



## THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

### Understanding the Contextual Factors shaping our future

*Annette Pelkmans*

I would like to begin by tracing back our journey from the moment we talked about the wickedness and complexity of the problems we face today, and then briefly review the 6X1 methodology, which gives us a tools to address these wicked problems. But for the greater part of my talk today, I want to focus on the principal motor of this methodology, and the basis of its success, and that is the quality of our relationships. Without this, no amount of training or methodology can bring us to the destination we aspire for: a New Africa.

So a quick review, and to refresh our memory: what are wicked problems? As I've said we are not using "wicked" in the sense of evil, but to describe challenges that are incredibly tough to solve. Wicked problems are complex, messy, and interconnected. They can't be fixed by just applying a simple solution. Think about the most pressing issues we face today—poverty, climate change, access to education, inequality, even the effects of conflict. Each one of these is a wicked problem.

Why are they so hard to solve? Because these problems don't exist in isolation. They're linked to other systems—cultural, political, economic, and social. Let's take poverty as an example. It's not just about someone not having money. Poverty connects to education, healthcare, access to opportunities, the availability of jobs, and even the effects of climate change. You try to fix one piece, and you realize it impacts something else. That's why wicked problems can't be solved by looking at just one aspect—they require a much bigger, broader approach.

This brings me to *complexity theory*, which I discussed in the second year. Complexity theory teaches us that in a complex system, everything is connected. Think of it like nature. In a forest, if you remove one species of animal, it can throw off the entire ecosystem. Other species suffer, plants might grow out of control, and the balance is lost. Society is like that too. Our communities, our economies, our environments—they are all connected. The actions we take in one area often ripple through the rest of the system, sometimes in ways we didn't expect.

Now, why does this matter? Because it shows us that to solve these complex issues, we need to think differently. Traditional problem-solving methods—where one person, one government, or one organization comes in with a ready-made solution—simply won't



work. We have to embrace the complexity, and more importantly, we have to collaborate. This is the key.

*Collaboration* means bringing together people from different backgrounds, different professions, and different experiences. It means working across boundaries, across sectors, and across cultures. No one person has all the answers, but when we come together, we can unlock new perspectives and solutions we hadn't thought of before. We can share knowledge, pool resources, and create innovations that actually work.

Now that we've explored what wicked problems are and how complexity theory helps us understand the interconnectedness of challenges, let's review the methodology we discussed and deepened in the past year. We call this the 6X1 methodology—which is a framework or approach towards fruitful collaboration. This approach doesn't promise to simplify wicked problems, but it provides a structure to navigate them effectively by working together.

The first step is *LOOK AROUND*. This means taking the time to truly understand what's happening in your local environment. Whether it's your neighborhood, school, or city, the key is to observe and recognize the problems that might not be immediately obvious. For example, you might notice a lack of clean water in your community, but as you dig deeper, you'll see it's connected to poor infrastructure or environmental degradation. Wicked problems require us to see the big picture.

Next, we *SUM UP THE IDEAS*. After observing the challenges, it's important to prioritize. What's the most urgent or impactful issue to tackle? With complexity in mind, it's not about solving everything at once, but about choosing the right starting point. Think about what can make the biggest difference and where we can begin to create positive change.

Once we've identified the problem, we need gear up and *INVOLVE* those around us. Collaboration is at the heart of this methodology. Involve others—whether it's different organizations, local leaders, or simply your neighbors. Wicked problems can't be solved by individuals acting alone; they need diverse perspectives and collective effort. This step reminds us that our strength lies in unity.

Then, we *ROLL UP OUR SLEEVES* and put the plan into action. It's time to move from ideas to implementation. This step is about actually doing the work—planting the trees, building the infrastructure, or launching the educational campaign. Taking action is the key to moving forward.

But we don't just act blindly. As the project progresses, we need to ask, *HOW CAN WE IMPROVE?* This step is all about reflection and evaluation. At various points, stop and assess how things are going. What challenges have we encountered? What could be



done better? Continuous evaluation helps us adapt and learn, which is crucial when dealing with complex problems that don't have clear-cut solutions.

Finally, PARTY TIME. Once the project is complete, take the time to celebrate. This might sound simple, but it's important. Recognizing the contributions of everyone involved builds a sense of community and reinforces the power of collaboration. It reminds us that change is possible when we work together.

This methodology gives us a practical framework for addressing the complexity of wicked problems. It teaches us to observe, prioritize, collaborate, act, evaluate, and, ultimately, celebrate our achievements. By following these steps, we don't simplify the challenges, but we create a process that empowers us to tackle them head-on— together.

This is what we've explored in the past. But today, I want to focus on the *driving force* behind this methodology—the *quality of our relationships*. The stronger our relationships, the more effective our collective efforts will be. But how do we achieve that quality?

