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Finding the Win in Wicked Problems: Lessons From Evaluating Public Policy Advocacy

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Introduction

The social and public welfare issues currently facing the United States and the world are staggering. Poverty, homelessness, eroding school systems, and global climate change are just a few. Such “wicked” problems challenge governments, foundations, and nonprofits as they work to address them effectively, equitably, economically, and sustainably. In its response, philanthropy has an opportunity to foster an internal and external culture of collaboration, candor, and community voice. Using the right strategies and comprehensive tools, today’s philanthropists can improve leadership, create effective organizations, and build powerful partnerships devoted to achieving profound social change.

This article describes a wicked problems framework that can be used in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of programs that address these complex issues. It specifically focuses on how the wicked problems frame may be applied to public policy advocacy evaluation. Two policy initiatives are described and used to illustrate some of the ways in which a wicked problems framework can be a beneficial approach to evaluation (as well as to all parts of the grantmaking cycle). The two policy efforts are (1) a legislative campaign supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies that focused on improving and expanding national health insurance for children (State Children’s Health Insurance Program) and (2) an advocacy initiative supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation that was intended

Key Points

- Many of the social issues private foundations and other philanthropies attempt to address — poverty, homelessness, global climate change — are wicked problems. That is, they defy easy definition, lack permanent solutions, and have multiple stakeholders.
- The wicked problems framework helps make explicit the challenging nature of the issue to be addressed, requires an inclusive style of leadership that seeks stakeholder involvement, and demands candid exchange among stakeholders about the nature of the problem and effectiveness of efforts to address it.
- A wicked problems framework provides a set of criteria and questions for evaluators of advocacy efforts to ask all the other stakeholders to assess: (1) the type and quality of leadership provided by the funder, grantees, and other stakeholders in terms of involving stakeholders and fostering a culture of candor; (2) the degree to which leadership and others were candid about the problem, the effectiveness of the strategies, and stakeholder contributions; and (3) quality and contributions of stakeholders.
- Two recent public policy advocacy efforts and their evaluation are used to highlight some of the issues a wicked problems framework makes apparent, and the possible ramifications if such a framework had been used from the initial stages of the advocacy efforts.

to strengthen the federal Farm Bill and expand conservation and improve healthy food for the poor.

The Wicked Problems Frame

What Is It?

One function of public policy is to ameliorate, if not “solve,” social justice issues. In many cases, such issues meet the definition of what Rittel and Webber (1973) termed “wicked problems.” They identified 10 properties of a wicked problem:

1. It is impossible to write a well-defined problem statement about wicked problems.
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule; the search for solutions never ends.
3. Choosing a solution to a wicked problem is a matter of judgment.
4. Solutions to wicked problems generate unexpected consequences over time and measurement is hard.
5. Solutions to wicked problems have consequences that cannot be undone.
6. Wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions.
7. Every wicked problem is unique, without precedent, and thus experience does not help you address it.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem; they have no single root cause.
9. A wicked problem involves many stakeholders, who all will have different ideas about the problem, its causes, and its solutions.
10. Problem solvers dealing with a wicked issue are held liable for the consequences of any actions.

How Can It Help Foundations?

The wicked problems construct is particularly useful for foundations supporting public policy strategies. It serves to improve the effectiveness of a foundation’s programs because it

- Creates the need for the funder to be explicit about the nature of the underlying social justice issue it is trying to address and why a public policy advocacy strategy is reasonable to address the social justice issue.
- Ensures that the foundation has sought out appropriate involvement from stakeholders. In the politics of public policy, who defines the problem (thus, explicitly or implicitly assert-

ing the problem’s cause) and who develops solutions to it, are critical factors in determining who is an effective participant in informing and influencing the final policy outcome. . One of the places a foundation has some input in addressing a wicked problem is through the stakeholders (e.g., grantees) it chooses to support and thus who will be at the negotiating table.

Nancy Roberts, professor of strategic management and professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, notes that “people’s personal preferences, backgrounds, educational experiences, and organizational affiliations” shape the way each person defines, assigns causation, and offers solutions to wicked problems (Roberts, 2001)). Those supported stakeholders, when given the time and resources to participate deeply and consistently in an advocacy effort, have the opportunity to be heard, accommodated, and even become leaders themselves. Thus, the wicked problems frame reminds and requires a funder to pay careful attention both to the stakeholders it chooses to support and to its rationale for supporting certain stakeholders (e.g., nonprofit advocates) over others. The success, quality, and longevity of the public policy solution in part depend on the quality and integrity of stakeholder involvement.

