Perceptions of increasing complexity in planning and avenues for responding to the new challenges

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As we all feel the pressure of carrying out planning assignments under increasing levels of uncertainties, it is important to ponder on the sources of that higher uncertainty as well as on the wider dimensions of the problems in which we can no longer make sound assumptions.

It is argued that the fundamental novelty we are now living through is much deeper than simply an acceleration of the speed of change of the constraints or parameters of our planning problems, and in fact extends to changes in the objective function, in the social paradigms in the name of which we supposedly operate.

It is still too early to have a new planning theory ready, but some avenues seem to emerge as guidelines for action:

Adopt systems dynamics and agent-based modeling as essential tools of technical work, in order to internalize interactions (feed-backs) and multiplicity of initiatives in society, some of them at impact scales bigger than those of public institutions;

Evolve from a search of optimality towards evolution with preservation of a wide range of options of good performance for a partially fuzzy set of objectives. As important as what we achieve through certain decisions are the degrees of freedom we open or close for future system evolution;

The very long life of infrastructure and other physical facilities is in contrast with the possible speed of change of requirements on the services they render. Inter-generational solidarity is nice to justify long term public debt against a vast array of infrastructural endowment, but the risk exists that some of that infrastructure may be useless / obsolete within the lifecycle of its financial amortization (change of technology or change of values/social requirements);

Planning assumedly for a diversity of lifestyles and choices by individuals and social groups (from tolerance to inclusion).

To conclude some reflections are elaborated on the challenges of transparency and communication to stakeholders in this new context, as it is still necessary to deliver a simple story from a very complex reality, without hiding or distorting, but also without submerging each of the various constituencies with the details of the problems as seen by other constituencies, and the conclusion is taken that information must be made available much more in a hypertext context than along the traditional linear format.