

THE SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB

A Case Study



1. OVERVIEW





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What is the SFL?

The Sustainable Food Lab (SFL) is a consortium of 70 businesses and social organizations from three continents. The mission of the Sustainable Food Lab is to accelerate the shift of sustainable food from niche to mainstream in order to ensure a healthy future for the planet and its people.

The SFL loosely defines a sustainable food system as one in which resources (including natural resources such as soil and water, as well as human resources such as labor) are used below their rate of recovery. The fertility of the soil is maintained and improved; the availability and quality of water is protected and enhanced; biodiversity is healthy; farmers, farm workers, and all other laborers have livable incomes; food is safe and promotes health; businesses can thrive; and the carbon and energy footprints of production are within the limits scientists define for relative safety.

What are the aims of the Lab?

The work of the Lab aims to achieve outcomes in several areas:

Leadership A community of leaders with new tools and capacities to manage across multi-sectoral (business, government, NGO and community organisation) boundaries.

Sustainable food supply Working examples of new value chain models and commodity standards that address social,

economic and environmental sustainability.

Organizational change Corporations with increased capacity to drive both business performance and social responsibility performance, and non-business organizations with increased capacity to partner with the private sector to achieve their public purposes more effectively.

Knowledge that transforms the industry Documented methods, practices, cases, and stories of collaborative projects and policy incentives.

What are the roles of the SFL?

The SFL has four roles:

Working collaboratively across business sectors testing and developing new ideas. Partners and Food Lab members come together in the Sustainable Food Lab to try out new ideas not only on paper, but with live pilot projects so that theory and practice can interact.

Measuring the impact of its own work. Throughout 2009 and 2010 the SFL and its partners are developing key impact indicators by which to describe and measure sustainability, an assessment of the state of sustainability in food systems, and an analysis of what else would be needed, beyond voluntary market initiatives, to address the gaps between what is being accomplished and what needs to be accomplished.

Sharing learning about the food system and efforts to shift it.

The Sustainable Food Lab's learning environment was designed by systems thinking, The Global Leadership Initiative U Process (the "U"), and team excellence experts associated with MIT and the Society for Organizational Learning. Lab members share stories and case studies and learn together experientially and through practice at summits and Learning Journeys in the field.

Providing an innovation space for system leaders.

The Sustainable Food Lab is a global network for the sharing of expertise and development of working partnerships. System leaders operate under the guiding assumption that nobody can manage the whole food system in isolation.

What are the current projects of the SFL?

The Sustainable Food Lab (SFL) incubates partnership projects, sometimes employing a management role, and consistently collecting and sharing knowledge. Currently the SFL is focusing on the following three priorities:

Poverty and market access. The SFL and its members are facilitating 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. For more information on this project, contact Don Seville.

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). The contact person for this project is Daniella Malin.

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. The local food trend is at an all time peak, with every sector of the industry clamoring for

local supply. 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 new procurement practices can be put in place. For more information contact Karen Karp.

In addition, new efforts are developing around water quality and healthy nutrition. Meanwhile the early work of the SFL has already begun to address responsible fishing, framing, institutional food procurement, and biofuels standards.

Successful example of a multi-stakeholder global change lab

The Sustainable Food Lab was the first large-scale, multi-stakeholder, global Change Lab that Reos Partners (which at this point was known as Generon) embarked upon. Originally envisioned as a two-year project, the SFL quickly evolved into a project that could “span generations.” As the Lab grew into a much larger, more complex project involving many more people and organizations, effectively onboarding these new members has become a priority. Including Learning Journeys (LJs) as part of its annual meetings has met this need effectively. The SFL also showed that an ongoing secretariat function was critical to supporting pilot projects.

One of the most powerful and ground

breaking outcomes of the Food Lab has been giving people the chance to develop relationships with people they wouldn't ordinarily work with in the context of their organisations. Members are not only working on projects together through the Lab but are involving new colleagues in work outside the Lab as well.

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 US Foodservice can come together and work for the higher good. That's what it's all about. The essence, the power, of the Sustainable Food Lab is that we can do 100 fold, 1,000 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.”

2. CONDITIONS FOR LAUNCH





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In this section we examine how the Lab was taken from an idea to an active force in the real world, with many different individuals and organisations working together towards a sustainable food system. We examine the convening strategy, funding, decisions about scope and the framing of sustainability in relation to food and global food systems.

Convening strategy. How was the Lab taken from vision to reality?

Susan Sweitzer, learning historian for the SFL, identified the origins of the Food Lab during the summer of 2002 at the launch of the Global Leadership Initiative, an initiative dedicated to addressing the critical global challenges of our time. Whilst eating breakfast Hal Hamilton, Don Seville, Adam Kahane, and Peter Senge started exploring the possibility that the debates over agricultural sustainability might benefit from the application of the U Process. New contributors to the conversation were convened, 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 desire to influence the mainstream food system. All three expressed a sense that neither the Kellogg Foundation nor Unilever were powerful enough to create systemic change of their own accord and therefore, concerted collaboration with other powerful

actors in the system, was a good idea.

Over the following year and a half, Hal, Adam, and their colleagues at the Sustainability Institute and Reos Partners (which was still known at this point as Generon Consulting) began the process by conducting interviews with dozens of system leaders in the United States, Europe and Brazil. Hal drew on his background in the food industry to engage a wide range of contacts. From these interviews, individuals were invited to join the SFL. The intention was to bring together pioneering leaders seeking more rapid and far reaching change.

