THE SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB

A Case Study

REOS

1. OVERVIEW

Executive Summary

The Sustainable Food Lab (SFL) utilised innovative methods of facilitation and engagement to explore how to shift food sustainability from niche to the mainstream. The SFL was born out of the convening work and vision of Adam Kahane and Hal Hamilton, two leaders in the field of systems change and food systems respectively. The SFL began with application of the U-Process – an innovative methodology for multi-stakeholder engagement – among a diverse range of actors from the global food system. The first attempt to implement this process and on a global level, the SFL gives evidence of the strengths of the 'Change Lab' approach and the U-Process as well as lessons learned. This report provides a summary of the project's background, the ideas and methods that underpin it, and a narrative of the SFL's activities up to this point.

In 2002, leading systems thinkers and leaders of change in the food system met and together they identified the potential of innovative, cross-sectoral collaboration to make change in the global food system. Over the next several years, the SFL evolved rapidly from an idea to an ongoing project involving a wide variety of influential international stakeholders and leaders from across the food system. The initial Lab team was made up of leaders from major corporations, producers groups, community organisations and international NGOs. These members undertook a series of learning journeys, retreats and innovation workshops as part of the U-Process. The U-Process involved action learning and activities that transcended and cross cut traditional barriers between parties who do not normally collaborate, and provided space to explore potential for creative problem solving to shift sustainability from niche to the mainstream. Out of this process, innovative pilot projects were designed and launched that leveraged the resources and expertise of the diverse team members. These projects were selected with the intent to impact crucial nodes in the value chain of the global food system, focusing on issues such as farmers' livelihoods and ethical sourcing policies.

The SFL continues to evolve, and many lessons have been learned about the potential for positive impact of such an initiative as well as the challenges that must be overcome. Credibility, commitment, passion, and resources, as well as awareness of other relevant platforms in the wider field, were identified as crucial factors for the success of such an ambitious initiative. As the SFL moves forward, the wealth of knowledge gained from its work up to this point will help illuminate the potential for systemic change when diverse groups of stakeholders decide to come together in meaningful collaboration. As a case study, the Sustainable Food Lab provides evidence to support a theory of change that is based on multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership. The SFL has a vibrant project list that began with collaborations between large companies, NGOs and producers that resulted in sustainable practice. Whilst we cannot say that systemic change has been achieved yet, the SFL has been highly successful in attempts to 'tip the system' and provides much support for the role of multi-stakeholder platforms or Labs as a space for dialogue, innovation and the conditions for change on systemic issues. It also demonstrates that adopting an approach that is iterative, participative and responsive to need established through action learning on the ground can and does deliver meaningful results.

1. OVERVIEW

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Overview

1. A Successful Example of a Multi-Stakeholder Global Change Lab

In 2004 a range of leaders and pioneers multi-national food companies, global and local NGOs were invited to come together to experience a new way of learning and working together. They were invited to experiment in person with "bringing sustainable food chains into the mainstream" through action and dialogue. The group attended a series of meetings that were located around the world. The meetings involved travelling out of the boardroom and into the field, engaging with the human and environmental dimensions of agriculture on the ground. These experiential meetings made up the activities Sustainable Food Lab, reflecting the intention of the meetings to act as a laboratory for a new, experimental form of multi-stakeholder collaboration and innovation.

The Sustainable Food Lab (SFL) was the first large-scale, multi-stakeholder, global Change Lab embarked upon. Originally envisioned as a two-year project, the scope and potential of the SFL to address questions of food sustainability allowed it to evolve into a project that would meet the needs of future generations by sustainable measures to safe guard natural and social resources. The aim was to bring sustainable food supply chains into the mainstream using a new, innovative process to foster collaborative learning across the food chain. For example, Larry Pulliam, Executive Vice-President of SYSCO made the following comments about the diverse and unique composition of the Lab:

> *"It's pretty unusual that fierce competitors like SYSCO and the US Foodservice can come together and work for the higher good. The essence, the power, of the Sustainable Food Lab is that we can do one hundred fold, one thousand fold, more together than we can do by ourselves. What we're doing is the right thing to do, the good thing to do - for the world. It's also good for our businesses. There's a competitive advantage for SYSCO to be involved, but we can't fully realize that competitive advantage without working together with others in this group to mainstream sustainability."*

What is the Challenge of Sustainable Food?

> *"It has started to get crowded in this boat, or spaceship. The number of passengers is increasing although stores of food are in short supply and waste is increasing at an alarming rate. We need a fundamental change of course." - Klaus Hahlbrock, Author of Feeding the Planet, 2009*

The challenge of global food sustainability is immense and complex. The world population of over 6 billion is expected to rise to 9.2 billion by 2050. The growth in population, accompanied by rising standards of development globally, means that there is a huge need for safe and high quality food. The scale of the problem becomes clear when we consider that even with current population levels there is a struggle to provide adequate food. The longevity of the problem emerges when we envisage that it is essential to be able to provide for current populations, without compromising the capacity of human and natural systems to provide food for future generations. Natural ecosystems are already under strain. We are already facing the issues of rising levels of carbon dioxide, loss in biodiversity and soil degradation. Jason Clay, Senior Vice President of Market Transformation, WWF, a member of the Food Lab and the Advisory Board and writer of the report World Agriculture and Environment explains,

> *"...the Earth is currently home to over 6 billion people. Supporting them all by low-intensity cropping – depending solely on recycling organic matter and using crop rotation with legumes – would require doubling or tripling the area currently cultivated. This land would have to come from somewhere – and would most likely mean the elimination of most if not all tropical rainforests and the conversation of a large part of tropical and subtropical grasslands too."*

These complex trends are familiar to the consumer who is looking for more sustainable practice from food businesses and corporations. Businesses are being held to account and asked to examine all the links along food supply chains. There is a growing demand for organic and sustainably

produced food. Yet the scale of food required to feed the world can create a tension between the need to provide enough for all and the capacity to respond to understandings that current mainstream agricultural practice is socially and ecologically unsustainable. Further, promotion of alternative agricultural production processes can potentially ignore socioeconomic questions in terms of market access for consumers, farmer livelihoods and labour rights. Zaid Hassan summarises the logic of the problem of the food system:

> *'The basic cycle of the food system in the West, set up over the last fifty years, looks something like this. The system is characterized by slow, steady increases in demand for food; producers respond by over-producing which in turn results in an over-abundance of crops; food processors buy crops, integrating and consolidating in order to pass on the lowest price to consumers; more and more crops are being grown in mega-farms driving more small farms out of business; the price of food in retail stores is falling; small producers are steadily going out of business; there is an overall increase in urban populations which drives on-going and steady increases in the demand for food. This is the dominant logic of the food system, and it drives patterns in the global food system.*

As one critic put it "most farmers are becoming producers of raw materials for a giant food manufacturing system. They are really not in any sense producing food anymore."' (See Postcards from the global food system at worldchanging.com). The complex and contradictory nature of the food system is further elucidated by Peter Senge:

> *"No global supply networks affect more people than those for food. Food production and distribution is the world's largest industry, employing over a billion people. For most of those living in wealthy northern countries, global food systems seem to be working fine…But behind affordable prices for well-off consumers sits a system that is one of the most powerful generators of poverty, political and economic instability and environmental destruction in the world." (Peter Senge: 2007: 352)*

Responding to the Challenge of Food Sustainability

The Food Lab makes an important contribution to the field of food sustainability. It has attempted to address the systemic nature of the food system by working with a range of diverse and powerful players from across the global food system, specifically across value chains, to create change in partnership, towards a more sustainable future of food. Creating change in partnership means that an NGO and a MNC will work together to find new ways of working that embeds sustainable practice. For example, in the space of the SFL SYSCO, one of the world's largest food service companies, formed a partnership with IPM Institute. IPM Institute are an independent NPO that help producers to practice Integrated Pest Management that reduces the use of pesticides to reduce damage to health and the environment. SYSCO then adopted standards for the use of pesticides and natural resources to improve the environmental sustainability of their produce.

Thus the SFL has attempted to respond to the complex and global nature of the topic of food sustainability by bringing together previously unlikely allies, such as small producers and large food corporations, and providing experiences for them to develop a shared understanding of the problem of food sustainability. Leaders from multi-national companies, NGOs, farmers associations and co-operatives, and governments were invited to come together and perform as a team to address the challenges of sustainability. Team members began to create inquiries, projects and initiatives to shift the global food system in a sustainable direction. The SFL thus became a platform to respond to the vulnerability of the global food system by initiating projects to embed sustainable practice in supply chain relationships.

In sum, the Food Lab meets the challenge of food sustainability by creating a safe and productive space for dialogue and innovation. These spaces work towards change through creating an alliance of multi-stakeholder organizations committed to more sustainable global food systems, hosting

experiential processes that enable partnership building between diverse actors and supporting initiatives and projects that aim to create large-scale changes in the food system.

A Case Study in Systemic Change

> *"The largest and most promising systemic change initiative I know of."*
> *Peter Senge, 2007*

The premise of this paper is that the Food Lab provides a valuable case study in which to learn lessons and insights. We can learn from the experience of the Food Lab both as an intervention working for change in the food system and through the application of U-Process and the Change Lab. This methodology is also applicable to other complex social, economic and environmental issues such as climate change, finance and education. Reflecting on the experience of the Food Lab can therefore offer generic lessons and insights on large scale, international initiatives. The Food Lab is thus a valuable learning tool owing to its international success in terms of its membership, scope, results and impact. Both the strengths and the lessons we will explore in this paper.

What can be Learnt from the Food Lab?

The story of the Sustainable Food Lab is rich in learning. As a novel experiment in systemic change, it is the source of learning for a range of research interests. In addition to providing a synthesis of findings from the SFL process, this paper will also try to distil learnings that apply to convening multi-stakeholder Change Labs or processes to consider the meaning of the SFL more broadly.

There is a ripe opportunity to learn from the various facets of the SFL from its inception to its establishment. This includes the convening strategy- how was the Food Lab created, the conditions for launching the SFL, the methodology- the application of the U-Process, the evolution and growth of the Lab over time, the results of the Lab, the strengths of the Lab, the areas of possible improvement and resounding questions regarding the Food Lab and multi-stakeholder systems work.

The purpose of this paper is to draw out the learnings on the Food Lab. Reos Partners were commissioned by WWF to inform their own work in conducting multi-stakeholder processes in the fields of food and food sustainability.

The research and learnings for this paper derive from interviews with Hal Hamilton, co-convenor and co-director of the Lab Adam Kahane, co-convenor and facilitator of the Lab and LeAnne Grillo, meeting producer of the Lab. Desk research was also conducted including a review of literature from books, articles and websites, and a more general reflection and dialogue on some of the emerging lessons.

2. CONDITIONS FOR LAUNCH

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How was the Lab was taken from an idea in the hearts and minds of a few to an active force for change in the global food system? How did the Lab prepare for creating partnerships, pathways and opportunities with many different individuals and organisations working together towards change?

In this section we examine what conditions enabled the Lab to launch in 2004 and sustain as an organisation to the present day. These conditions include: the convening strategy, funding, scope of the Lab, convening legitimacy, building a multi-stakeholder platform, leadership and commitment, bringing the right people into the room, and having a road map to navigate the first 2 years of the Lab. We outline these conditions to understand in-depth what is needed to launch a successful, multi-stakeholder Change Lab.

Condition 1: Convening strategy

How was the Lab taken from vision to reality?