It's shaped by both the outcomes we achieve and the process we follow during collaboration. Stronger relationships lead to better outcomes, and in turn, successful outcomes reinforce and strengthen those relationships. But the process matters just as much. When the process builds trust, values each person's contributions, and helps us navigate interpersonal conflicts, it directly enhances the quality of our relationships. This creates a cycle of continuous improvement in both our efforts and our bonds with one another.

Ultimately, the success of our collaboration depends on individual behavior—on whether each of us can act in ways that earn the trust of others. But this behavior isn't just a personal matter; it's also shaped by the context and environment in which we find ourselves. Our ability to build trust and foster strong relationships is influenced by the culture of the group, the systems we work within, and the support we receive. When we find ourselves in environments that promote openness, respect, and mutual support, we're more likely to exhibit the kind of behavior that strengthens collaboration and trust.

Now that we've seen how individual behavior and the surrounding environment shape the quality of our relationships and the effectiveness of our collaboration, let's take a step further. I want to explore a crucial aspect of our growth and development—both as individuals and as nations—through a familiar metaphor: the parable of the seed.

This parable powerfully illustrates how the context we find ourselves in influences our potential. Just as individual behavior is shaped by the environment, so too are our opportunities for success and growth shaped by the external factors that surround us.



For this presentation, I want to delve into a crucial aspect of our growth and development by drawing on the familiar parable of the seed. This story serves as a powerful metaphor for understanding how our life contexts influence our potentials both as individuals and as countries.

In the parable, a sower scatters seeds, and their fate hinges on where they land. Some seeds fall on the path and are quickly devoured by birds, others land on rocky ground and wither due to lack of nourishment, while others find themselves amidst thorns and are choked by competing plants. Finally, some seeds land on fertile ground, where they grow and thrive, yielding a bountiful harvest. This narrative is more than a simple story; it symbolizes how various factors affect our ability to grow and succeed.

Just like the seeds, our success—whether as individuals or as a collective society—depends significantly on the context in which we find ourselves. For nations, this context includes historical legacies, geographical constraints, and geopolitical realities. A country's history, such as whether it was once a colonizer or a colony, influences its current development trajectory. Similarly, geographic factors like being landlocked or coastal can dramatically affect a nation's economic opportunities.

External circumstances can profoundly shape the path of our lives and the developmental path of entire countries. In a favorable environment, a nation may experience a virtuous cycle where high incomes lead to better education, improved health, effective governance, and further economic growth. Conversely, unfavorable conditions can trap nations in a vicious cycle of poverty where low incomes perpetuate poor governance and limited opportunities.

Despite these external influences, one can still hear some people mouth the misconception that poverty results from personal shortcomings, lack of values or virtues, or a lack of effort. Some argue that individuals are poor because they do not work hard enough, are unwilling to adopt new technologies, or fail to prioritize their children's education. This perspective oversimplifies the issue and places undue blame on individuals, ignoring the broader systemic and structural barriers that impact their lives.

It is important to recognize that while personal values and hard work matter, they do not tell the entire story. Our behaviors and opportunities are heavily influenced by factors beyond our control, much like how the future of a seed depends on the quality of the soil in which it falls. The conditions we face often shape our choices and opportunities, making it essential to understand the broader context.

The challenge is that these conditioning factors are frequently institutionalized or structural, which means that good outcomes tend to reinforce themselves and poor outcomes become entrenched over time. For instance, poverty can create a *poverty penalty*, where poverty breeds certain behaviors that ensure that the poor remain poor.

When survival is a daily concern, long-term planning may become a luxury rather than a priority. Additionally, without safety nets, taking risks can feel too costly, thus further hindering progress. Yet, escaping poverty means being able to save and invest for the future, plan ahead, and even take risks.

A particularly critical aspect to consider is how poverty can lead to opportunistic behavior. In environments where resources are scarce and opportunities are limited, individuals may exploit institutional weaknesses or perceived cultural strengths to survive. For example, in societies where traditional beliefs assert that men are inherently stronger and thus deserve more privileges, this can result in systemic inequalities where women are denied equal opportunities. Similarly, cultural biases that view youth as inexperienced and, therefore, less deserving can lead to practices where young people are offered lower wages or less favorable working conditions, exploiting their position for economic gain. Poverty also makes many voters susceptible to vote buying, or grand promises, which corrupt and opportunistic politicians take advantage of.

These dynamics are not simply individual failings but reflect deeper, systemic issues where poverty and inequality create environments ripe for exploitation. When people are pushed into desperate situations, they may resort to opportunistic behaviors, which, in turn, can perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage. Institutional weaknesses and cultural biases can become entrenched, reinforcing existing inequalities and making it even harder for individuals to break free from poverty.

