FAQ

Note

Frequently asked questions (FAQ) about Systems Planning[28] and brief answers with references for further reading in a rather easy-going and pragmatic style.

1 Overview

What is Systems Planning[29]?

Systems Planning[28] is a curated cooperative quest for *the art of efficiency*[29] with regard to human activities and constructs (e.g. plans, their preparation, and respective systems), materialising a *holistic conduct platform*[28] that prizes and promotes shared understanding as well as stakeholder competences (Perdicoúlis, 2014c).

What is Systems Planning[28] good for?

Systems Planning[28] helps anyone with a forethought do their job efficiently: conceive and propose plans (or policies, or strategies) and projects, assess the efficiency of existing proposals, make improvements where necessary, forecast, mitigate — you name it. This requires a set of competences (Perdicoúlis, 2011), which are then developed further.

How did Systems Planning[28] start?

The foundations of Systems Planning[28] were laid in the UK by 1993 with an academic (PhD) endeavour to appraise public plans (Perdicoúlis, 1996). This required a systems perspective, which led to contact with System Dynamics. The appraisal went deeper, into the process of creating these plans, which brought up methodological issues. Following years of study, everything started to blend together, and efficiency emerged at the heart of the matter.

What is the genesis of Systems Planning[28] in milestones?

2014 DEC: 5th generation website (Coda) — first with proper domain
2014 SEP: `systemsplanning.org` domain created
2012 JAN: 4th generation website (Coda)
2012 AUG: Systems Planning[29] term and logo created
2012 JAN: 3rd generation website (Eclipse)
2011 NOV: first 'lab journal' launched (*Systems Planner*[29])
2011 OCT: Perdicoulis Publishing[28] established (Perdicoúlis, 2014k)
2010 DEC: first book published (Perdicoúlis, 2010)
2007 NOV: 2nd generation website (iWeb)
1997 SEP: first website published (hand-coded)
1996 SEP: PhD concluded (Perdicoúlis, 1996)
1993 SEP: Advanced study commenced (PhD)

Who 'owns' Systems Planning[28]?

Systems Planning[28] functions as a 'curated cooperation' (Perdicoúlis, 2014n). The onus of responsible guidance to keep organised and deliver on its cause is bestowed on its trustee (Perdicoúlis, 2014c). Copyright and licensing rules apply to the collective as well as individual works (§ 6).

Why is there an 'official' practice of Systems Planning[28]?

The trustee of Systems Planning[28] (Perdicoúlis, 2014c) oversees its integral development and appropriate use to ensure *quality* regarding fairness (e.g. fitness-for-purpose screening, copyright, brand names), activity standards, and commissioned work (Perdicoúlis, 2016).

2 Distinction

How is Systems Planning[28] different than mainstream praxis?

Systems Planning[28] works with explicit mental models of systems of interest, processes, and plans (or strategies, or policies): everything is made visible. This contrasts with the overwhelming planning practice based on ignored or concealed mental models and multi-page text volumes that can have anyone lost. How can one shape an unknown or invisible object?

What is Systems Planning[28] alternative to?

The lineage of Systems Planning[28] makes it an alternative to its [surviving] *ancestors* — for instance, Systemic Approach to Planning, Procedural Planning Theory, Strategic Planning, Strategic Choice Approach, Strategy Maps, PSR/ DPSIR, System Dynamics, Systems Thinking, and Soft Systems Methodology (Perdicoúlis, 2014e). As in families, cooperation with the ancestors is extremely valuable and well appreciated.

What are the differences between RBP's and CLDs?

Systems Planning[29] reverse blueprints (RBP) are very similar to System Dynamics causal loop diagrams (CLD), with the following differences: (a) loop marks are mandatory in CLD, but optional in RBP (used only when necessary); (b) problem mark-up (XYZ) is possible in RBP — and encouraged, if it does not overload with information — but not allowed in CLD.

Why Systems Planning[28] over Systems Thinking or System Dynamics?

Systems Thinking and System Dynamics make provisions only for *systems*, while Systems Planning[28] makes additional provisions for *processes* (e.g. CPD) and *plans/ strategies/ policies* (e.g. DCD), as well as for relating to the *planning problem* (XYZ). Also, Systems Planning[28] is free of the numerical bindings of System Dynamics (e.g. SFD).

3 Focus

What is efficiency?

A fun answer is: 'how fast you do something well' (Perdicoúlis, 2014h). Efficiency is often manifested as *simplicity*, which appears 'natural' after deep understanding; *elegance*, which appears 'fitting' after acquiring the right skills; and *quality*, which stands for 'high standards' in everything we do. The 'Systems Thinking' book (Perdicoúlis, 2010) and the 'Building Competences' book (Perdicoúlis, 2011) present efficiency in the context of planning — spatial, strategic, operational, and beyond.

Who needs efficiency?