One of the major conditions that enabled the launch of the Lab was the employment of the convening strategy. This strategy was formulated in collaboration between convenors, thinking partners and funders at the beginning of the project. We will explore this convening strategy and the conversations that led to it, and how this then translated into convening and recruiting Lab members. Learnings and reflections on the convening strategy are also provided.

The Birth of the Food Lab

Susan Sweitzer, learning historian for the SFL, identifies the origins of the Food Lab during the summer of 2002 at the launch of the Global Leadership Initiative, an initiative dedicated to addressing current critical global challenges. The GLI was set up in partnership by the Society for Organizational Learning and Generon Consulting. It was a non-profit with the intention to apply the U-Process in large-scale multi-stakeholder "Change Labs." The GLI proposed to contribute to solving ten complex via generating a 'tipping point' in humanity's ability to address its most critical global challenges." (Kahane 2010:39). Sweitzer describes a generative meeting that had a lasting impact. Over breakfast Hal Hamilton and Don Seville from the Sustainability Institute, Adam Kahane from Generon, and Peter Senge from SOL/MIT started exploring the possibility that the debates over agricultural sustainability might benefit from the application of the U-Process and a multi-stakeholder Change Lab approach to bring different stakeholders together for a shift towards sustainability.

The U-Process is a deep collective learning process, which will be explored in more detail later in the paper. It was developed by systems thinkers C. Otto Sharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Adam Kahane and their colleagues at MIT and Generon Consulting as a social technology to address problems characterised by high complexity that were systemic in nature. They saw the potential for a deep collective learning process geared towards a sustainable food system. The group then invited new contributors to the conversation including Andre van Heemstra, Jan-Kees Vis and Jeroen Bordewijk of Unilever, and Oran Hesterman of the Kellogg Foundation. Oran, Jan-Kees and Jeroen described their ongoing investments in sustainable agriculture projects and their passion to influence the mainstream food system. All three expressed a sense that change in the food system could not come from one actor or one sector alone. For instance, they agreed that neither the Kellogg Foundation nor Unilever were powerful enough to create systemic change of their own accord without collaboration and partnership with other actors in the system: NGOs, governments and civil society groups.

Following this agreement over the need and potential value of the Lab, Hal and Adam began a convening strategy. They would identify leaders from across the food system that might have energy and interest to be in the Lab. 'Across the food system' referred to finding leaders from across business, corporations, NGOs, government, and civil society groups working in the area of food. Over the following year and a half, Hal, Adam,

and their colleagues at the Sustainability Institute and Generon began the process by conducting interviews with dozens of leaders in the United States, Europe and Brazil. Hal drew on his background and strong reputation in the food industry to engage a wide range of contacts as well as the strong reputation of the Sustainability Institute in the field of systems change and food sustainability. They used the method of dialogue interviews created by Joseph Jaworski at Generon. In each interview members of the team tried to understand the unique perspective on the system from the point of view of the interviewee and their own motivations and aspirations within their position in the field. From these interview with different systemic actors Hal, Adam and colleagues built up a spectrum of different understandings of the food system and what was wrong with it. They were looking for the following elements in potential founding members:

- passion to make large scale changes in the food system
- parties that would represent a microcosm of the system
- energy to try something new that went beyond the normal board room

During the interviews Hal, Adam and the team were able to collect a sense of the systemic challenges shared by the potential members of the Lab. They were then able to explore the possible scope of the Lab. The learning history documents the following challenges:

• Enabling mass markets to take account of the environmental and social impacts of particular food production.

• Enlarging market access for developing countries while preserving the future for farmers in the United States and Europe.

• Protecting the health of farmers and farm workers.

• Increasing opportunities for the rural poor.

• Enabling smaller farmers to aggregate supply and achieve efficiencies of scale.

• Attracting talent and entrepreneurship to food production.

• Enabling a richer flow of information among all the nodes in value chains, including farmers, food businesses and consumers. (Susan Sweitzer ‘Learning History’ June 2004:4)

The next step after these interviews was inviting a selection of the interviewees to join the SFL. The intention was to bring together 30 pioneering leaders seeking more rapid and far reaching change.

These included leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs from business, government, NGOs and civil society from Europe, the United States, and Latin America. This group would embark on an unusual series of experiential meetings together. These meetings would comprise the different phases of the U-Process in the Lab. This would lead them to visit farms and factories in Brazil, visioning and setting intention in the high desert of Arizona, and prototyping a first round of practical projects on different systemic issues. We will explore the U-Process in more depth further on in this paper, detailing what it involved, the strengths it brought to the project, and areas in which it can be improved.

A Brief Reflection on the Convening strategy

In terms of delivering results the convening strategy was highly successful. Founding members were recruited for the Lab. These members came from across a diverse ecology of organisations that had clout and influence within the food system and within the fields of food sustainability, including multi-national food companies, government, NGOs and community organisations. See appendix one for a full list. From the interviews the convening team was also able to get a diverse picture of complexity in the food system, from the perspective of those who were working within it.

The passion and commitment of some of the major players from the beginning was an effective aspect of delivering the convening strategy.

There was a passion for change embodied in the convenors, the funders, the partners. The initial breakfast meeting set the tone for a project that would span the next eight years. The commitment and intention to intervene on a large scale in the food system, specifically on value chains, fuelled a series of interviews that brought together more stakeholders who were also keen to act and actually change the sustainability of the food system on a large scale.

Lessons Learned

With the benefit of hindsight Hal has reflected that the convening strategy could have been improved by reaching a stronger sense of what was already being done in the field of food sustainability and systemic change before they began the Lab. Another related learning is that the convenors could have targeted more specifically players who were already making significant changes within the food system. We will explore this in more depth in the learnings sections of this paper. There is another point of reflection regarding the convening theory. If the focus is on convening players of influence- large NGOs and multi-national companies, is there a possibility that those who are doing pioneering work in food sustainability on a small scale with less influence, are less present than those with substantial power in the food system?

Condition 2

Funding

Another key condition for launch of the Lab was being able to attract the necessary funding to enable the initial phases to take place. The SFL was funded in the beginning, and has continued to be funded, by collaborating organizations and foundation grants. Each founding corporation committed $84K over the first two years and continues to pay annual fees. The largest foundation for the launch phase was the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, with significant grants also from a foundation in Belgium and one in France. The value proposition of the Lab was to use the U-Process as an unusual and advanced social technology that would enable a group to make break through innovations in the area of food sustainability.

Condition 3

Scope - Why a Global Sustainable Food Lab?

Defining the scope of the work of the Lab was another condition for launch. The Food Lab aimed to impact the global food system and this necessitated a global dimension to the work and scope of the Lab. In practice this entailed inviting members from around the world and addressing the issues of global supply chains. The institutional home for the Lab was in Virginia, USA. Subsequent meetings were held all over the world. Some of the meetings were held in Southern locations to be able to make face-to-face linkages between production in some less developed countries like Guatemala and consumption in the global north. Primarily due to the existing relationships of the convenors, the SFL began by operating in the geographic areas of Europe and the Americas, primarily North America and Brazil. It became global in recent years as it picked up traction with other partners who saw opportunities for the work of the Lab in other countries. The choice of countries was not specific but linked to the respective histories of Adam and Hal in their fields and the connections that followed on from those meetings, and where the need for specific projects emerged. Today projects of the Food Lab are also located in Africa and Asia.

Condition 4

Legitimacy within the spaces of the Food Industry, Food Sustainability and Social Change

An important condition for convening the Food Lab was having the credibility to convene diverse and influential stakeholders. Based on their respective reputations and expertise, Hal Hamilton of the Sustainability Institute and Adam Kahane facilitated the buy-in necessary to convene the Sustainable Food Lab, with the support of and Joseph Jaworski of Generon

Consulting, and Peter Senge of MIT.

Hal came to convene with the experience of a career in sustainable agriculture and was well known for his role leading, researching and practising sustainable food systems. He began as a dairy farmer in Kentucky where he was rewarded for his sustainable practice in conversation. Beyond experience as a farmer, he was executive director for the Center of Sustainable Systems, leader of the Learning Communities Project, director of the Kentucky Integrated Farming Systems project, and coordinator of a multi-university and NGO research project for the Southern Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program of the USDA.

Whilst Hal brought the food system and food sustainability cards to the table, Adam Kahane brought world-wide expertise in facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue around ‘stuck’ global problems. This provided a creative collaboration strategy and a strong convening partnership. Adam was able to build on his reputation from his work on some of the toughest, most complex problems in the world. He facilitated the Mont Fleur scenario workshops in South Africa during the transition away from apartheid. He has also been involved in facilitating a series of extraordinary conflict resolution and problem-solving efforts: in Colombia during the civil war; in Argentina during the economic collapse; in Guatemala after the genocide; and in Israel, Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and the Basque Country. Through these experiences, he learned to create environments that enable new ideas and creative solutions to emerge—even in the most polarized contexts.
Adam and Hal’s respective organizations Generon Consulting and the Sustainability Institute also lent credibility to their efforts. Generon Consulting was a pioneer in convening and facilitating multi-stakeholder Change Labs on some of the world’s most complex problems. The Sustainability Institute was founded in 1996 by the late Donella Meadows to apply systems thinking and organizational learning to economic, environmental and social challenges. The Sustainability Institute had conducted 40 years of research into the future of the food system and exploring the complex problem of sustainable food.

Condition 5

Creating a Space for many Different Players

In the early days of the Lab, Hal and Adam agreed to avoid using one specific definition of sustainability when talking about the Lab. Given the controversy and plurality of meanings attached to the term, at this point they wanted to avoid engaging in the problematic territory about what sustainability means and avoid repelling certain actors. It was essential for the Lab to welcome a number of parties with varying definitions of sustainability, or who were new to sustainability and sustainable practices, to be able to provide a neutral space that did not favour certain players or particular approaches to sustainability. This conscious approach could be said to permit large scale players with no history of sustainable practice, such as some multi-national food companies, to join the Sustainable Food Lab without fear of being criticised for social and environmental impacts and other sustainability frames of reference. This meant that on the part of the convening organisations, they had to create the right balance of having questions and starting points that would provide enough focus and direction for members to join, without putting off certain types of stakeholders with an apparent affiliation to a particular direction of action.

Condition 6

Leadership and Commitment

Looking back on the Lab’s development, it is hard to imagine that the Lab would have become what it is today without the passion and commitment of the Labs convenors and the organisations that supported those convenors. Hal and Adam put tremendous energy into interviewing stakeholders for the Lab and used every possible meeting and opportunity to find the right alchemic mix of people who were committed to making change. They were

bringing leaders already recognized in the field into a new space or ‘container’, effectively saying the current way of doing business wasn’t working, and asking them to follow along on a bunch of unorthodox processes and to see how change might be made in the system.

There was also a level of creative collaboration between Hal and the Sustainability Institute who provided the food industry experience and legitimacy and Adam and Generon who provided experience with facilitating Change Labs on some of the most stuck social issues through multi-stakeholder dialogue and scenario planning. By inviting individuals into the Lab, they also had to convince stakeholders to do something that went beyond business as usual and to enter into a long and emergent process the outcomes of which were unknown. The Change Lab’s methods are radical in the sense that they deviate from a lot of the normal ways that we know of addressing systemic issues or ‘stuck problems’. The methods are experiential, action-orientated and involve prototyping ideas in partnership rather than planning solutions as part of an organisational strategic plan. Therefore the confidence and support of the convening organisations to lead members through this process was essential.

