

## Eawag Seminar Invitation

# The Paradox of Governing Wicked Problems

**Speaker** **Prof. Katrien Termeer**  
*Wageningen University, Netherlands*

**When** **November 30, 11.00 – 12.00 a.m.**

**Where** **Forum Chriesbach, room C20, Eawag Dübendorf**

**Abstract** Many sustainability issues such as loss of biodiversity, adaption to climate change or food security carry the characteristics of wicked problems. They present themselves as a confusing mess of interrelated problems that are continuously changing, redefined, or reproduced in different ways. Due to the inherently incomplete understanding of problems, every action can have unpredictable consequences, and today's solutions could become tomorrow's problems. Ambitious policymakers risk to become frustrated by wicked problems, because they never know whether they are doing well. Governing wicked policy problems thus inevitably involves a paradox of trying to develop effective policies for problems that have no final solutions and for which additional efforts might increase the chances of finding a better solution. In the lecture, I will discuss the policy perspective of transformative change through accumulating small wins. Small wins are defined as concrete outcomes of moderate importance that involve in-depth changes and have overcome many barriers. Because one small win may seem and remain unimportant, it is important to activate the right propelling mechanisms to scale up, broaden or deepen small wins. A small wins approach is promising for making progress in complex wicked problem areas, because it allows people to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness and to welcome new understandings rather than tame wickedness. Moreover, small wins are less overwhelming, less threatening, and have the potential to accumulate into transformative change through non-linear processes. However, the approach is disputed also and will inevitably clash with unrealistic expectations of addressing wicked problems rapidly, radically and comprehensively.

Professor C.J.A.M. (Katrien) Termeer chairs the Public Administration and Policy Group at Wageningen University, the Netherlands. Her research addresses the governance of wicked problems in the interrelated fields of food, agriculture, climate and energy. She studies the emergence of new forms of governance to enhance sustainable development, varying from self-governing communities and public private partnerships to global round tables and private certifying systems. She is especially interested in how governance actors constrained and enabled by historically grown institutions, make sense to new forms of governance in day-to-day practices. She uses research findings for co-designing innovative governance arrangements and developing action strategies. Furthermore, she is a crown-appointed member of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands, member of the Advisory Council for the Dutch government on public governance, and member of the Supervisory Board Solidaridad Europe.