Just as important, the foundation needs to recognize that it is a stakeholder with a point of view expressed in its vision, mission, theory of change, programmatic outcomes, and grantmaking criteria. At the individual level, the managing program director also must be aware of their influential stakeholder’s role. As a stakeholder with significant power (in terms of funding), what and how the foundation and individual program director communicates to potential grant seekers and grantees influences how they approach the funder and, perhaps, how they address the wicked problem.

- Shares “the solution” (or the supported public policy strategy) among stakeholders. This fundamental acknowledgement of greater stakeholder involvement creates its own benefits,

including (1) increased candor among stakeholders and (2) a more distributed leadership and decision-making model that requires the program director to seek out and listen to divergent perspectives from within and outside of the organization. As solutions are more collectively owned (wicked problems don't go away, but significant change can be achieved), the ability to discuss the tough questions will require openness and honesty about what is and isn't working so that strategies can be fine-tuned. This process can increase the efficacy of the public policy advocacy effort.

- Improves communication, internally and externally, regarding the nature of the issues being addressed and the reasons why solving such problems are challenging. The wicked problems frame reminds funders of these responsibilities and that no matter how successful the public policy outcome, the problem does not have a permanent solution. In fact, regardless of the action taken, it is likely that another set of problems unforeseen (and unforeseeable) will surface. The wicked problems frame forces funders (and their evaluators) to acknowledge that in the policy advocacy realm, it is difficult to predict what is going to happen, much less when it will happen. In other words, it keeps funders humble and evaluators sane.

This frame also fits well with John Kingdon's (2001) ideas about policy agendas and the various independent policy-making streams — the problem to be solved, possible policies to address it, and the political context or climate that makes it possible (or not) to align a problem with a policy solution. By considering public policy advocacy through the wicked problems frame, funders are asked to consider each of these streams. As a result, they have a better understanding of what is possible, the timeframe for realizing such possibilities, and how to design an appropriate evaluation.

Why Is the Wicked Problems Frame Relevant to Public Policy Advocacy Evaluation?

The ability of private foundations to legally support nonprofit groups to influence legislation

is well established.¹ Public charity/nonprofit advocacy, lobbying (direct and grassroots), and other efforts to inform and influence specific legislation are important tools for advocates. In turn, understanding the efficacy and the array of proactive and reactive activities associated with any legislative advocacy campaign can help both funders and grantees. The right evaluation at the right time that asks the right questions of the right players can yield lessons for funder and grantees.

The wicked problems frame reminds and requires a funder to pay careful attention both to the stakeholders it chooses to support and to its rationale for supporting certain stakeholders over others.

Recent efforts to understand initiation, management, and evaluation of public policy advocacy grantmaking have focused on the organizational and system levels. Much of the recent literature, meetings, and conversations on evaluation of public policy advocacy have focused on methodologies for evaluating organizations' public policy advocacy efforts.² These efforts are also being discussed in the context of systems approaches to framing and evaluating social change efforts (Parsons, 2007; Richardson, 1991). Similar to what Kingdon (1995) proposed, these approaches view policy making as a complex adaptive system.

Efforts in both these areas have yielded important results: (1) Policy funders, both experienced and new, gain a deeper understanding of the role of advocacy groups and how public policy is created, nurtured, and ultimately manifested (whether

¹ See Internal Revenue Service letter to Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest, December 9, 2004.

² See, for example, Alliance for Justice, Innonet, and American Evaluation Association conference agenda over the past three years.