Condition 7

The Alchemy of the Members of the SFL

> *“Successful innovations happen when organisations combine the just right ideas in the just right structure” (Keith Sawyer 2007:14)*

Another condition for launch was the alchemy of the diverse people being convened. These people came from diverse organisations and countries, from the Netherlands to Brazil, from organisations such as Consumers International, Brazilian farmers organisations suchAssocene-Associação de Orientação das Cooperativas do Nordeste, Brazil and American farmers groups such as Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, to some of the largest food corporations such as SYSCO, Unilever and Carrefour. The interviewees had been carefully chosen from the interview process and the resulting mix of people was one that was capable of innovative and powerful activities in the world.

Condition 8

Theory and Practice Informing the Lab

Another condition for launching the delivery of the Lab was having a map or framework for the process, in this case the U-Process as applied to the Change Lab. In addition, the Sustainable Food Lab also drew on many of the lessons from Senge’s Five Disciplines framework for personal mastery and systems thinking, ideas from Adam Kahane, Joseph Jaworski and Otto Sharmer and other leading systems thinkers. The goal was to provide a roadmap for how a diverse group of leaders would meet and work together over a long period of time.

The U-Process – an introduction

The deep structure or ‘navigational map’ of the Sustainable Food Lab was the application of the U-Process. The U-Process also know as Theory U, co- developed by Joseph Jaworski and Otto Scharmer and colleagues at the Society for Organizational Learning, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Generon Consulting and Reos Partners.

The U-Process is a social technology for addressing highly complex challenges or issues. It is an innovation process, a theory, a set of practices, for creating unprecedented relationships, networks and innovations within and across the worlds of business, government, and civil society. The U-Process is appropriate for issues or problems that are highly complex and systemic, where existing approaches to change or solving the issue are clearly not working. Sustainable food is one such problem.

In the Change Lab the U-Process is applied and an individual or team undertakes three phases of activities to intervene in a given system. The first part is ‘sensing’ and this refers to experiencing the current reality of the system of which they seek to influence, such as the food system. Sensing activities involve dialogue interviews, learning journeys and group activities. The second part is called ‘presencing’ and involves time alone in nature or another creative environment such as with an orchestra or in a studio. Individuals reflect to allow their “inner knowing” to emerge, about the system they find themselves in and what role they want to play. The third part is called ‘realizing’ or ‘creating’ and requires action learning and creativity to pioneer a new reality through creating ideas and initiatives. This may involve building initiatives, creating art, writing proposals or cementing partnerships. When working in groups, as in the case of the Food Lab, these three phases become Co-Sensing, Co-Presencing, and Co-Creating. Connected to these three phases, the U-Process outlines seven core leadership “capacities.” These capacities are: suspending, redirecting, letting go, letting come, crystallizing, prototyping, and institutionalizing. Otto Sharmer refers to the pivotal role of the Presencing part of the U-Process. “Once a group crosses this threshold, nothing remains the same. Individual members and the group as a whole begin to operate with a heightened level of energy and sense of future possibility.”(Sharmer 2007)

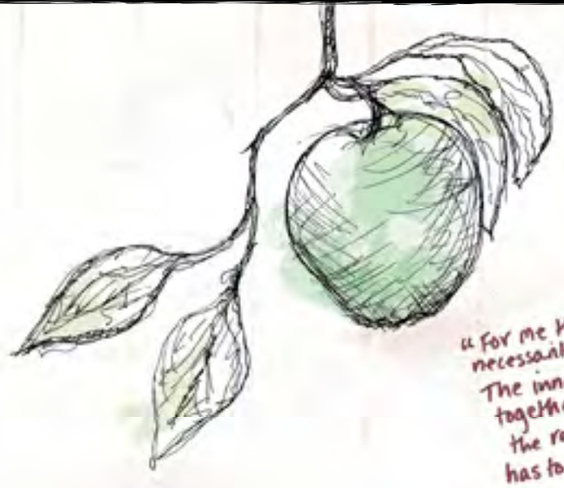
The U-Process is already applied by many creative people-business and social entrepreneurs, inventors, artists intuitively in the process of idea or innovation creation. The U-Process takes what has previously been an individual, tacit, intuitive, and largely unreplicable practice, and embodies it in a methodology that can be used collectively and consciously to open up and make visible fields of opportunity.

When used to bring together multi-stakeholder or multi-sectoral groups, the U-Process creates shared action-learning spaces within which diverse teams become capable of ‘team learning’ and collective intelligence. This allows them to share what each of them knows both openly and tacitly so that together they can see an insightful snap shot of whole system and where they might usefully intervene within it. The resulting “system sight” enables effective individual and collective leadership that goes beyond the boundaries that sectoral leaders were already operating in.
From this place of greater clarity and connection, the teams are able to co-create innovations that address their most complex challenges. The advantage of the innovations created in a Change Lab is that they have been formed through participation, systems thinking and emergence so they are attuned to the context and the complexity of the issue they attempt to address.

In the next section we will look at how the Change Lab unfolded, what and who it involved and the process by which systemic innovations within the food system were arrived upon.

3. PROCESS

THE SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB: A CASE STUDY



"For me the innovation will not necessarily be in the ideas. The innovation will be if together we can change the reality. The innovation has to do with commitment"
- Lab team member

LOCATION

The Lab team, the Executive Champions, and other interested parties reviewed the results from the completed innovation initiatives, and decided which ones to scale and how.

JUNE 2006
REALISING VENTURE LAUNCH

THE FRAMING INITIATIVE

Provided insights into public perceptions of food supply, along with "alternative frames" that informed how to effectively communicate information about sustainably produced food.

THE BUSINESS COALITION OF U.S. BASED COMPANIES INITIATIVE

Steadily expanded in membership, with a first round of "quick win" projects. A new coalition of Brazil-based companies was also planned.

INITIATIVES

LOCATION

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2004
SENSING LEARNING JOURNEYS

Trips organised around learning agendas developed in the first workshop, designed to help the participants learn about the system by observing it first hand.

LOCATION

The team synthesized observations from learning journeys, constructed a set of food system innovations, crystallised visions of the future, and identified strategic leverage points for shifting the system towards that vision.

NOVEMBER 2004
PRESENCING AND REALIZING INNOVATION RETREAT

NOVEMBER 2005
MID-COURSE REVIEW

This session was to review, support and identify the projects identified in Salzburg

Location: EARTH university (Costa Rica)

APRIL 2005
REALIZING DESIGN STUDIO

The kick-off for the innovation initiatives. Executive champions were also invited

Location: Salzburg, Austria

"I was surprised by the fact that after two and a half days, some sort of shared understanding has emerged despite us coming from very, very different backgrounds. I think part of the reason for this is that there has been among the team a very high level of willingness to learn and listen to other people" - Lab team member

JUNE 2004
SENSING FOUNDATION WORKSHOP

LOCATION

The team began to construct a shared map of the current reality of the system, based on varied perspectives and experiences. They identified areas for further research and learning.

THE FISHERIES INITIATIVE

Delivered economic benefits to fish harvesters and better management of fisheries whilst prospecting for financial resources worldwide

LOCATION: Antigua, Guatemala (Learning journeys lasting 2–7 days preceded this meeting)

OCTOBER 2007
SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB MEETING

NOVEMBER 2007
THE ROLE OF PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONAL FOOD IN SUSTAINABLE PROMOTING RURAL DEVELOPMENT

"This has actually been an amazing process in relation to building trust within the group"
- Lab team member

NOVEMBER 2007
GREEN MOUNTAIN COFFEE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS PROJECT SUMMIT

DECEMBER 2007
BUSINESS COALITION MEETING
(hosted by General Mills)

NOVEMBER 2007
CIAA & SAI PLATFORM CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE.

APRIL 2008
CHINA LEARNING JOURNEY

JUNE 2008
VALUE CHAIN CLINIC

SEPTEMBER 2008
SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB SUMMIT

THE LATIN AMERICAN FAMILY FARM INITIATIVE

Worked to generate better livelihoods for small farmers with the active involvement of major buyers in project planning

THE RESPONSIBLE COMMODITIES INITIATIVE

Analysed dozens of ongoing commodity certification efforts and developing a meta-standard to simplify information flow about standards and certifications

THE FOOD FOR HEALTH AND LEARNING INITIATIVES

planned to create new combinations of public officials and opinion leaders to provide better year round food in school and public health systems

4. PROCESS

In this section we outline the facilitation design and social technologies that provided the framework and direction for the early stages of the Lab. First, the overall process plan of the Change Lab over 2 years is briefly described. We then explore the process in its constituent phases in more detail and cover the first meeting, the second meeting and Learning Journeys in Brazil, the Solo in Arizona and the Innovation Retreat in Austria during the realizing phase of the U Process. Each of the phases has commentary from the facilitators of the process, the learning historian and the participants as they went through the different movements of the "U". After the U, we turn to the meetings post-U process and give a broad overview of how the meetings of the SFL continue to the present day.

The Process

a Timeline Over 2 years

Summary:

Foundation Workshop: June 1-3, 2004. The team begins to construct a map of the current reality of the system, based on varied perspectives and experiences as represented by the stakeholders, and identifies areas for further research and learning. Bergen, The Netherlands

Learning Journeys: August and September, 2004. Trips into the field are organized around learning agendas developed in the foundation workshop designed to help the participants learn about a system by observing it (and other relevant systems) first hand.

Each Journey focused on a different geographic region of Brazil, and each group experienced a wide range of actors in food systems from farmer cooperatives to multi-national commodity producers, government and private sector representatives and NGOs.

Innovation Retreat: November 1, 2004. The team synthesizes observations from Learning Journeys, constructs a set of food system innovations, crystallizes visions of the future that they believe need to come forth, and identifies strategic leverage points for shifting the systems towards this vision. Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Design Studio: Monday April 4-7, 2005. The kick-off for the Innovation Initiatives. Executive Champions are invited for the whole session or from the evening of Wednesday April 6 through the evening of Thursday April 7. Salzburg, Austria

Mid Course Review: November 8-11, 2005. This session reviewed, supported, and further developed the projects identified during the Design Studio. Costa Rica

Venture Launch: May 31 - June 1, 2006. The Lab team, the Executive Champions, and other interested parties review the results from the completed Innovation Initiatives, and decide which will be continued and taken to scale. The group determined how this was to be accomplished, with what resources and by which institutions. Executive Champions were invited. Location: New Orleans, USA

(Note originally this meeting was intended to be the venture launch in New York. Instead it became a meeting involving LJs to 18 different places effected by Hurricane Katrina, it involved asking the question what can we learn from the systems effected by Hurricane Katrina and how can we learn how to build resilient systems?).

The Process In Depth:

Phase 1: The Foundation Workshop

The facilitated process of the Sustainable Food Lab began with a meeting of all those invited to be members in June 2004 for the Foundation Workshop. This meeting represented the launch of the Lab team that had been convened following Hal and Adam's extensive interview process in Europe, America and Latin America. It included 45 leaders from governments, food processors, retailers, banks, non-governmental organizations, and citizen and worker movements, from across Europe, the United States, and Latin America. A Brazilian member describes the innovative structure of the meeting in terms of participation:

> *“You have been able to put dogs and cats in a closed bag. Everybody got out alive and, more amazing, respecting each other's different points of view and agreeing that we could achieve something together.”*

What Happened?

The Foundation Workshop focused on developing a collective understanding of the current realities of the food system. The plenary sessions provided a framework by exploring a broad range of ideas and perspectives on the challenges in the food system, the indicators of sustainability in a food chain, and current initiatives that are successful or of interest to sustainable food systems.

