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Learning Within the Unknowable: How Puzzling Our Way Through Can Help Evaluate Sustainable Development

There are people in the systems field who argue that policy and systems thinking are poor bedfellows. Whilst this may seem counter-intuitive, they have a point.

Policy in systems terms is about setting boundaries. Boundaries are inevitable because policy is about beliefs, world views and ideology.

Without these we wouldn't need policy because everything would be possible. Boundaries are also necessary because resource are limited. If there were no resource limits then everything would be possible and we would not need policy. Ideology and resource constraints are a potent brew, they decide whose ideas win, and whose ideas are marginalised, they determine who or what is "in" and who or what is "out". In other words "policy" is fundamentally a political.

Politics and systems thinking are often at opposite ends of the spectrum for the simple reason that systems thinking exposes politics, and thus policy, for what it really is.

On the other hand there are ways around this Gordian Knot. This talk explores some approaches that enable evaluators to use systems ideas within the constraints set by policy makers and the political context.