TABLE 1 The Wicked Problem Nature of Poverty and Two Public Policy Strategy Solutions

Wicked problem criteria	Social issues and policy strategies — SCHIP and Farm Bill
It is impossible to write a well-defined problem statement about wicked problems.	A well-defined problem statement cannot be written easily for either the SCHIP or the Farm Bill efforts. Both are attempting to address and ameliorate complex social justice issues centered on the causes and consequences of poverty.
Wicked problems have no stopping rule; the search for solutions never ends.	If the children’s health insurance issue or lack of access to healthy foods is “solved” through a public policy action, other issues related to poverty such as inadequate educational systems, insufficient job market, lack of an adequate supply of healthy foods, and lack of an adequate supply of affordable healthy foods emerge or remain; thus, the solutions to those issues then become paramount.
Choosing a solution to a wicked problem is a matter of judgment.	Judgment is driven by what is “known” at any one time about possible solutions combined with the individual, group, or political party that has the clout to make or force to choose the solution. In the case of SCHIP, a judgment was made to only pursue health insurance for children and not for all individuals, families, and adults. For food, the judgment was made that access to healthy foods (excluding school foods) was a market force, private sector issue and not one to be addressed through public policy.
Solutions to wicked problems generate unexpected consequences over time and measurement is hard.	What are the unforeseen or unforeseeable results, intended or unintended, of having healthier children due to increased access to health care or better foods? What are the results of not having such access?
Solutions to wicked problems have consequences that cannot be undone.	For many social justice issues, the result of any ameliorating strategy may ultimately mean increased or reduced quality of life, or greater or fewer deaths. Moreover, the culture of policy making calls for compromise and trade-offs. What are the consequences of such trade-offs for the immediate policy strategy, other public policy efforts addressing other social issues, and ultimately for those individuals, communities, and society overall that suffer from the underlying wicked problem(s)?
Wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions.	Relates to the first criterion in that without a well-defined problem statement, there cannot be well-defined and finite solutions.
Every wicked problem is unique, without precedent, thus experience does not help you address it.	Also related to the first criterion.
Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem; they have no single root cause.	Also related to the first criterion.
A wicked problem involves many stakeholders, who all will have different ideas about the problem, its causes, and its solutions.	SCHIP’s stakeholders included children’s advocates, universal health care supports, pediatrician groups, the AMA, health insurance industry, and limited government advocates. Some of the Farm Bill stakeholders included antihunger advocates, environmental advocates, grain commodity groups, livestock groups, and agricultural trade associations
Problem solvers dealing with a wicked issue are held liable for the consequences of any actions.	In the world of foundations, funders look to the grantees to be accountable for their public policy advocacy efforts — this despite the multiple, external factors influencing policy creation, implementation, and impacts.

Note. SCHIP = State Children’s Health Insurance Program; AMA = American Medical Association.

defeated, victorious, or the all-too-common in-between result). (2) Advocacy groups (and their evaluators) have some standardized tools to track and report their advocacy performance in ways that funders understand.³ (3) Placing policy work in a systems context has revealed the complex nature of policy change and has articulated the need to understand deeply the participants and context in which policy work occurs.

The wicked problems frame complements the organizational and systems evaluation models by asking the evaluators to look at the choices and decisions made in the upstream parts of grant-making, including program design, communication, and implementation. A lack of adequate definition and intent that is common in these early stages causes problems in the downstream evaluation design and implementation (as Ricardo Mallet has observed, “the bane of evaluation is a poorly designed program”(WK Kellogg, 2001)).

The intent of the wicked problems frame is to help the evaluator seek more basic answers to questions about several aspects of a program and the type of leadership provided by the foundation around those aspects, including (1) the nature of the social justice problems attempting to be addressed by a public policy strategy; (2) the rationale for choosing a public policy strategy over other strategies; (3) the stakeholders involved in those discussions, how they were involved, and when they were involved; and (4) the quality of, and level of candor in, the communications and outreach to grant seekers, other stakeholders, and the community. (A robust theory of change may capture some of these pieces; however, our experience tells us that theories of change rarely do.)

³ We believe that most experienced and successful advocacy groups know how to track their performance for their own purposes, including policy research and other preparatory activities; education and outreach to membership and the public; the ability to perform power analyses, target and inform the policy decision makers (e.g., bureaucrats or legislators), and understand if and when the opportunity exists to advocate a policy change; and policy success. The current evaluation efforts have been to capture this knowledge in ways that can be fed to, and understood by, funders and others.

The Atlantic and W.K.K.F. Efforts

Over the past several years, we have been the cluster evaluators for two significant federal public policy advocacy efforts supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (W.K.K.F.). Part of our work with Atlantic was to evaluate its efforts to reauthorize the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Our W.K.K.F. work comprised an evaluation of its efforts to inform the 2008 federal Farm Bill. Each of these efforts had different approaches, expectations, and types of grantees. Next, we discuss why the issues addressed by these efforts are wicked problems, provide an overview of each effort, and analyze the lessons learned from them using the wicked problems frame.