The participants also had an opportunity to shape the next part of the process that would follow. They created two lists outlining their agendas for the time between the Foundation Workshop and the Innovation Retreat, framed in a Learning Agenda and a Research Agenda. The project learning history documents:

> *“The Learning Agenda focused on the people and places team members wanted to learn more about during their Learning Journeys. The Research Agenda outlined research that team members thought would support their learning and which resources team members had to offer each other.”*

Whilst the overall process design was based on the U Process, the Lab team members had the opportunity to set their own learning needs and identify how the secretariat could support them at each phase of the U.

Learning Journeys in Brazil

> *"The desk is a dangerous place from which to view the world." --John LeCarre*

Three months after the meeting in the Netherlands, the secretariat organized Learning Journeys for the Lab team to experience based on the team’s learning agenda. Team members joined one of three five-day Learning Journeys organized in Brazil. Each journey focused on a different geographic region of Brazil, and each group experienced a wide range of actors in food systems - from farmer cooperatives to multinational commodity producers, government and private sector representatives, and environmental NGOs.

What is a Learning Journey?

A Learning Journey is usually a physical journey to locations of relevance or meaning to a specific topic. In small groups Lab Team members travel together in order to immerse themselves in the problem, to experience a reality face-to-face they do not normally come in contact with, and to sense the system through practicing the capacities of suspending and redirecting. The learning journeys impact the perspectives and understandings of individual Lab Team members but importantly also create a shared context for participants to refer back to and share experiences around. For multi-stakeholder groups, learning journeys are particularly valuable as individuals are encouraged to learn from the other perspectives of the people they are traveling with.

LeAnne Grillo from Reos Partners has been running learning journeys on the SFL. She describes their value:

"In the Food Lab we've used them [learning journeys] to better our understanding of the food system as a whole, to help us hone in on a particular issue we were grappling with. For example--as we were beginning to prototype some initiatives, New Orleans, LA and the effects of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita presented us with the opportunity to look at resilience. What could we learn about the systems in New Orleans that were devastated , that had survived,and those that had actually thrived? How could we incorp orate those learnings into our attempts to design projects that would themselves be resilient? Visits with various people and organizations in New Orleans helped us discern those answers. Learning Journeys give us a way to see what's important through the eyes of others, help us to step out of our own automatic response patterns, and stimulate meaningful questions and conversations." (Personal communication, 2009)

The first step along these journeys, organized with lots of time for reflection, journaling, and sharing of insights, was for each person to notice his or her own assumptions. One multinational business leader remarked after visits to a sugar mill and then with labor organizers:

"I am still amazed that this number of people can look at the same thing and see something so different, and every perspective is valid. It doesn't help me. I find it still confusing. There is so much I don't understand about other perspectives."

Phase 2: The Nature Solo

"Time alone in silence in nature is one of the most reliable ways we know to become completely present-to the living generative field that connects all of humanity, to an expanded sense of self, and ultimately to what is emerging through us. As we remain completely present, in these moments, we discover a depth of wisdom far beyond that ordinarily available to us." –Joseph Jaworski, author of Presence and Synchronicity, the Inner Path of Leadership

Four months after the learning journeys, the Lab reconvened in rural Arizona to experience co-presencing during the adventurous activity of time alone in nature, also known as the Nature Solo or Vision Quest.

The theory of the U-Process includes the notion that as members of the team immerse themselves in the reality of the system they are trying to understand and change, they begin to notice their own role in the system. The facilitators ask them to step back, and retreat from the complexity of that system and reflect on what is going on around and what is needed of them in the situation they find themselves in. One of the goals of the nature solo was for participants to get a sense of what was possible for the group to achieve within the boundaries of the SFL.

How did the Nature Solo work?

The Nature Solo experience began on the third day of the Innovation Retreat. Guides led team members, carrying backpacks of clothing and food, into the rocky foothills of Mount Hopkins to individual campsites. Each campsite contained a tent, sleeping bag, and supply of water. The team members were advised to maintain silence and remain within 50 feet of the tent. The campsites in the desert environment were isolated, except for the local wildlife. On the fifth morning of the Retreat, after team members had spent two days and nights alone in the mountains, the guides retraced their steps, collecting participants and leading them back to the base.

The Lab team members had a variety of experiences during the solo, ranging from bliss, to fear, to confusion and inner knowing. One participant reflected:

"The message became very clear to me on the solo about the importance of food to be consumed as close to the site as possible. Rather than reinventing the wheel we might be able to adopt what is already being done as a prototype. Particularly facilitating the connection of all the food buyers in a region so it pulls in institutional buyers, it's doable."

Why is time alone in nature useful in change processes?

A strong team is created from experiencing the nature solo together. Strangers become friends, unlikely allies become connected. People share a unique and courageous experience. As well as team alignment, it is also helpful to bring the group into a creative state, where they are in touch with what they are passionate about and what they want to do in the world. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2003) found through his research that creative people are at their peak when they experience a unified flowing from one moment to the next, where they experience a blurring of boundaries between self and environment, self and other. Time in nature brings participants into this creative state. Many experience an increased connection between themselves and the world, which is a useful entry point into the next phase, the task of creating systemic initiatives in the area of food sustainability.

Phase 3: Realizing

From reflection to collective action: participants create and choose initiatives

In the third phase, the creative space of the U, individuals returned from the solo and to the Lab to announce the ideas they would like to work on. This took place in a team workshop. Moving from a solo outdoors to generating ideas may seem unorthodox, but this was a foundational and innovative element of the Lab's method of moving groups to action. They formed teams around these ideas using the tool Open Space Technology. Some of these became ideas that would last over the next 5-6 years of the SFL; others were recycled and become part of the learning process.

Finally, having brought forward initiative proposals - each with the potential for significant leverage, impact, synthesis, learning and cross sector outcomes - team members made choices about which initiatives they were personally willing to co-lead or otherwise commit to.

> The Learning History describes: *"The initiatives that were chosen had germinated from seeds planted in the earliest plenary sessions. Each was enriched and changed through much iteration. Generally, ideas and innovations were influenced by the earlier group work on indicators of success, information about the work already being done in each area of innovation, the amount of time and resources individual Food Lab members were able to commit to the work involved, and the degree to which the initiative had potential for leverage in the food system."*

From this Innovation Retreat were born the following initiatives: The Business Coalition, the Responsible Fishing Alliance, the Responsible Commodities Initiative, framing research that started in the U.S. and was joined by partners in Europe, a network of cities and school systems piloting sustainability in food procurement, and, eventually, value chain projects to tackle small farmer livelihood in Latin America, Africa and the United States.

Since the initial formulation of these projects, they have evolved. Some have phased out, some have institutionalized themselves as distinct entities, and some have continued to grow in sophistication and impact within the Lab's incubation space.

A key point to note is that the move towards innovation is not homogenous. Individuals form teams around ideas they are interested in. These ideas vary considerably and develop in parallel. It is not a case of squeezing the diversity of the group into one unifying idea, even if there is an alignment of purpose amongst the wider group.

Growing as a team and the roots of a new organisation

At this point in the U, the team were becoming more close-knit and interconnected, despite their diversity. In the closing of the Arizona meeting, one of the businessmen said:

> *"I have heard others in the circle call it 'trust' and 'respect,' but I've just got to say: I have experienced a deepening love for all of you."*

Through their experiences together, in meetings, on Learning Journeys, and in the desert, they now knew one another better and related to one another both as colleagues and as friends. Although they had different backgrounds and loyalties and positions in the larger system, they saw one another as peers in a common endeavour. They were excited by what they could sense was the enlarging potential within the group and their work together in the food system. Whilst this is a useful outcome, another benefit of this trust is that it means there is an environment where conflicting views and diverse positions can work in collaboration, rather than conflict and avoid the segmentation that often occurs when many different sectoral view-points are sharing a common space. This is then useful out in the 'real world' as it is the basis of new platforms whereby NGOs and corporations can work together in partnership and dovetail private and public sector interests in mainstreaming sustainable practice.

The atmosphere of trust and respect that was generated amongst the Lab team may seem a subtle point and a long way from bringing about substantial change to the food system, but the two are connected. Psychologists have demonstrated that as familiarity increases, groups are better able to work as a team, and this leads to effectiveness benefits overall (Sawyer 2009). Spending time together, groups develop shared norms and understanding derived through acting and doing. Michael Polyani, a chemical engineer turned philosopher of science has described this type of knowledge as tacit knowledge (2002). This refers to a common sense of understanding and norms or 'know how', which some have suggested is the precursor for both creativity and collaboration (Sawyer 2007:51). It is part of developing a level of shared expertise amongst a group. This is relevant to the food system in that it means new relationships are made between farmers, producers, NGOs, multi-national corporations and others, who can come to shared agreements about problems and how to adopt more sustainable practice at various points in the production and value chains in partnership, rather than through their individual organisational structures.

What were the outcomes of the Innovation Retreat?

The tangible outcomes of the Retreat were the creation and exchange of ideas, the identification of areas to focus prototyping initiatives, and new teams united by the goal of systemic innovations.

Sustainable Food Lab Design Studio Salzburg

In June 2005, seven months after the Innovation retreat, the Lab team came together to build on their initiatives in Salzburg, Austria. The design studio is where the actual modeling of prototypes and the iterative process of screening them and improving on them in rapid cycles occurred. This required the team to take their shared understandings of the food system and develop the beginnings of the initiatives arrived at in Arizona into actual agreements to create joint pilot projects.

Adam describes:

> *"What struck me in Salzburg was how much more tension and conflict there was. My colleague Alain Wouters noticed and said: 'What we are seeing here is the natural characteristic of the team having shifted into action. Now for the first time their interests are truly engaged: who will deploy their time and resources on what, who will have what control and ownership of what we produce, and who will get the credit or blame (Kahane 2010:110)."*

The team had to make the transition from dreaming and imagining how things could be to actually trying out their ideas and giving them form. To do this required different skills and the more challenging aspect of working together.

Core Food Lab Initiatives worked on in Salzburg included:

• **Food for Health, Learning and Livelihoods:** The Food for Health, Learning & Livelihoods (F4H) innovation initiative that focused on improving the health and education sectors of the public or institutional food system in Europe and North America.

• **Business Coalition for More Sustainable Food:** The Business Coalition for More Sustainable Food will harness the buying power of food-related companies to create more sustainable food supply systems.

Coalition members aimed to work collectively to aggregate demand, identify best practices, and improve the social, environmental and financial performance of specific supply chains. This would address a broad set of issues including farmer income, community impact, land use, water use, packaging, pesticides, transportation and energy consumption. Some pilot initiatives would be with differentiated products and some with commodities.

Other initiatives that were touched on in Salzburg included:

• Responsible Commodities
• Better Food, Safer World;
• Partnerships for Sustainability:
• Latin American Family Farms;
• Framing Sustainability; and
• Sustainable Fisheries.

The initiatives were further refined and developed six months later and presented at the Mid Course Review, November 8 – 11, 2005, Costa Rica.

After the first two years of the Food Lab and team members had gone through the U-process, there was a growing understanding that the Food Lab could make a real contribution to the goal of a sustainable food system. There was a transition from using the U-Process as an overall framework, to having smaller meetings, where the U-Process and other technologies informed meeting design.

There was also a shift in membership. Half of the original Food Lab team stayed and the other half went on to do other projects and work. There was a conscious decision by the Secretariat that to make an impact, there was value in working with a much larger group of people that represented a more detailed microcosm of the food system.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the U-Process

What worked? What didn't work? What can we learn from the application of the U? Why apply the U-Process to this type of complex problem? What is special or unique about the U? Why is it relevant to the global food system?

