- What do we mean by health inequalities?
- What sectors need to be involved
- What are the numbers on inequalities?
- What has been tried elsewhere?
- What will happen if we do nothing?
- How will we measure success?

# Example of health inequalities

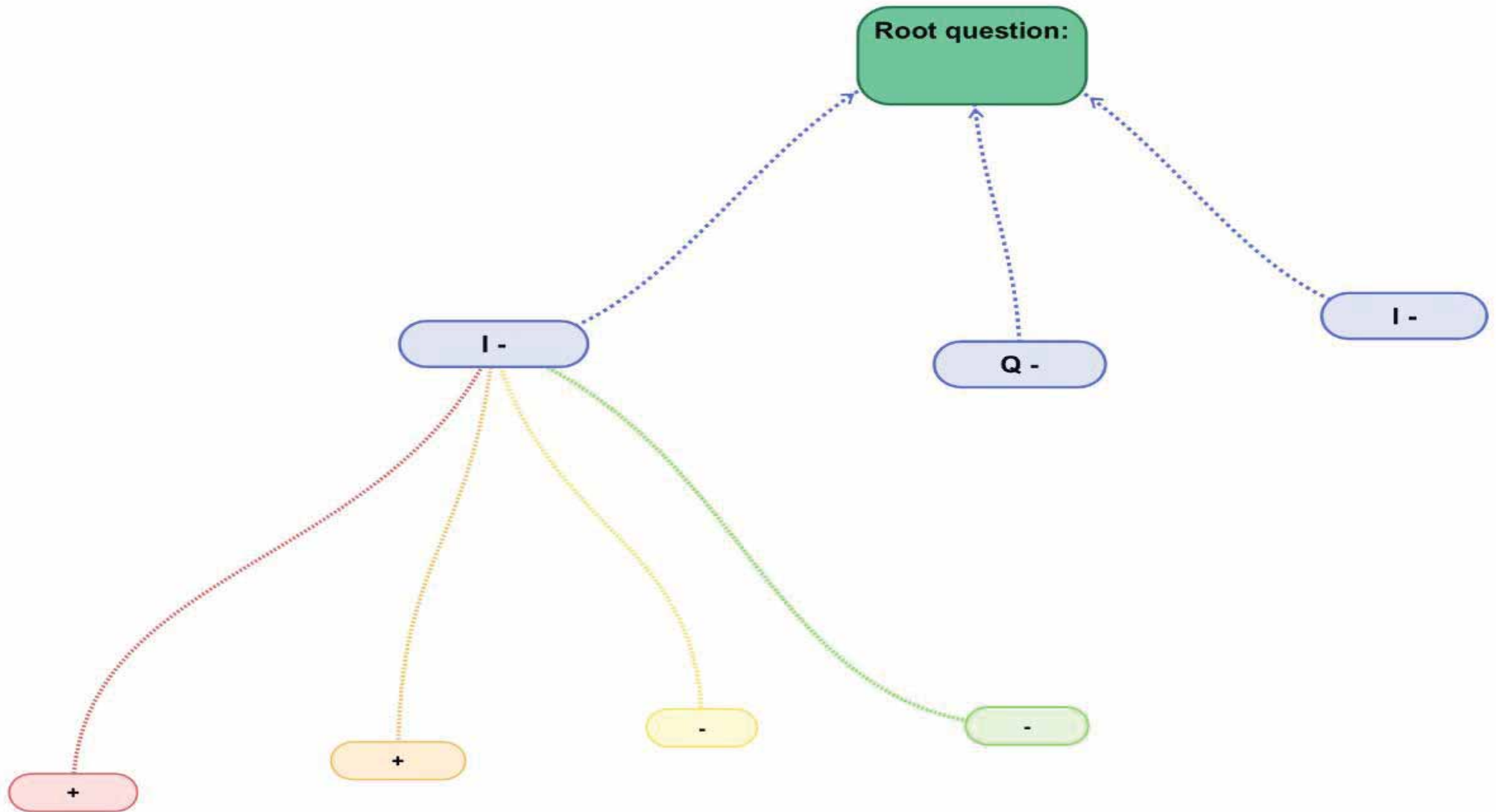




# Asking 'Good' Root Questions

- Simple, not compound
  - Ask only one thing
- Don't sneak major assumptions\answers into the question
- Open, not closed
  - Not yes/no or either/or questions

# Try making an issue map



# Strategies for coping with wicked problems

- Key ingredients
  - Collaboration
  - Dialogue
  - Shared Understanding

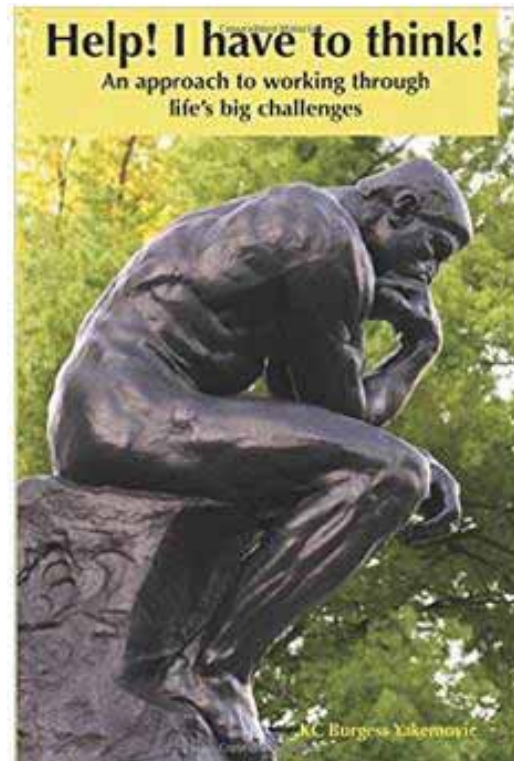
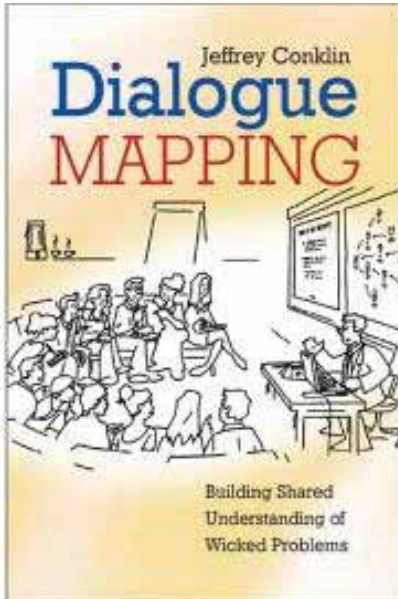
# Conclusion / Summary

- Most public policy problems are wicked in nature.
- Wicked problems must be tackled differently than tame or complex problems.
- Focus on collaboration, dialogue and shared understanding.
- « Mapping » issues and dialogues can be useful in reaching decisions on how to tackle wicked problems.



- Questions or comments?

# A few resources



# Evaluation and continuing education credits

- We will send you an email with a link to an evaluation form for this webinar.
- In order to receive continuing education credits, you will have to fill out the evaluation form.
- To obtain continuing education credits, once you have filled out the evaluation form, you can click on a link that will take you to another form requesting your credits. Your evaluation form responses will remain confidential and will not be connected to your request for continuing education credits

Thanks for joining us

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