“The bane of evaluation is a poorly designed program”

Why Are These Issues Wicked Problems?

Consider the underlying issues the two foundations’ strategies were attempting to address. In both cases, these issues and the ways in which they manifest in people’s lives individually, in their families, and in their communities are wicked problems. Table 1 compares the wicked problems criteria with these public policy strategy responses.

Atlantic Philanthropies: Childhood Poverty and Lack of Health Insurance for Children

The costs of childhood poverty to children, families, and communities are well documented: impoverishment, reduced productivity, increased crime, and higher health risks (Holzer, Schanzenbach, Duncan, & Ludwig, 2007; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). An important consequence of poverty is the lack of health insurance for children (high health insurance costs drive families into poverty, and poverty keeps families from accessing insurance). In 2007, 11 percent of all children in the United States (8.9 million) had no health insurance. Uninsured children are more likely to go without immunizations and miss school as a result of untreated illness. Due to their

decreased access to primary and preventive care, they are also more likely to end up seeking care in emergency rooms (Center for Family and Children, Georgetown University, 2009). Atlantic supported federal policy advocacy efforts to improve one of most significant options that poor children have to access health insurance, SCHIP. Improving SCHIP was a public policy strategy used in response to one manifestation of an underlying wicked problem (poverty).

W. K. Kellogg Foundation: Rural and Urban Poverty and Lack of Access to Healthy Food
Inadequate access to healthy, affordable food is a serious and widespread issue across the country. An estimated 25 percent of U.S. counties are low-access areas and 13 percent are “food deserts” (regions, urban or rural, with little or no access to foods needed to maintain a healthy diet) (Morton & Blanchard, 2007). Both the limited access to healthy, affordable food and its high cost contribute to poor nutrition and obesity among children and adults in poor communities (Morton & Blanchard, 2007; Rundle et al., 2009).

The Farm Bill offered one strategy (public policy) to address a classic wicked problem (lack of access to healthy food). A consequence of this strategy would require more such food to be grown and distributed to poor urban and rural communities. This, in turn, would not only require a sufficient supply of farmers in appropriate locations but also the infrastructure to process and distribute it in ways that ensure quality and affordability. Such multiple, complex consequences are a classic aspect of a wicked problem.

How Did Atlantic and W.K.K.F. Address the Issues?

Essentially, both Atlantic and Kellogg wanted specific policy-content and policy-process outcomes. These, along with their goals, theory of change, and other key aspects of their efforts are summarized in Table 2.

Atlantic Philanthropies and SCHIP

As outlined in the theory of change for its Disadvantaged Children and Youth (DCY) Programme, Atlantic invests in advocacy capacity in order to

(1) impact immediate, short-term policy initiatives and (2) create and exploit potential policy opportunities. Atlantic aims to improve individual and collective capacity to conduct policy campaigns focused on learning, health, and access to benefits. The recent effort to reauthorize SCHIP is one such campaign. As with capacity building, Atlantic identified specific outcomes for this effort congruent with overall policy advocacy outcomes for its DCY Programme.

Context. Created by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, SCHIP was due to expire in 2007. It was designed as a federal-state funding partnership to offer health insurance coverage to children in modest-income families who are unable to afford private insurance, but whose incomes are too high to qualify for Medicaid assistance. States were given latitude on implementing SCHIP, including key contentious issues such as income-level eligibility, whether adults of eligible should be covered, how states are allotted SCHIP funds, and whether immigrants’ children should be covered.

The players. The SCHIP reauthorization effort involved a core of eight Atlantic grantees. Several trade associations and other nonprofit groups were also active participants. Funded by several foundations, including Atlantic, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation (Packard), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Wellspring Advisors, the grantees and other participants formed networks focused solely on SCHIP and assisted in shifting the focus of broad health care coalitions to the SCHIP reauthorization. Atlantic grantees were involved in at least five such coalitions and networks. Some of these were involved in the original SCHIP efforts, others joined as the reauthorization effort began in 2006, and the remainder arrived later in the game.