Having outlined the 3 phases of the U, we will now summarise some of the strengths and weaknesses of the U-Process as applied to the complex issue of sustainable food. This section of the paper is intended to have practical relevance to those seeking to design or participate in a U-Process or Change Lab on food or another complex, systemic issue. It also aims to give a sense of where the U adds value and where there are spaces for improvement in the theory and process.

Strengths

- Shared understanding Going through the three phases of the U:

sensing, presencing and realizing builds a shared understanding of a problem amongst stakeholders. This is immensely valuable for any diverse group, particularly a multi-stakeholder group. Bringing together people who normally work and perhaps live miles apart, and being able to come to a shared understanding of a problem is remarkable. Peter Senge writes the Food Lab team reached a common sense of what their problem was, and that this was important as binding the group as a team:

"In their words, they were trapped in a race to the [polluted] bottom [of the food system] going faster and faster towards where no one wanted to go" (2007:353).

- **Building the capacity to act together.** Through group process and shared experience, the U builds collective intention and the will and capacity to act together.

"I have never seen a programme quite like this for bringing a diverse group to a profound place of connection, with one another and with what it is we are here to do," Oran Hesterman, Head of Agricultural programs of the Kellogg Foundation.

- **Building working relationships.** The relationships in the Lab become the basis of cross-sector partnerships, which become organisational or professional working relationships.

- **Testing and re-designing for impact.** Action learning is involved throughout the U. Initiatives can be prototyped in the field and tested with real live users, rather than planning based. Leverage points are tested in the field. This is an asset as it enables initiatives to be tested to respond to real needs and problems.

- **New skills.** There is a capacity building dimension that involves learning the skills of working as a team, working across boundaries, suspending judgement and assumptions, empathising and seeing one's own role in the system and potential for leadership.

- **Connecting the dots in complex issues.** For learning about a global food system, the U-Process enabled stakeholders who might be concerned with one part of the chain such as marketing or processing in the UK to see first hand things earlier in the chain and connect the people, the human dimension in an otherwise abstract value chain. Senge argues that: "The experience [of LJs in Brazil] was especially powerful for those from corporations who had never encountered the actual system on the ground" (Senge 2006:402).

- **Overlapping business and environmental objectives.** The U as applied in the Food Lab can create a space where the secretariat and members can see opportunities for connection and synergy between private and public interests.

- **Platform for multi-stakeholder engagement.** The U provides a platform for engagement between diverse stakeholders to start thinking and learning together. For example in a learning journey with Unilever and Oxfam in Guatemala, multinational corporations and NGOs were able to achieve a shared sense of challenges and solutions.

"…if you talk about development you have to recognize there is government, civil society and private sector and thinking that one of those sectors doesn't exist is fooling yourself. So the fact that private sector is on this journey with us - the fact that we have had lots of experience working with them is good. It is time for us to engage with the big boys."
- Joost Martens, Regional Director Oxfam Great Britain

- **Institution Building.** The U-Process, as applied in the Change Lab, is a useful method for building an institution. It is a good foundation step by amassing relationships, networks, and co-creating a work

remit and sense where and how to contribute in the world. Many organisations have been set up following initially going through a U process.

- **Leadership.** There is a powerful leadership element to the U. Stakeholders take an act of leadership even on embarking on the U-Process. Participants, the advisory board, the secretariat, and facilitators all play multiple leadership roles and are constantly building on and iterating professional capacity.

Weaknesses

- Resource Intensive Professional design and delivery of the U-Process or a global Change Lab requires a lot of resources (time, funds, capacity, intention, commitment), particularly the nature solo which requires a camping expedition and lots of safety protocols. For this reason, there has only been one nature solo so far on the Food Lab.

- Committing to something new Sometimes it is hard for individual members to justify the time to attend a U-Process to their home organisations. This means that it is important that there is buy-in from the upper levels of participating organisations.

- The answers aren’t known at the beginning Broadly speaking, the outcomes of the U are capacities, relationships and solutions. However, the forms of these solutions are emergent so difficult to guarantee at the outset what the outcomes will be.

- Representing the whole system It is difficult to accurately represent a) the system b) all the different stakeholders involved in the food system - or any global system. There is a risk that some stakeholders will feel under-represented.

- Difficult to widen participation It is difficult to capture the learning and development in the different phases as the learning is embodied between the group members and therefore can make it difficult to make the experiences of the U process more widely available either publically or shared with a wider group.

- New tools needed for prototyping social innovation In the realizing phase of the SFL Hal commented that at the time less was known about the prototyping phase, about creating social innovation, instead the work focused more on innovation that at this stage was not finely attuned to sustainability. This meant that at this stage less was known about creating the conditions for environmental and socially sustainable innovations, tools instead were more appropriate for innovation in the economic sense of new products and services.

- Initiatives require testing Without adequate testing with users, there is a risk that initiatives can be disconnected from needs in the real world, there is a risk that ideas are idealistic and not finely attuned to a specific need.

- Initial, contextual research is important Without initial research, there is a risk of zero-basing and not building a rich enough picture of what is already present in the field in terms of networks, initiatives and strategies of change.

- Small group Hal and colleagues found that a larger group was needed to try and instrument the changes they were aiming for than the initial 35 that went through the U.

- The link between the U and systemic change Currently, there are a

variety of definitions of systemic change and understanding how the U-Process links with systemic change requires further research. It is currently difficult to draw causal links between the U-Process and systemic change, even if slices of the system can be addressed.

- Difficult to measure impact Because of the tacit and embodied nature of the U, it is hard to ascribe cause and effect from the U. Some of the relationships and initiatives in the U-Process may contribute to much larger changes within the system, but the precise impact of this is hard to measure.

What Happened in the SFL After the U-Process?

Following the 2 years of the U-Process, SFL meetings continued and rather than continuing formally with the U-Process framework, meetings took a different quality of responding to specific needs and opportunities. Some of the aspects of the U were applied to create a safe and creative space for multi-stakeholder dialogue and action. These aspects included: action learning, learning journeys for new members and to conduct specific inquiries into value chains, maintaining a safe space of trust for leaders, use of processes such as ‘checking in’ and group work, not talking heads but geared around actual projects. The iterative dimension of prototyping continued to be applied. The secretariat and the Lab team continued to undergo, explicitly and implicitly, cycles of learning about the places where there was the greatest leverage and how to incorporate the learning into action.

Meetings that Followed the Change Lab

Sustainable Food Lab review meeting, Costa Rica, 8th-11th 2005.
Summary: Members of the Sustainable Food Lab Team gathered at EARTH University, Costa Rica for a four-day Mid-Course Review. Lab Team members advanced the work of the initiatives and assessed their work with respect to the overall goals and ambitions of the Lab.

London Semi-Annual Meeting, Sustainable Food Laboratory, 13-14 February 2007
Summary: Members and guests gathered for the Semi-Annual meeting which focused on in–depth learning about practical initiatives, exploring new ideas, and planning next steps. The Food Lab meeting was followed by an international public meeting in City Hall examining sustainability initiatives in public sector food systems.

Guatemala Sustainable Food Lab Meeting, Antigua, Guatemala, 14-18 October 2007
New Approaches to Developing Sustainable Value Chains (small-holders and sustainable livelihoods).

Sustainable Food Lab Summit, September 2008, Santa Cruz, California
Summary: More than seventy representatives of Food Lab member and partner institutions met in Santa Cruz, California, September 23 through 26, 2008. There had been a choice of three learning journeys in the Central Valley of California the preceding two days. The meeting opened with shared experiences from these journeys from the point of view of farm workers, farmers, processors, food service providers and food service distributors.

Business Coalition Meeting, December 10, 2008, Hosted by Sodexo at the National Geographic Offices in Washington, DC, USA
Summary: Meeting including presentations on the following topics: Sustainability at National Geographic, Key Impacts of Agricultural Supply Chain, The Logic of Sustainability Sourcing and a Case study: US Foodservice and Rainforest Alliance coffee certification.

Growing a 21st Century Agricultural Revolution, Collaborating Across

Boundaries for Sustainability, March 18-20, 2009

Lansdowne, Virginia, USA. Hosted by Keystone, SAI and SFL.

Summary: More than 250 participants from agribusiness, the food industry, and NGOS attended. The conference focused on new approaches being taken by the private sector and partners to 'green' the food supply chain in the U.S. and internationally. The highly interactive event addressed key issues – such as water, climate, energy, biodiversity, poverty – and key strategies such as partnering in value chains, embedding performance metrics, incentives for better practices, and building institutional infrastructure in farming communities.

Next Meeting: March 2010 Costa Rica

Sustainable Food Lab members will meet to dig deeply into pilot projects and share projections of industry-wide developments. Topics will include carbon quantification and markets, supply chains from developing countries, regional sourcing, and alignment among outcome metrics. Learning journeys are a part of the program.

4. EVOLUTION AND GROWTH

3. EVOLUTION AND GROWTH

Having described the U-Process as applied in the Change Lab and the events that followed, we will now take a step back to explore how the SFL grew and developed over time, to observe changes that were made and how roles were expanded. We will cover the subjects of the work of the Lab, the role of the secretariat and how this has changed over time, how decisions were and are made, the process of membership and membership criteria, and how this has evolved.

The Work of the Lab

The history of the Lab shows us how the work and remit of the Lab has evolved and reached sharper definition over time. Initially, whilst starting with a grand ambition, the convening organisations suspended their ideas of what the work of the Lab should be to allow a range of different systemic actors to come in with their own understandings, agendas and goals. Following the Change Lab several major initiatives came out, of which some were 'composted' and others were scaled out and grown.

The Role of the Lab

Hal Hamilton describes the current role of the Lab as *"to connect leaders to one another, to support them in their organizational and project roles, and to nurture the shared space in which they grow in their capacities to lead the whole system."*

The Subject Matter of the Lab

Initially the secretariat avoided some areas relating to food and food sustainability and this changed over time. For example the question of poverty and hunger was avoided as they thought this was too big a scope for the Lab to address. Over time, it became clear that issues of poverty and hunger were intimately related to small scale producers and their relationships to the wider food system, specifically, their capacity to participate in formal markets. Hal and the team realised there was an opportunity to support companies to procure supply from small holders if the necessary connections are made and structures in place thereby decreasing the risk of poverty and hunger of small-holders. Thus, poverty and hunger became a part of the SFL's remit as it was clear they could play a useful connector and facilitation role.

The Mission

The current mission of the Sustainable Food Lab is to "accelerate the shift of sustainable food from niche to mainstream." They currently define a sustainable food system as follows:

> *"We define a sustainable food and agriculture system as one in which the fertility of our soil is maintained and improved; the availability and quality of water are protected and enhanced; our biodiversity is protected; farmers, farm workers, and all other actors in value chains have liveable incomes; the food we eat is affordable and promotes our health; sustainable businesses can thrive; and the flow of energy and the discharge of waste, including greenhouse gas emissions, are within the capacity of the earth to absorb forever."*

Currently the work of the Lab is defined into specific areas. These areas have been arrived at over time through assessing need through workshops, meetings and partnerships and also where partners and members have brought specific challenges to be solved. Individuals have needed the Secretariat to help make the connections between large businesses and other partners.

Currently the SFL is focusing on the following three priorities: poverty and market access, climate change and regional food.

Poverty and Market Access

The SFL and its members are cultivating new market connections between multinational food companies and small-scale farmers in Central America and Africa. They have developed and are implementing new business models that distribute risks and rewards more evenly across the supply chain, improve the flow of market information, and increase access to credit and technical assistance.

In Africa for example, with support that the Gates Foundation is providing Rainforest Alliance, the Food Lab are creating new market opportunities for bean farmers in Ethiopia, cocoa farmers in Ghana, and produce farmers in Kenya and Uganda.