### **So is it possible to break out of this poverty penalty, and if yes, how?**

Earlier I made the analogy about us being seeds whose paths can be determined by our context. But that's where the analogy with the seed ends. Unlike seeds, we are not passive victims of our circumstances. We are individuals made in the image of God, and with that comes the gift of agency—the ability to determine our own paths, to make choices, and to change the direction of our lives. Beyond that, we are not alone; we are a collective. As a community, we have the power to change the terrain itself, much like the sun and rain help to nourish the soil and make it fertile. Together, we can work to create environments that are more just, supportive, and nurturing, where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Still, there will be those among us who manage to exercise their agency and make choices to change their circumstances, but there will also be those who, for various reasons, may not feel empowered to do the same. This creates a dynamic within any team or group. When some members aren't able to exercise their agency, they may act in ways that disrupt the group, behaving opportunistically or in a manner that damages trust. When this happens, the quality of relationships can decline if we don't address it.



The responsibility, then, falls on those who are aware of what's happening. They can respond in one of two ways: Voice or Exit.

VOICE involves staying engaged with the situation, working patiently to help those who may be struggling. This could mean raising awareness, offering guidance, and showing empathy. It requires time, patience, and love. By offering support and understanding, we can act like the forces that help make the soil fertile—nurturing the environment so that others, too, can grow and flourish.

On the other hand, there's EXIT. This is when, instead of addressing the issue directly, we choose to disengage. We see this in many areas of life: if you don't like the food at a restaurant, you might simply leave and never return, rather than giving feedback to the manager. If you're unhappy in a job, you might resign rather than talk to your boss. Similarly, in a group setting, if certain members are disrupting the harmony, others may choose to walk away, reconstituting the group with new members.

Both options—Voice and Exit—are valid, but they carry different consequences. Choosing Voice means working toward understanding and building relationships, while Exit involves removing oneself from the situation. Each choice has the potential to shape the future dynamics of the team.

What ultimately determines whether we choose Voice or Exit often comes down to loyalty. Albert Hirschman, the author of the theory, emphasized the role of Loyalty alongside Voice and Exit. When we feel a sense of loyalty—whether to a group, a cause, or even a nation—there is a greater likelihood that we will choose Voice, working patiently for change rather than walking away. Loyalty acts as a powerful anchor that encourages us to invest in improving the situation. And when we bring love into the equation, this commitment becomes even stronger. Love compels us to keep trying, to help others rise, and to nurture the bonds that unite us.

However, there are times when Exit remains a necessary option—particularly in extreme situations where no progress is made, and the very harmony of the group is at risk. Loyalty and love may keep us committed for a while, but if the environment remains toxic or harmful, Exit can sometimes be the only path left.

As we reflect on this dynamic, it's essential to speak about the poverty penalty. Poverty and oppression can weigh heavily on individuals and communities, influencing behaviors and mindsets that hold us back. Recognizing how poverty affects us—how it shapes our decisions, our relationships, and our capacity to exercise our agency—is the first step toward breaking free from these behavioral chains. When we understand the impact of poverty, we can make conscious choices to rise above it. Whether we choose Voice or, in extreme cases, Exit, we must decide to free ourselves from the patterns that can break us, both as individuals and as a collective.



This awareness challenges us to break the cycle of poverty and oppression that can stifle not just individuals but entire communities, and to work together toward a future where all can flourish.

So here are the key takeaways:

- 1. *Our problems are complex and wicked:*** The challenges we face—whether social, economic, or environmental—are interconnected and often difficult to define or solve. To tackle these problems effectively, we must collaborate. We need to become brokers of partnerships, uniting diverse people and resources to address these challenges together.
- 2. *6X1 methodology:*** This structured approach helps guide our efforts. It begins with observing the situation, prioritizing what needs to be done, and collaborating with others. Then, we roll up our sleeves and take action, regularly evaluating our progress, and finally, celebrating our achievements. This framework provides a pathway to organized, collaborative problem-solving.
- 3. *The motor of success is relationships:*** At the core of any effective collaboration are strong, healthy relationships. We must nurture these relationships, as they drive the success of our collective efforts. Relationships built on trust, respect, and understanding allow us to work together effectively.
- 4. *Beware of behavioral patterns shaped by our environment:*** The environment we live in can induce behaviors that either strengthen or harm relationships. Poverty and other challenges may create patterns of behavior that frustrate our efforts. By openly discussing these influences, we can become more aware and avoid reacting with prejudice or frustration.
- 5. *Reflection and action:*** Each of us, as individuals, must take responsibility to reflect on how our behavior impacts our relationships and the group's efforts. It is also the role of the group to create a fertile environment where everyone feels empowered to express their true voice, contributing fully to the collective effort.

These are the essential elements we need to move forward—collaboration, structure, nurturing relationships, self-awareness, and collective responsibility. With these, we can better tackle the complex problems we face.