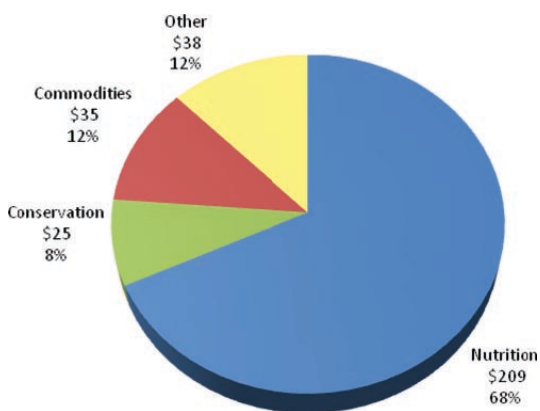
Outcome. Between October and December 2007, President Bush vetoed two versions of SCHIP. In late December 2007, he signed a bill extending the current SCHIP for 18 months. In January 2009, President Obama signed a SCHIP bill almost identical to the one that the previous president had twice vetoed.

TABLE 2 Summary of Atlantic's SCHIP and Kellogg's Farm Bill Public Policy Advocacy

Key grant and initiative issues	Atlantic philanthropies and SCHIP	W.K. Kellogg and Farm Bill
Theory of change	Better public policy at the local, state, and federal levels is critical to improving the lives of disadvantaged children and youth.	Support new models of community-based and community-owned food systems enterprises and inform new models of food systems policy.
Goal	Make lasting changes in the lives of disadvantaged children and youth through policies and programs that keep them engaged in learning, healthy, and connected to family support.	Policy reforms are successfully enacted and increase — at least to a steady stream — the trickle of the Farm Bill's resources dedicated to the foundation's vision of healthy, environmentally sound, equitable food.
Outcomes: policy content	SCHIP reauthorization legislation that protects, and optimally expands and improves, the program without undermining such coverage in Medicaid. It trusted the grantees to determine what an "optimal" SCHIP looked like.	More Farm Bill resources to be dedicated to the foundation's vision of healthy, environmentally sound, equitable food.
Outcomes: policy advocacy process	<p>Stronger leadership and better coordination among key national advocacy organizations.</p> <p>Improved capacity among state organizations to advocate for and implement health-coverage legislation.</p> <p>Increased representation of nontraditional allies and increased collaboration among advocates and health care providers.</p>	Work collaboratively, to build a forum for collaboration around agriculture and food systems policy work that endures beyond the period of the grant.
Type of grants	General operating	Project — Farm Bill
Number of grantees	13	5 core
Number of partners	Approximately 32 core partners, several dozen peripheral	13 subgrantees, 300 supporting
Collaborative	Network	Network
Strategies	Public education	Public education
	Media	Media
	Briefings with Hill staff	Briefings with Hill staff
	Direct lobbying — grantee	Direct lobbying — grantee
	Grassroots lobbying	Grassroots lobbying
Evaluation		
Project	Some	Yes
Cluster	Yes	Yes

Note. SCHIP = State Children's Health Insurance Program.

FIGURE 1 2008 Farm Bill Spending, in Billions of Dollars



W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Farm Bill

For more than 10 years, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation has supported efforts to inform domestic agricultural policies, including Farm Bill reform. Policy reform is part of W.K.K.F.’s Food and Society Initiative (FAS) and its vision of a future food system that provides a safe and nutritious food supply, grown in a manner that protects individual health and the environment while adding economic and social value to rural and urban communities. This future food system is one in which “good food” — that is, healthy, green, fair, and affordable food — is abundant and available to all segments of society.

The Farm Bill. The 2008 Farm Bill is the most recent reauthorization of a statute created in 1933. It has been reauthorized periodically, usually every five to six years, and often given a new name, with accompanying changes of content and thrust. It has a long history as a cornerstone of federal agriculture and rural policy and its many proponents (interest groups and in Congress) have had decades to become entrenched. One of the most critical changes in the Farm Bill occurred in 1977, when food stamps were added to it. This changed the political calculations significantly by expanding the Farm Bill’s constituencies and their advocates.