Climate Change

The SFL has assembled a team of member companies, university researchers and technical experts to develop and test ways to measure and incentivize low-carbon agricultural practices through the food supply chain. Increasing soil organic matter, improving fertilizer application, and capturing methane from livestock are three ways in which agriculture is being turned from a problem (accounting for one/sixth of global GHG emissions) into a solution (by enhancing the capacity of crops and soil to store carbon).

Regional Food

In the US, The SFL is facilitating new market connections between a select number of companies (retailers, food service and distribution firms) to “re-regionalize” fruit and vegetable production and distribution. In addition to key drivers such as transportation costs, climate change and growing consumer demand, the SFL has identified specific points in the chain - from product specifications to Quality Assurance to post-harvest-handling to contracting and financing - where sustainable procurement practices can be put in place.

In addition, new efforts are developing around water quality and healthy nutrition.

Capacity Building

Finally, another new function of the Lab that has been recently developed is the provision of capacity building services.

The capacity building services of the Lab helps companies to think through and act around sustainable sourcing. For example, in the case of sustainably sourcing soy, companies approached the Lab for assistance with sustainable sourcing. The Lab built capacity amongst members and within members’ organisations, raising awareness of how companies can intervene in their own supply chains to source sustainably.

The Secretariat’s Role

The Secretariat is the professional support for the Lab team and was provided initially by The Sustainability Institute and Generon Consulting. The Sustainability Institute (SI) is a non-profit research and consulting group that uses systems analysis and organizational learning to help a broad array of organizations become more strategic. Generon was an international process consulting firm with extensive experience in tri-sector dialogue and action. Generon Consulting has now grown into two independent firms: Generon International and Reos Partners. Reos Partners is an organisation seeking to build capacity for systemic change and innovation in complex social, economic and environmental issues and currently has 5 offices on 4 continents. Following the Innovation Retreat, Synergos Institute joined the secretariat in providing professional support for the work of the Food Lab. Synergos is an international NGO that supports local development and philanthropy with projects in North America,

Asia, Latin America and Southern Africa.

Currently, the Secretariat is drawn from a partnership among Ag Innovations Network, Karp Resources and Reos Partners. Ag Innovations Network (AIN) is the managing partner of the secretariat, and Hal Hamilton and Don Seville are the co-leaders of the Food Lab.

Reos Partners now provides process design and meeting facilitation expertise. Karp Resources provides direct services to members such as in-house training, strategy, project management, sourcing and product development. In addition, Karp Resources is leading new efforts with several members to identify and realize regional sourcing opportunities.

The primary role of the secretariat is to play a connector role: to connect organisational leaders to one another, to support them in their organizational and project roles, and to nurture the shared space in which they grow in their capacities to lead the whole system. The practicality of this involves talking to a wide range of stakeholders, understanding what they want and need and how this can align with changes towards more sustainable practice and sourcing. The task of the secretariat is then to see how sustainable changes can then add brand value to specific businesses associated with the food lab.

Many of the Lab's member organizations were new to sustainability and therefore one of the services the SFL provided to them was a suite of capacity building opportunities. These included in-house training, strategic planning, management coaching, and tailor designed field trips to embed sustainable practice within the member organisation. The Lab employs a small professional staff and a team of consultants maintain a strategic partnership with the MIT Sloane School through which Lab members have access to MBA students for research projects.

The Secretariat liaises and makes decisions informed by the steering committee. The Steering Committee, comprising current SFL members from a range of sectors, provides oversight to the Lab, establishes budget priorities, assists with fundraising, and shares the Food Lab stories with a broader audience.

The Composition of the Lab

The original Lab team was composed of individuals from three continents and three sectors in the food system: business, government and NGOs. The founding Lab Team consisted of people with a demonstrated ability to make change on the ground who had also expressed a high level of frustration about the current state of the system and passion for sustainable food systems.

After the initial U-Process, half of the original team left and new members joined. Today they continue to embody a wide range of experience and expertise, including global and regional policy development and implementation, product development and certification, regional branding of products, developing farmer cooperatives, integrating and advocating for environmental and social policies, and developing financial incentive programs addressing many dimensions of food systems.

As one Team Member put it:

> *"The problem, historically, with alternatives in the food industry is we [business] will create a strategy and it's separate – it's very insular from the policy people and from the people who are working on hunger/poverty, the NGO community. This project provides an opportunity for us to integrate our efforts so that we have a more powerful and focused strategy."*

How do organisations become members?

Currently, there is a different approach to bringing new members into the Lab, more formal than it was initially, as the Secretariat has created membership criteria. The majority of new members now enter the Food Lab via a common project. To be eligible, organisations are assessed according to:

- Their potential influence on shifting the main food system onto a more sustainable path.
- Their work on innovative projects that can add to collective learning.
- Their commitment to designating one or more individuals to become actively engaged with the Sustainable Food Lab.

These individuals must be committed to the goals and processes of the Food Lab and they must have explicit support from senior management to pursue these goals and participate in Food Lab activities.

All members of the Sustainable Food Lab, including universities and NGOs, contribute financial support.

Value to Members

Hal Hamilton has suggested that there is a distinction between the value that members derive from belonging to the Lab and the value their organisations gain from sending an individual from their organisation to attend a Lab. There are also different types of benefits for different types of stakeholders. For instance, for NGOS there is the opportunity to engage with some of the large multi-national food companies and influence their sustainability practice. For some large food companies there is the chance to be at the cutting edge of sustainable practice through engagement with the secretariat, NGOs and producers organisations. For all members, regardless of organisational stripes, there is the benefit to be part of a community aligned around a common purpose of mainstreaming sustainability. There are opportunities to meet friends, to meet people on the ground working at different points in value chains, to network, to form new partnerships, to hear inspiring speakers and facilitators, to engage in experiential activates, to re-energise and reflect. Part of the value for members is to be part of a safe space for discussion, dialogue and learning about sustainable agriculture and sustainable food systems.

5. REFLECTIONS

5. REFLECTIONS

In this final section we dig a bit deeper into the character and design of the Lab and raise questions about decisions that were made about the Lab. Based on the description given so far, we will try to draw out the learnings. We will illuminate the strengths of the Sustainable Food Lab and follow this by raising the opportunities for improvement or reflection. Before embarking on this, it is useful to explore how systems ideas are applied to complex issues, as was the case in the SFL, and current thinking around working systemically for change.

In contrast to the idea that systems have natural boundaries, or a system is a given 'thing' Churchman argues that there is a moral or ethical judgment in how much of the system the viewer takes into account at any one time, because systems are expansive in space and time. Thus in formulating a project that aims to address the system or a systemic issue, such as the Food Lab, the project creators make a boundary judgement as to the scope, the size, the scale and the purpose of a systemic project.

The lesson is not to assume a system can be accurately represented or captured in a room or meeting. Churchman recommends deciphering the ways in which boundaries have been drawn around a given system. In this paper we have identified the ways in which the project and by implication the food system was shaped and understood. We will apply this definition of boundary judgements to understand the scope and form of the Food Lab. Some of these boundaries were refined through the process of convening and running a Change Lab and are thus influenced by both Change Lab and U-Process theory. When we think of the Food Lab and the process of 'convening a microcosm of the system' it is useful to remember that this is an attempt to take into account the whole by considering the complex interrelationships between people and activities, this is what makes it unique and creates opportunity for change. At the same time, what can be seen in a Lab is a part of the whole (Churchman 1970), a snapshot in time and not a comprehensive view of the whole system of food.

When we consider the success of the Food Lab or the effectiveness of the U-Process as applied to a complex social issue such as food sustainability it is also crucial to remember that the story of the project or Change Lab will be influenced a great deal by how the problem is framed at the beginning.

Who sees the problem as a problem, who defines the nature of the problem and who should be involved in addressing that problem has a major influence on what the possible scope of initiatives and 'solutions' can be.

> *"We often limit the possibilities for transformative action because of the way in which we frame the issues and problems with which we are concerned." (Burns 2007:23)*

What is unique about a Change Lab or U-Process approach is that the meetings with different stakeholders in different places take individuals out of their normal working patterns. In doing so, the Lab intervenes in the systemic patterns that comprise the 'normal' way of doing business and provides opportunities to create new patterns of behaviour. By patterns of behaviour this may be simple things like new cross sector partnerships or a new approach to sustainable practice or new conversations. However, by lifting individuals from the status quo of organisational work, life and culture and creating new spaces of opportunity for new action and dialogue, there is a possibility for systemic shifts in behaviour and in organisations and between them that did not exist previously.

Looking at systemic patterns and the creation of new patterns also involves power. According to Burns Foucault sees power as, *"a perpetual negotiation that is supported by the crystallisation of particular discourses, which are then embodied in institutions."* (2007:37) It is suggested here that multi-stakeholder spaces such as Change Labs, the U-Process or multi-stakeholder action learning meetings are powerful interventions because they enable stakeholders to create new patterns of behaviour, such as a multi-stakeholder working partnership, and therefore depart from the dominant way of doing things. In the situation where the dominant way of

doing things involves a lot of unsustainable practice or unsustainable value chains, it creates the opportunity for change. Thus a small action, by changing the patterns of behaviour towards sustainability, can have a larger systemic effect and re-negotiates existing patterns of power.

Strengths of the Sustainable Food Lab

This document has sketched the character and shape of the SFL. From this picture we will emphasise the strengths and areas of learning or possible improvement to the Sustainable Food Lab.

- Delivering value to members;
- A multi-stakeholder learning space for change;
- Enabling individuals/leaders who are new to sustainability and sustainable agriculture to come to the table;
- Cultivating partnerships that act to make changes together;
- Engaging influential players;
- Listening, making connections and finding opportunities for change.

1. Delivering Value to Members

The evaluators of Phase 1 found that most members believe the Lab offers them real value. For instance, when asked about the “overall value to you and your organization of participating in the Lab thus far”, attendees at the recent London meeting gave an average rating of 5.70 on a 7- is-high-scale. The value to members is also evident in the growing membership base, the influential steering committee the need for more and different types of meetings, the increase in meeting attendance, new partnerships, projects and opportunities and the increasing global reach of the Lab.

2. A Multi-stakeholder Learning Space for Change

The Lab provides a space where people can have conversations that have meaning and design activities that contribute to change. The Lab Secretariat and facilitators create interesting and experiential meetings with an atmosphere of trust and openness. The value of carefully maintaining a sense of community is that contributes to change within broader systems and relationships. There is freedom to explore thinking and acting differently.

The value of this type of approach, and the role in creating trust and confidentiality amongst a multi-stakeholder, is explained by LeAnne Grillo:

> *“It comes down to trust and people not needing to show up having all the answers. Food Lab members value going to a place where they can talk about food issues, whereas in organisations they come from they are looked to for answers. Members can come and say here is my problem how do you see this from your side? There are people we need people to say 'I don’t know how to'. We don’t want to publish what’s going on because it’s a space that allows everyone to be vulnerable and the willingness to be vulnerable that is affecting the change. There is the opportunity for CEOs to say 'yes you're right I see why we are making these decisions and they are impacting you negatively and lets see what we can do to change it.' They might be less prepared to do this in a less protected space. This is a big triumph in the Lab that we have a space of honesty. Members can come and reflect how far they have come and listen from a different place and suspend judgement. However the value of this is hard to measure.”*

3: Enabling Organisations who are New to Sustainability and Sustainable Agriculture to Come to the Table

> *"In the Sustainable Food Lab we have created an amazing network of relationships and leadership across boundaries. Some of the businesses that have joined the Sustainable Food Lab were new to sustainability just a few years ago and are now leading among their competitors." Hal Hamilton*

The approach of the SFL enables businesses with no track record of sustainability to come and be part of the Lab. Individuals who are new to sustainability agenda can ease in gradually, as well as find avenues for sustainability changes to be economically advantageous.