You guessed it: everyone! In relation to Systems Planning[28], beneficiaries can be organisations and individuals in formal planning contexts (e.g. city, state, enterprise) such as practitioners (in-house and consultants), stakeholders, and academics (researchers, instructors, and students), as well as civil society professionals such as scientists, engineers, journalists, lawyers, physicians, police investigators, and school teachers — to mention but a few (Perdicoúlis, 2014h).

How does Systems Planning[28] develop efficiency?

Systems Planning[28] invests in learning. Individuals as well as organisations develop their own efficiency by building *competences* with regard to understanding, reasoning, communication, decision-making, and action (Perdicoúlis, 2014d). Efficiency achieved through competence-building is double-rewarding: in addition to a better way of working as well as outcomes, the 'investor' has the deep satisfaction of capability and accomplishment.

4 Easy

I have done my SWOT, as instructed, but I am still confused... What next?

As explained in *Systems Planner* N°6 (Perdicoúlis, 2012a), good SWOT practice counts on: (a) a 'systems' understanding of the situation through a (shared) mental model, (b) clear definition of the intended outcomes (or objectives), and (c) explicit relation of SWOT with the rest of the planning process. Make sure you have all these three, and then go back and re-do your SWOT — preferably a 'graphic SWOT', as shown in *Systems Planner* N°11 (Perdicoúlis, 2012b).

I have all the facts from my indicators. Now what?

Working closely with indicators leads to 'point thinking', as explained in the 'indicators article' (Perdicoúlis and Glasson, 2011). Systems planning[28] helps everyone involved in planning to develop their understanding about how the 'system' — that is, whatever they are planning for — is built and functions. From there on, they can think of how to achieve what outcomes they intend.

I have defined my problem, but this doesn't get me anywhere. What is missing?

For many people, 'problem' is just something to worry about, often associated to an uncomfortable situation (Perdicoúlis, 2013). This is only a part of the story you need to think of: the 'XYZ' problem definition (Perdicoúlis, 2014g) asks for (a) an objective description of the situation, (b) the intended outcomes, and (c) what can be done to achieve those outcomes in the given conditions. Very simple, and it works.

I don't understand this policy (or plan or strategy)... Is it me?

Chances are that the policy (or plan or strategy) itself is inadequately expressed, or — worse — deficiently conceived. As a check, take the text that troubles you, transform it into a diagram (DCD), and visualise its content — together with some common faults such as omissions, ambiguity, uncertainty, or non-sequiturs.

5 Advanced

How can I gauge efficiency?

There are many possible ways to formulate a numerical index that represents efficiency, but this will always miss out on information about structure and function — hence, an impediment to troubleshooting and, generally, planning. Simply put, indexes cannot cater to the understanding of 'why's and 'how's: this is Systems Planning[29] territory. Gauging efficiency efficiently (*sic*) is best done qualitatively, and requires understanding (also qualitative).

How may I know whether one's plan (or policy or strategy) is 'good'?

Do you simply trust the author(s)? Or who recommended it? Or how much it cost? Or do you wait until it is implemented, to see whether it produced the intended outcomes? Or, maybe, you just 'think' it is alright because 'it looks alright'? How about transcribing its contents into an unambiguous DCD, examine its structure and function, and simulate its action?

How can I demonstrate the appropriateness of the action of our plan?

Would you start talking about it as a salesperson? Would you prepare a slideshow with its pros and cons? Or even use a SWOT analysis? How about presenting the full planning problem in a coherent and succinct 'XYZ' form, explaining all the essential links (e.g. concerns to objectives, to action, to outcomes, and back to concerns)?

Which decision-support technique is best when information is scarce?

Decision-support techniques such as 'black box' I/O models or 'critical factors' cannot be trusted without a good understanding of 'how things work', and this often requires study, observations, and explanations that are subject to debate. Oddly, though, instead of supporting them, understanding is likely to render all 'shortcut techniques' unsatisfactory.

6 Meta

What are 'lab journals'?

Systems Planning[28] introduces a new genre of scholarly journals, designated as 'labs': workspaces for critical thinking, learning, and creative contribution. Consequently, their articles are *assays* (examinations to determine content or quality) or *essays* (short pieces of writing on a particular subject) — both from *essayer* [F], to try. The journals complement conventional publications, at the same quality standard, with contemporary technology and media.

Who can/ should join Systems Planning[29]?

Refining efficiency to an art is a fun and cooperative endeavour, already shared with a number of people. The initiative is open to anyone with curiosity to understand (structure, function, and form); with passion for knowledge (objects and methodology); with enthusiasm for explaining well (scholarly rigour; visual reasoning); and with an appreciation for abstraction (ideas) as well as application (praxis).

What does 'joining Systems Planning[29]' imply?

Contributions to Systems Planning[28] are ideas (e.g. in the form of articles, artwork, or software), teamwork (teams are very special systems), and network (at a grand scale, often with institutional support). All this is hard but deeply gratifying work, powered by human spirit and driven by a cause: efficiency. Such work can only be shared, as it makes for a better world.

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