Understanding the funding of the Farm Bill’s various key titles is critical to understanding the politics surrounding the legislation. Over the past

few decades, the nutrition title, particularly food stamps, has grown to dominate the Farm Bill budget. Nutrition constitutes 68 percent of spending in the 2008 Farm Bill — a total of \$209 billion over five years. The other two major spending (entitlement) titles, commodities and conservation, are a distant second and third representing 12 percent and 8 percent, respectively, of overall spending (see the Figure; Congressional Budget Office, 2008)

The players. Due to the wide range of policy issues at play in the Farm Bill — agricultural markets, energy, rural economic development, nutrition, and feeding hungry people — and an equally wide range of the possible solutions to a diverse set of problems, the stakeholders involved are numerous and varied. Even the number interested in those aspects of the Farm Bill that could be related directly to W.K.K.F.’s good food vision are significant and involve many titles of the bill. In a tight budget environment with a zero-sum outcome as a given, the trade-offs among good food advocates and the other powerful stakeholders were real.

Outcomes. Through an intense and involved collaborative process, the effort of W.K.K.F.-funded organizations, called the Farm and Food Policy Project (FFPP), constructed a set of priorities. These priorities were divided into five areas with a total of 38 priority issues involving 11 of the 15 Farm Bill titles. Twenty-three of the 38 were fully included in the Farm Bill, seven were partly included, and eight were not included. Regarding funding for fiscal year 2008–2012, successful FFPP priorities included a net gain of \$5 billion in mandatory spending from the 2002 Farm Bill and an additional net gain of \$1.9 billion in discretionary funding. These amounts are small in comparison to the overall bill’s five-year budget of \$307 billion. Relatively large gains were made, however, in some of the smaller programs important to W.K.K.F..

What Are the Lessons?

In evaluating these two significant public policy efforts, what kind of light is shed on addressing wicked problems? Two critical lessons emerge.

Both revolve around the decisions made in the early stages of developing a grantmaking program: (1) the importance of the funder defining what a successful program looks like; and (2) how ideas of success (as defined by the funder) shape, and are shaped by, the other stakeholders.

Define Success: Be Clear About What You Want

Rittel and Webber (1973) stated that one aspect of wicked problems is “Choosing a solution to a wicked problem is a matter of judgment.” A funder’s theory of change and the way it defines the outcomes of its public policy initiative is the beginning of how it judges what the possible universe of solutions will be. For both Atlantic and WKKE, there was a mixed set of judgments as to the content of the policy outcome and the types of interactions between the grantees and other like-minded stakeholders. Thus, this judgment establishes the universe of possible grant seekers and grantees. Some types of nonprofit groups will not fit the theory of change or may not agree with the foundation’s public policy goals. Just as important, a funder may draw new types of organizations into its sphere. Either way, the potential universe of possible grantees is bound and constrained as soon as the goals and subsequent strategies are set.

Due to Atlantic’s tight focus of its DCY advocacy efforts around health (e.g. SCHIP) and its desire to have immediate impact on specific policy opportunities, its universe of potential grantees was limited to D.C.-based organizations. For the most part, despite the initial setbacks, this universe of groups was successful from a policy-content outcome perspective, because the groups ultimately won on all their major issues. In terms of building advocacy capacity and developing leadership, however, the outcomes of Atlantic’s investment were not as clear. This was not due to a failure of the grantees but rather to the types of grantees initially selected; the lack of clear baseline data around current advocacy capacity and leadership against which changes could be assessed; and the lack of clearly defined advocacy capacity and leadership development expectations communicated to the grantees.

W.K.K.F. thought it was being explicit by the way it defined the outcomes of the Farm Bill effort: to have an impact on the content of the Farm Bill and to build a broader, more sustained coalition of good food interests. Although both of these were understood in theory by the grantees and their partners, the importance they attached to different aspects of the Farm Bill varied, thus giving a wide array of grantee interest around how they perceived the problem. Grantees viewed the problem differently — some saw it as a food insecurity issue, others as a lack of enough food to feed the hungry, as insufficient conservation practices on agriculture lands, or as industrial agriculture run amok.

A funder’s theory of change and the way it defines the outcomes of its public policy initiative is the beginning of how it judges what the possible universe of solutions will be.