4: Cultivating Partnerships that Act to Make Changes Together

> *"People not connected to agriculture think we can snap our fingers and change everything- but we are a product of each environment we are in, and we can't change it all by ourselves, we need help in each context where we work- we need NGOs and Government."*
> *A corporate leader speaking at the Growing a 21st Century Agricultural Revolution, ….2009, Meeting notes.*

In the Food Lab, participating organisations have moved from thinking to acting together to implement sustainability objectives. This has manifested as the creation of new partnerships between multi-nationals and NGOs, producers and universities. For example, Unilever has partnered with Rainforest Alliance to certify and revitalize Lipton Tea. Mars is partnering with organizations across the cacao region of Cote D'Ivoire to create deep and comprehensive rural development. CH Robinson Worldwide is partnering with agricultural universities in the south of the US to rebuild short supply chains to retail distribution centres.

4. Engaging Influential Players

The Lab has engaged a powerful array of organisations. A big achievement of the SFL is its vibrant and influential membership particularly in the case of corporate and NGO membership.

Corporate Membership

In its efforts to forge tri-sector, cross-continent partnerships, SFL had the greatest success in enlisting the participation of large US businesses. Lab members include the largest distributor in the US (SYSCO), top food service management companies (US Foodservice, Aramark), a major retailer (Costco), leading food manufacturers (General Mills, Unilever) and sustainability innovators like Starbucks and Organic Valley. While additional players would be needed to achieve the critical mass desired by Lab organizers and some Business Coalition members, the significant effort made to recruit and engage US corporate players is impressive.

NGO Membership

The Lab has also attracted a variety of larger NGOs working internationally on issues like supply standards and certification (The Rainforest Alliance), commodities (World Wildlife Fund), and regional developmental issues in Central America (CIAT and Counterpart International). Members of the Lab include a small number of important funders, including the recent addition of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

5. Listening and Making Connections

Another advantage of the Lab is that it engages members and potential members one-on-one to find opportunities for change. Hal and the Secretariat team listen to stakeholders, engage in dialogue, and understand what they are working on, what their priorities are, and what their

organisations need and aspire to achieve. This then extends to what the stakeholder's own current practice towards sustainability is. This is then matched with other players to try and impact multiple points on the value chain by combining private and public interests.

6. Finding Where to Intervene

In the work of the Lab there has been space and opportunity for the emergence of new projects, pieces of work and partnerships and strategic interventions within the food system that emerge of themselves, rather than being planned and 'rolled out'. Rather than having a concrete master plan or strategy, the use of the U-Process and other social technologies has taken an action learning approach where the secretariat is continually exploring and finding opportunities to act, or what Senge calls "leverage points" (2007). These opportunities are also known as entry points or 'opportunity spaces' (Burns 2007). It is only by going to investigate value chains with stakeholders on the ground that the limits to sustainability, and thus the opportunities to intervene, become clear.

7. Action Learning and Team learning

> ***"…****The lone genius is a myth: instead its the group genius that generates breakthrough innovation. When we collaborate, creativity unfolds across people, the sparks fly faster and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." (Sawyer 2007:7)*

Significant learning has occurred at the group level of the Lab team and at the level of the Secretariat. This 'team learning' (where the intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the individuals in a team (Senge 2007:9) is a huge asset as it enables alignment and the increased ability to act together. The more the teams understand different points of view and engage in dialogue, the more the team is in a position to work on joint projects together. The activities of the U-Process have provided spaces for the Lab team to practice together and so improve at thinking and working together. In the past Peter Drucker has suggested that in working together organisations ought to be like an orchestra (1998), more recently others such Harvard Business professor John Kao have suggested that a high performing organisation that innovates could be compared with collaborative creativity, or jamming (1996). In Jazz there is no script, instead talented members make it up as they go along, according to need and resources. Perhaps what we see in the Food Lab is jamming in the Lab's meetings and innovative spaces.

Learning was also a big part of the U, creating initiatives and then testing them in the field. Some of the initiatives were non-starters, others needed tinkering and adapting based on what was learnt from testing in the field.

At the same time, the secretariat and advisory board were in a learning process and considering how to make impact. Most of the evolution and growth of the SFL could be partially explained by reflection on what was effective and what was not and adapting to increase effectiveness.

The success and prominence of learning in the SFL can also be understood by the adoption of Senge's five disciplines of a learning organisation: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision and team learning in addition to the cycles of learning and iteration in the U-Process.

Points of Learning and Food for Thought

1) Innovation and Building on Existing Initiatives for Change

One of the major points of learning from the experience of the Food Lab, according to the original convenors of the Lab Adam and Hal, was that it would have been more valuable had it accounted for what was already being done in the field of sustainability and sustainable food systems. Whilst

they interviewed a variety of stakeholders, they took a blank slate approach whereby Lab Team members were expected to come up with breakthrough innovations from scratch. With the wisdom of hindsight Hal has suggested that there were already a lot of great projects and initiatives on food sustainability that were in need of additional funding, resources, time and partners. Perhaps a better strategy, he proposes, would have been to begin with what is already being done, rather than produce some ideas that were not completely attuned to the existing context of work in the area of food sustainability.

This learning is relevant to a Change Lab or U-Process or any development intervention that seeks to innovate on any topic or complex social issue: be it in the fields of AIDS and HIV, finance, education or climate change. It is an important insight because for the ideas or innovations coming out of the Lab to have traction, to respond to a need and to be truly sustainable in both an economic and durability sense, they need to have a role and respond to a need in the real world. One of the dangers is that sometimes ideas are produced that are beautiful and idealistic, but because they are not finely attuned to a specific need, they don't gain the traction or funding to be resilient in the world. Hal has commented how all the initiatives that the SFL are currently working on respond to a clearly defined need and that is part of their success.

Learning 2) The Geographical Scope of the SFL

By attempting to work with the whole system and working with different players to get a shared understanding of the global food system, the SFL enables members to attain a systemic perspective. However, it is important not to confuse a systemic perspective or bringing in different stakeholders with accurately reflecting or representing a whole system. The SFL is an attempt to see more of the whole, or a slice of the whole, rather than the achievement of seeing the whole or bringing the whole system into the room. This is even more pertinent when we consider the global food system.

One possible area of improvement or area of expansion of the SFL would be create multiple, locally based centres for the SFL's activities. This would contrast with the existing situation where the remit is global and there are many global partners and members but the locus of the SFL is in Vermont and the meetings are located in different locations around the world. The advantage of local centres is that it could reduce air travel and build the capacity of local communities as well as support sustainable interactions between sustainability projects and the local communities they serve. Another advantage is that activities of the SFL could build on existing local food initiatives and projects, and lend support to existing work.

Learning 3) Gender and Diversity in the Lab

In the evaluation commissioned by the Kellogg Foundation, concerns were raised by certain participants about a perceived need to more openly address gender and power imbalances in the group. As one Lab member suggested, "gender and North/South power imbalances have been a big issue over the course of the Lab. The SFL had the chance to be a place where these issues were worked out, but that hasn't happened. It's irrelevant to be at the table if you don't deal with power and gender issues." One possible reason for slight gender imbalance is that it is reflective of the food system itself. There were also some key women leaders who were involved in the Lab from the outset, both on the secretariat side and amongst the founders.

The issue of power and gender was also identified in the learnings document from the Bhavishya Child Malnutrition Change Lab and is important to explore when considering the design of future Labs. How should a Lab or a U-Process deal with power inequalities of the existing system? Should it try and compensate for these differences? Should it reflect the differences? For example, the problem of food is perceived

differently worldwide, in some parts of Southern Africa the main challenge of food is food security, whereas in some parts of the global north food quality and sustainable sourcing of food is the local priority. When you bring different global players together, how do you insure that all the interests and challenges of the stakeholders are equally valued in the Lab?

By linking together different stakeholders, such as coffee companies with producers there is a huge opportunity in the Lab to sidestep power inequalities in the real world and create solutions that work for both relatively empowered and disempowered players. The secretariat has in the context of the SFL had a positive role in fostering new connections that can bridge some of the power and geographical divides and boundaries between different stakeholders in the context of the food system.

Learning 4) Membership and Participation

It could safely be concluded that the SFL has had significant success in attracting members from large corporations, farmers groups and NGOs and providing useful services to them through the medium of the Lab. It could be suggested that the Lab has carved out a specific niche within a multi-stakeholder framework.

When evaluating participation, the evaluator for the SFL phase 1, JoAnne Berkenkamp, found that the Lab has had less success engaging other voices from the civil sector. Representation from producer-based organizations, consumer groups, and farm worker advocates has been very limited. Participation in the Lab was also heavily weighted toward US and European players.

The question of why the Lab was less successful at engaging civil and grass roots players is an important one. Was a tacit boundary drawn that had the effect of engaging some players and disengaging others? The main factor identified by the evaluator for the absence of civil society organisations was the cost of participating in meetings in a variety of global locales. Greater diversity might have been achieved had a more strategic effort been made to support participation of those groups least able to afford being at the table. This in mind, the Lab did pay for those who could not afford many of the meeting related costs. In addition, many on-the-ground projects (like the Green Mountain coffee and Costco supply chain studies) have made concerted efforts to engage Central American producer communities in their research.

The Lack of Government Participation

An emerging boundary is also apparent between the work of the Lab and, for the most part, national governments as they remain absent from the table.

It would be useful to the question the subject of government participation in the Lab. Is multi-stakeholder work, in these forms, favoured amongst national governments? Jake Chapman, a leading UK systems thinker has written in his pamphlet “Systems Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently” that governments need to learn to think differently in policy making and adopt approaches that incorporate feedback, complexity and non-linearity. The Change Lab and U-Process is an example of one such approach.

Initially, members of the Lab Team included individuals from the European Commission and the European Parliament as well as Arie van den Brand, former MP from the Netherlands. The question of whether and by what means governmental actors should be better integrated into the Lab remains a topic of discussion by the SFL.

One of the major learnings on the composition of the Lab and getting all the major players into the room is that it takes time. Both forming relationships across boundaries and forming key strategic relationships between large

organisations takes time. Furthermore, it takes time to develop a common sense of the problem and time and experience for individuals of different organisations to move towards acting together. Peter Senge draws out this lesson: “It took more than 2 years to assemble the initial group for the SFL, starting with the commitment of Unilever and Oxfam to work together” (P 356). The implication of this is that it is difficult to measure cause and effect in terms of actions to support systemic change. Creating systemic impacts on the food system is a long and winding road. There are no quick solutions to move the system towards sustainability, due to the complexity of food production, consumption and agricultural systems.

Results

What have Been the Results of the Lab?

In his book The Dance Of Change, Peter Senge wrote: “Most leadership strategies are doomed to failure from the outset. Leaders instigating change are often like gardeners standing over their plants, imploring them: ‘Grow! Try harder! You can do it!’ No gardener tries to convince a plant to ‘want’ to grow: if the seed does not have the potential to grow, there’s nothing anyone can do to make a difference.”

In the case of the Food Lab, efforts have been focused on where change can effectively be made and is needed. When projects or initiatives are not meeting the aims and mission of the Food Lab, projects are composted and new avenues are pursued.

The Food Lab, compromising of its membership base, secretariat and advisory board, have been successfully following the mission of accelerating the shift of sustainable food from niche to mainstream. The results support the realisation of this mission.

