■ Notes and Insights

Reflections on a Transdisciplinary Workshop

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The thematic focus of the Fourth European System Dynamics Workshop at the Università di Palermo was on management in the public sector, which is a crucial factor for the viability of a modern society. Public sector institutions in many places are in need of support for their improvement or reform. Such support is primarily a matter of conceptual framing and understanding, as well as the use of appropriate methods, rather than a matter of content. System Dynamics is a powerful methodology for answering that need.

At a time where many systems are misdirected (Ackoff and Pourdehnad, 2001), the topic 'Public Sector Applications of the System Dynamics Approach' arrives in timely fashion. Because it addresses one of the largest issues of modernity, it is fully in accord with Jay Forrester—the founder of System Dynamics—who encourages the community of system dynamicists to concentrate on the foremost challenges facing society (Forrester, 2007).

The Palermo workshop hosted 45 participants. There were 11 presentations which addressed different facets of the overall topic. The discussions were lively and led to insightful conclusions.

A favourable structural feature of the European System Dynamics Workshops is that ample time is allocated to the sessions, in contrast to the ever decreasing presentation times at most international conferences. In this way, profound discussions are enabled, fostering productive exchanges among participants. Not all of the presented papers, however, are necessarily published in the special issue which follows the workshop. On the contrary, new work also finds a place there, since promising portions of work-in-progress likewise contribute to the ongoing quest for scientific progress in the subject area of concern. That is why only five papers from the Palermo meeting are going into print in this volume.

A graceful property and useful characteristic which stood out in this particular workshop was its trans-disciplinary nature, in two respects. Firstly, exponents of different backgrounds, e.g. economics, business, public policy, management, social sciences, environmental science and engineering engaged in the conversation. The discussion across disciplinary boundaries was enabled by a common code, embodied in the language and formal apparatus of the theory of non-linear dynamic systems. Such a common ground facilitates sharing among people from different backgrounds, affording them one and the same frame of reference that can accommodate different perspectives. The discussion is nourished by strands from diverse backgrounds, even as the

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Staff from 'Team Srl', a consulting company specialising in public administration, presenting at the workshop. From left to right, Raffaella Rovida (Project Manager), Luca Delrio (Management Engineer) and Enrico Rovida (President).

Carmine Bianchi presenting at the workshop.

protagonists of these strands continue to rely on their specific disciplinary language games. It is the common code that provides the concepts which make the connection between these different 'worlds' possible, therewith inducing mutual understanding and genuine progress in the collective endeavour. That symphonic quality is what distinguishes a trans-disciplinary discourse from a merely interdisciplinary exchange.

Secondly, the initiative, although it came from academics, did not confine itself to a conversation restricted to the 'ivory tower'. On the contrary, speakers came from the realms of both theory and practice. 60 per cent were academics from 12 universities across Europe (Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland), while 40 per cent were professionals working in such different areas as

health care, opera house management, regional planning and control, management consulting and information technology. The presence of these high-stature representatives from the public sector stimulated and enriched the dialogue between researchers and practitioners. This feature was new in relation to prior workshops, and clearly it has borne fruit, in that several of the papers are authored by members of the public sector. The papers collected in this edition, then, are the product of a fruitful cooperation between experienced researchers and exceptionally knowledgeable managers from the arts, health care and the Sicilian Regional Authority.

The results published in this special issue demonstrate that system dynamics has already contributed substantially to the public sector. This is shown in the many case studies and examples distributed across the different papers. Beyond the *status quo*, however, the potential of system dynamics to orientate the design of public policies and to help policy implementation is enormous. As the discussions at the workshop showed, this potential has been actualized only to a small degree. The conceptual and methodological power of system dynamics opens new vistas for public sector management, as it does for organizational and managerial issues in general.

It is worth noting that the organizers found a distinctly pleasant way of blending formal

Enzo Bivona and Lanfranco Marasso, of Engineering Ingegneria Informatica spa, at the workshop.

and informal platforms during the workshop. Carefully arranged luncheon buffets and coffee breaks—enjoyable examples of the famous Sicilian hospitality—were conducive to multiple interchanges of ideas between attendees. Two social highlights which framed the working sessions were the visit of the magnificent *Teatro Massimo* and a lively gathering at the *Ristorante Il Mirto de la Rosa* for a joint dinner.

In sum, committed individuals linked by cooperative work and social relationships, and catalyzed by a robust organizational frame, composed a functioning whole. A token of my fond gratitude goes to our hosts, Professors Carmine Bianchi and Enzo Bivona, for endowing the system dynamics community with this

wonderful event. Last but not least, it is time to heartily acknowledge Professors Peter Milling and Andreas Grössler for having originated the European System Dynamics Workshops, and to express fervent thanks to Dr David Lane, who has exercised sophisticated and effective leadership in their periodic realization and publication.

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