The lack of a specific common framework and understanding, resulted in the grantees developing their own ways to approach the FFPP effort:

- **Reform versus incremental change.** Some grantees thought W.K.K.F. was committed to the reformist agenda (as pursued by another coalition of stakeholders), whereas others were focused on more incremental changes. Regardless, reformists and incrementalists assumed that they were going to get more resources for specific titles and programs.
- **Policy change or improved collaboration.** Some grantees were focused on the collaborative successes of FFPP, others on the policy outcomes.
- **Time frame for success.** The time frame in which success was to be achieved was another issue (regardless of whether success was policy change or improved collaboration). Was it until the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill? Was it longer? If so, how much longer? In the case

of FFPP, the lack of a problem definition led to a search for solutions that all could agree upon. Though not insignificant, results were incremental, with a somewhat larger stream of resources and policies in alignment with W.K.K.F.'s vision.

Although the policy vehicle (in this case, the Farm Bill) was susceptible to ambiguity, the lessons of better defining what goals and the desired timeline remain real. Such clarity affects who decides to come to the table and thus how the policy advocacy effort is shaped, which in turn affects the immediate policy outcome, consequences of that outcome, and future policy advocacy efforts on farm policy and equitable access to healthy food.

The stakeholders to whom funders must pay close attention are nonprofits that represent or act as proxies for larger interests.

Attend to Stakeholders: Be Clear About Who You Want

Roberts (2000) identified three ways wicked problems can be addressed — authoritatively, competitively, or collaboratively. The effectiveness of each depends on the wickedness of the problem, the number of stakeholders, and how power is distributed among them. In general, the greater the number of stakeholders and the more equally power and decision making is distributed, the more a collaborative model for addressing wicked problems is warranted.

The active stakeholders in most public policy efforts are the decision makers themselves, their staff (who, by virtue of serving as gatekeepers and filters, often have a significant amount of power), and those parties directly impacted by the policy (usually in the form of their hired proxies, for example, lobbyists). The stakeholders to whom funders must pay close attention are nonprofits that represent or act as proxies for larger inter-

ests. Within the realm of their control, Atlantic and W.K.K.F. sought collaborative relationships with their stakeholders. Although grantees and others did work collaboratively in some ways, this was not a consistent approach.

Atlantic

Atlantic paid attention to two sets of stakeholders: nonprofits involved in national-level, disadvantaged children and youth policy efforts (and the subset of these that became grantees) and other funders involved in related issues.

Nonprofit advocacy groups. Atlantic supported nonprofit stakeholders that had significant amount of policy advocacy experience (and effectiveness) at the federal level and had a progressive agenda for disadvantaged children and youth. Within this broad group, Atlantic supported three key nonprofit stakeholder groups: (1) research- and policy-wise groups that advocated policies affecting low- and moderate-income people in general; (2) groups that were solely focused on research and advocacy of public policies affecting children; and (3) groups focused on building the advocacy and other capacities of their member groups.

Atlantic chose not to fund directly the state- or local-level groups. Some of its national grantees had membership in the states and communities, whereas others had effective working relationships with state and local groups. Some grantees were intermediaries and awarded portions of their Atlantic funding to the state and local groups they thought could most benefit the grantee's efforts. Atlantic relied on its grantees to determine the worthiness and alignment of these state- and local-level subgrantees with Atlantic's goals.

In addition to the types of groups funded, Atlantic wanted its grantees and others to be more collaborative. The Atlantic program officers' experiences as advocates and funders informed their view that inadequate collaboration and partnerships usually led to less-than-optimal use of resources and policy outcomes. Atlantic believed that closer partnership among advocacy

groups would lead to better outcomes and less infighting.

Funders. Atlantic also was aware of and communicated with many of the other funders involved in working with disadvantaged children. Though only a few were involved actively in policy advocacy, Atlantic was one of several funders and was not seen as the lead funder.

W.K.K.F.

W.K.K.F. paid attention to the same two sets of stakeholders as Atlantic. However, the type of groups within those stakeholder sets was significantly different. Much of this was due to the issue and the history of W.K.K.F.'s engagement with it.

Nonprofit advocacy groups. W.K.K.F.'s decisions on the types of groups to support in the 2008 Farm Bill effort were shaped considerably by its previous Farm Bill experiences. The most significant lessons learned in this previous work were related to the diversity (in all manners) of the stakeholders and how well they worked together. In 2004, for example, the foundation issued a rare request for proposals to diversify its applicant base and to make explicit its desire for a multi-issued collaborative approach to the Farm Bill. This broader coalition was particularly important as W.K.K.F.'s Food and Society Initiative transitioned from its initial focus on conservation and sustainable agriculture to healthy, green, fair, and affordable food. Additionally, the focus of the Farm Bill efforts on nutrition and diversity issues served to create a better fit within W.K.K.F.'s new mission to assist vulnerable children.