Since its inception in 2004 the Sustainable Food Lab has achieved the following results:

- Increased the number of formal, paying business members from 7 to 24
- Increased the number of formal, paying non-business members from 2 to 12
- Launched a Brazilian Initiative for Sustainable Food with 11 business and non-business members
- Developed formal partnerships with:

    The Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform;

    The Keystone Center Field to Market initiative;

    The Specialty Crops Stewardship Index initiative;

    ISEAL Alliance; and

    The Food Marketing Initiative.

Impact On Business

To what extent have large businesses in the Food Lab increased their commitments and actions to further sustainability in their supply chains? What observable forms and processes has this commitment taken?

> *“In the Sustainable Food Lab we have created an amazing network of relationships and leadership across boundaries. Some of the businesses that have joined the Sustainable Food Lab were new to sustainability just a few years ago and are now leading among their competitors. The Lab’s Business Coalition wrote in its Call to Action, “We, leaders of global food and agriculture, recognize that we influence the way one quarter of the world’s population earns a living, half the world’s habitable land is cared for, and two-thirds of the world’s fresh water is used. With such influence comes both opportunity and responsibility.” The Sustainable Food Lab*

The Evaluators of the Food Lab report that member companies are making a wide range of commitments to greater sustainability. The scope and scale of these commitments varies widely. Some companies have sustainability at the core of their mission. Others have developed some degree of momentum, and still others are just beginning. Some of the commitments highlighted below preceded the Lab, although the Lab has certainly informed and supported others. All reflect a growing wave of interest and action by these companies toward greater sustainability.

Reflections on Results

Shifting from niche to mainstream can effectively be achieved by working with large food corporations to mainstream sustainability. The presence of multiple food corporations within the food lab and their adoption of sustainable practice provide evidence to support a shift from niche to mainstream.

However, whilst there is no doubt that the Sustainable Food Lab encompasses powerful members from influential organisations that now have the capacity to act together and that these partnerships intervene at multiple entry points along the value chain it is not clear whether the outcomes of the Lab add up to systemic change.

Hal Hamilton, has suggested that the Food Lab is not yet systemic, and he has the following vision of what a systemic approach might look like:

> *"We would have constructed market incentives so that businesses make money only if practicing cradle-to-cradle techniques, with zero net carbon emissions and zero negative impact on the quality of soil, water or biodiversity. We would share some bottom-line rules about what is unacceptable, including anyone paid below a living wage at any point in the supply chain. Employers would have incentives – first and foremost to make money - by providing good jobs for those who participate in the value chain."*

One of the important outcomes of the Food Lab is that it is on the path towards systemic change and provides clear evidence of the need for systemic, multi-stakeholder action, as well as the fact that systemic change will not happen overnight.

Thus there is a vast array of learning that is very useful for the SFL to navigate the complexity of change in the food system. In the current economic climate, where financial needs often predominate over social or environmental goals, value chain projects are nevertheless crucial learning labs for the people and organizations involved. The SFL is refining the ability to creating win-win scenarios between economic and social and environmental priorities.

What Opportunity Exists for Sustainable Food Systems in the Future?

In the current context of complex, economic, social, political and environmental challenges facing the world there is a vibrant opportunity for the alignment of private and public interests in the pursuit of addressing such complex challenges such as food, hunger, climate change and so on. The Food Lab provides an example of how to seize such an opportunity. For Hal of the SFL, a sustainable future is one in which new incentives, rules, and values of sustainability that are embedded in decisions at all the crucial points of leverage. Similarly, for Hal and many others, "a successful business in twenty years will be run by people who can manage for all these goals simultaneously."

Conclusions

The Sustainable Food Lab is crystal clear on its mission and has evolved a strategy through action learning and meaningful engagement with a range of influential players to meet this challenge. The SFL skilfully connects movers and shakers both in the spheres of the existing system, and in the sphere of sustainable agriculture and sustainable food production and consumption, to bring sustainability into the mainstream.

As a case study, the Sustainable Food Lab supports a contemporary theory of change that is based on multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership. The SFL has a vibrant project list that began with collaborations between large companies, NGOs and producers that resulted in sustainable practice. Whilst we cannot say that systemic change has been achieved yet, the SFL has been one of many courageous pioneers on the path to systemic change within the food system. The SFL has been highly successful in attempts to 'tip the system' and provides much support for the role of multi-stakeholder platforms or Labs as a space for dialogue, innovation and the conditions for change on systemic issues. The SFL demonstrates that adopting an approach that is iterative, participative and responsive to needs established through action-learning and collaboration on the ground can and does deliver meaningful results.

In this paper we have attempted to cover the breadth and depth of the Lab so we can learn and share the lessons from its successful design and implementation. An overview of the convening strategy was given including the conditions for launching a global Change Lab was provided. A detailed unravelling of the U-Process as applied in the Lab was given. From this overview, reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the U, as applied to the global food system were presented. We then looked at what happened in the meetings after the initial stages of the U. This led to reflections on the current form of the Lab, and how its current form, role and membership has evolved and developed over time. We then looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the SFL and raised some questions concerning the areas of possible improvement for the SFL.

Some of the most important learnings distilled from the case of the SFL are:

- To successfully convene a Change Lab and bring together a diverse and influential group of stakeholders from a given system, there are key conditions that must be met in regards to resources, leadership, commitment and legitimacy within the fields of practice.

- Creating partnerships and a multi-stakeholder Lab takes care and time. Experiential processes and group processes, such as those applied in the SFL, help build partnerships across organisational and social boundaries.

- The experience of the SFL demonstrates that creating partnerships are an excellent precursor to delivering collaborative initiatives to embed sustainability in value chains or run food sustainability projects across sector boundaries.

- The U-Process is a valuable way to build a shared definition of the problem and also realize collective or shared purpose as a basis of future partnerships and projects.

- Maintaining the Lab activities, membership and momentum is as important as launching the Lab and this requires on going facilitation, strategy, dialogue and consultation with Lab members.

- Dialogue interviews and the process of deep listening is a vital tool in multi-stakeholder work. Through the initial dialogue interviews and also conversation and dialogue listening to what stakeholders want, what they need and what they are trying to do in the world, the

Secretariat are able to fine tune the Lab to the specific needs of members and their organizations.

- Whilst there is value to starting sustainable innovations from scratch, there is also value in finding out what is already going on within a given field by existing players and institutions, this should be a pre-requisite of action.

- Attempting systemic change is no small task and takes time and experimentation. Multiple approaches are needed and what works and how to proceed is sometimes best derived by testing out different approaches with stakeholders, Lab Members and actors and institutions in the field of food sustainability. “There are no cheap tickets to systemic change” as Donella Meadows once asserted.

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For copies of the Learning History by Susan Sweitzer
see http://www.sustainablefoodlab.org/

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Postcards From The Global Food System (#2) Zaid Hassan, 7 Mar 05 see WorldChanging.com ‘The Road From Green Revolution to Fatal Harvest’

Postcards From The Global Food System (#3) Zaid Hassan, 31 Mar 05’ Southern Views of Northern Logic.’

Reports

Sustainable Food Laboratory Phase Two: Evaluation Report prepared for W.K. Kellogg Foundation

JoAnne Berkenkamp External Evaluator April 3, 2007 1-30

The Sustainable Food Lab Overview – February 2008, Concept Paper

Appendix 1

Lab Team Members 2004-2006

Johan Alleman, King Baudouin Foundation, Belgium

Arie van den Brand, former Member of Parliament, the Netherlands

Pedro de Camargo Neto, Sociedade Rural Brasileira, Brazil

João S. Campari, Director, The Nature Conservancy, Brazil

Juan Cheaz, Regional Policy Coordinator for Central America, Mexico and t he Caribbean, Ofam GB, Mexico

Jason Clay, Vice President, Center for Conservation Innovation, World Wildl ife Fund, USA

Osler Desouzart, Consultant, formerly wit h Sadia, Perdigão and Doux Frangosul, Brazil

Carolee Deuel, VicePresident, Research, Quality and Technology, Kellogg Corporation, United States

Ron Dudley, President, Cargill, Specialty Canola Oils, United States

Meire de Fatima Ferreira, Sadia, Brazil

Laura Freeman, President and CEO, Laura's Lean Beef, United States

Gilles Gaebel, Carrefour, France

Rosalinda Guillen, former farm worker and leader in the farm worker movement, United States

Oran Hesterman, Program Director, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, United States

Eugene Kahn, Vice-President for Sustainability, General Mills, United States

Panayotis Lebessis, Economic Analysis and Evaluation, DG Agriculture of t he European Commission, Belgium

Karen Lehman, The Minnesota Project/Adaptive Leadership, United States

Hannes Lorenzen, Adviser, European Parliament, Belgium

Theresa Marquez, Marketing Director, Organic Valley Cooperative, United States

Neyde Nóbrega Nery, Executive Director, Assocene-Associação de Orientação das Cooperativas do Nordeste, Brazil

Frank van Ooijen, Public Affairs Direct or, Nutreco, the Netherlands

*Henk van Oosten, Innovation Network, Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, the Netherlands

Frederick Payton, University of Georgia and farmers' cooperative, United States

Bjarne Pedersen, Consumers International, United Kingdom

Larry Pulliam, Senior Vice President, SYSCO, United States

Elena Saraceno, Policy Advisor to the President, European Commission, Belgium

Peggy Sechrist, Texas farmer, President, Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, USA

Maureen Silos, Executive Director, Caribbean Institute, Suriname

Bruce Tozer, Managing Director, Structured Trade and Commodity Finance, Rabobank International, Great Britain

Pia Valota, ACU- Associazione Consumatori Utenti, and Secretary-General, Association of European Consumers, Italy

Jan-Kees Vis, Sustainable Agriculture Manager, Unilever, the Netherlands

Bernd Voss, Vice President, Arbeitsgemeinschaft bauerliche Landwirtschaft, Germany

Pierre Vuarin, Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation, France

Marcelo Vieira, farmer and board member, Brazil Specialty Coffee Associati on and Sociedade Rural Brasileira, Brazil

Lab Secretariat in 2004-2006

Hal Hamilton, Co-Leader, Sustainability Institute
Zaid Hassan, Process Documentation, Generon Consulting
*Joseph Jaworski, Faculty, Generon Consulting
Adam Kahane, Co-Leader, Generon Consulting
Alison Sander, Research
Don Seville, Research, Sustainability Institute
Susan Sweitzer, Learning History, Sustainability Institute
Susan Taylor, Logistics, Generon Consulting
Alain Wouters, Facilitation, Generon Consulting

Executive Champions

Antony Burgmans, Chairman, Unilever, the Netherlands
*Pierre Calame, President, Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation, France
*Wout Dekker, CEO and Chairman, Nutreco, the Netherlands
*Walter Fontana Filho, President, Sadia, Brazil
*Richard Foster, Vice President, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, United States
Joost Martens, Regional Director, Oxfam GB, Mexico and Caribbean
Eugenio Peixoto, Secretary of Agrarian Reform, Ministry of Agriculture, Brazil
Gerrit Rauws, Director, King Baudouin Foundation, Belgium
Mark Ritchie, President, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, United States
Richard Schnieders, CEO, SYSCO, United States
Paul Trân Van Thinh, Former Ambassador of the European Union
Roland Vaxelaire, Director of Quality and Sustainable Development, Carrefour, France

** Note: Those that are starred were not present in Bergen and the executive Champion body was discontinued after an initial meeting in Bergen. Some individuals continued to play an informal role in supporting the Lab.*