The five core grantees that constituted the FFPP represented issues concerning sustainable agriculture, conservation, community-based food system and food security, regionalism, and Black farmer issues. Four of the five were Washington, D.C.-based and had substantial experience advocating legislatively and within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The fifth grantee did not have this capacity, which was evident. However, because it was a coalition of many local and state groups, it was able to obtain feedback from grassroots constituents about policy ideas and possible

impacts in a timely manner. Furthermore, all five core grantees subcontracted with national, state, and local groups to deepen their reach on issues of interest to them and to broaden their reach especially into nutrition and public health.

FFPP involved a set of interests that spanned a significant set of issues, but the members' power to inform and influence public policy varied significantly. Moreover, the collective power was considerably less compared with non-FFPP Farm Bill stakeholders such as the farm commodity groups and large farm trade organizations. In addition, many of the large antihunger groups were not aligned with FFPP. Though some were sympathetic to FFPP issues, the FFPP did not offer the antihunger groups sufficient guarantees that the poverty-related issue they were addressing — hunger — was addressed more fully addressed by the FFPP than by the non-FFPP stakeholders.

Funders. Unlike the SCHIP issue, W.K.K.F. for several years had been (and continues to be) the lead funder of groups working on sustainable agriculture issues, including the federal Farm Bill.⁴ Though other funders were involved on key aspects of the farm bill (e.g., the conservation provisions or the antihunger/nutrition provisions), W.K.K.F. did not work closely with them on it.

The learning for W.K.K.F. and others is that supporting the right stakeholders is critical. W.K.K.F. made a significant leap from the last Farm Bill in this regard. Its next leap is to support stakeholders that will add value to coalition members, helping them make individual and collective gains. From a project's inception, potential partners need to assess whether the partnership will be sufficiently valuable to encourage them to participate.

⁴ In a recent report that Headwaters and the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders Network prepared for W.K.K.F., of the \$213.6 million awarded for sustainable food systems work between 2003 and 2006, W.K.K.F. was the most significant private funder — 43 percent of all private funding and 25 percent of total funding. Though significant, W.K.K.F.'s role has shrunk slightly from the previous four-year period, when it represented 45 percent of all reported private foundation funding.

Conclusion

Permanent solutions to the challenging social problems like poverty, and the multiple ways poverty affects individuals and society, such as children without health insurance and access to healthy food grown in environmentally sustainable manner, remain elusive. The nonprofit advocacy community, its foundation supporters, and many others use public policy to help address these issues. The wicked problems frame provides a way for funders and the groups with whom they work to approach the issues differently and together work through the issues presented by these complex subjects. It calls upon the funders to provide leadership that ensures stakeholder involvement and foster a culture of candor among the stakeholders including, and especially, its grantees.

The potential learning around these processes for the funder, grantee, other stakeholders, and evaluator offers the opportunity to further build trust, candor, and more effective strategies to address the underlying wicked problems.

By focusing on aspects of its own grantmaking processes that either attract or disempower potential nonprofit stakeholders — defining the issue, identifying the “right” outcomes, involving others in those early efforts, and communicating what it seeks to the possible grantees — a funder can gain greater clarity about what is possible. Such clarity can provide a much better idea of how to structure an evaluation that will enhance learning for the funder, its grantees, and other stakeholders.

The wicked problems framework also can ensure that evaluators include in their evaluation methodology an assessment of the quality of

leadership, degree of candor, and level of stakeholder involvement from the earliest aspects of a grantmaking program to its completion and re-envisioning. The potential learning around these processes for the funder, grantee, other stakeholders, and evaluator offers the opportunity to further build trust, candor, and more effective strategies to address the underlying wicked problems.

The Atlantic and W.K.K.F. case studies reveal that the funders approached their work with clear ideas about what needed to be done and some of the processes they wanted grantees to use in pursuit of the policy objectives. Both paid attention to their stakeholders in many ways, and both attempted to be clear with their stakeholders before and after they became grantees. As in any effort, each funder’s grantees achieved some of their objectives and fell short in others. Given the wickedness of problems each funder is facing, there will unfortunately be plenty of time to retool strategies for the next round of policy making.

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