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. The Food Lab learning history documents some of these 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.

The founders include leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs from business, government, NGOs and civil society from Europe, the United States, and Latin America. They were facilitated by Reos Partners through the U Process, which led 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 after designing them in Austria.

The first round of projects evolved into work on global commodity standards, institutional food buying in Europe, and clusters of supply chain projects that focus on poverty, climate, and regional food supply. Gene Kahn at General Mills calls the Lab “an epicenter of innovation.”

Many of the Lab’s member organizations are new to sustainability and therefore one of the services received by members is a suite of capacity building opportunities such as in-house training, strategic planning, management coaching, and tailor designed field trips. The Lab employs a small professional staff, while a team of consultants maintain a strategic



When founders of the Sustainable Food Lab first convened in 2004, Anthony Burgmans, then Chairman of Unilever, gave the Lab the challenge of figuring out how to feed nine billion people sustainably. The group of 32 people who first met in the Netherlands had different perspectives about sustainability—some championing social justice for small farmers, some driven to protect important bioregions, and some figuring out how to incorporate sustainability into corporate strategy. Each person and organization had a different reason for joining the Sustainable Food Lab but all shared a purpose of “accelerating the shift of sustainability in the food system from niche to mainstream.”

Hal Hamilton, March 2009

partnership with the MIT Sloane School through which Lab members have access to MBA students for research projects.

Funding

How was the Sustainable Food Lab funded?

The SFL was funded by foundation grants originally from Kellogg foundations and various other small foundations. The Food Lab had received funding from Kellogg through Oren Hesterman.

Hal wrote a proposal for Kellogg and Kellogg gave the Food Lab a substantial grant which provided the funds for its inception. Kellogg was the primary funder in the first two years of the Lab and funded fees, meeting expenses, 'Learning Journeys' (LJs) and 'Solo' initiatives for staff and all the participants. Hal had a built up a strong reputation for his work in the area of sustainable food with Kellogg and other foundations.

Scope - Why a global Sustainable Food Lab?

Originally the SFL was operating in the geographic areas of Europe and the Americas. It became global in recent years as it picked up traction 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.

What were the key decisions behind the Lab?

In the formative stage of the Food Lab, Hal Hamilton and Don Seville came to talk to Adam and Peter at Executive champions workshop in Vermont. Here they discussed some initial ideas. Further definition of the Lab came out of the dialogue interview process and through talking to people about what kind of appetite they had for change and how they might like to be involved. Hal and Adam had the guiding idea of shifting the mainstream food system towards a sustainable direction. They wanted to focus on the main system rather than alternative systems and in doing so attract the main players.

Framing the Sustainable Food Lab

In the early days of the Lab, Hal and Adam agreed to suspend temporarily the definition of sustainability. Given the controversy and plurality of meanings attached to the term, they were not interested in engaging in the problematic territory about what sustainability means. It was essential for the Lab to welcome a number of parties with varying definitions of sustainability.

3. EVOLUTION AND GROWTH





3. EVOLUTION AND GROWTH

“Credibility is a key word in this type of project, specifically credibility of the process and credibility of the outcome. We have enormous confidence in the people who are behind this project in terms of credibility of the process, and you are the guarantee of the credibility of the outcome. If all of you are happy with what comes out of it, it must be a major success.”

In this section we explore how the SFL began to grow and develop, changes were made and roles were expanded to meet the need of the rapidly growing Lab team. We cover the subjects of 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.

Who makes up the secretariat, and what do they do?

The secretariat is the professional support for the Lab team and was provided initially by Sustainability Institute and Generon. Sustainability Institute (SI) is a nonprofit 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, it is now called Reos Partners and comprises of 5 local offices in 4 different 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 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 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.

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 composition of the Lab

The original Lab team was composed of individuals from three continents and multiple sectors in the food system. 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. 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.”

Aside from the secretariat, two further groups support the work of the Lab team: Executive Champions and Advisors. The



Executive Champions are chief executives or senior officers of the companies and organisations with which team members are affiliated. The Champions provide feedback, credibility, and support for mobilizing further resources as Food Lab projects take shape. The Advisors are a resource for the lab team. They are experts who dynamically provide advice, research support, or intellectual input to the Lab team according to when it is needed.

What governance and decision-making bodies are there for the Lab staff and Lab team?

From early on, much direction and management of the Food Lab was provided by the secretariat. After two years working in this way, the Lab team reflected on their progress and concluded that they were not close enough to making an impact on the main food system. There was a shift towards moving the Lab being financially self-sustaining. It became self-funding and less reliant on foundation money, and a guiding committee was set up to steer its progress.

The Steering Committee, comprising current SFL members, provides oversight to the Lab, establishes budget priorities, assists with fundraising, and shares the Food Lab stories with a broader audience.

People in the sustainability institute thus had a big role in the direction of the Lab moving forward. The members were more focused on the issues and projects they were

working on, whereas the secretariat were able to see the bigger picture across initiatives, drawing connections and apprehending opportunities for cross sector learning and collaboration. This was the case in the value chain work which was expanded from food into clothing and other areas beyond food into a broader sustainability effort.

How do organisations become members?

The majority of new members now enter the Food Lab via a common project. To be eligible to be a member organisations must meet the following criteria as stated by the Food Lab secretariat:

Membership Criteria

Potential member businesses and organizations 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.

4. 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

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2004
SENSING & LEARNING
JOURNEYS

LOCATION: BRAZIL

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

JUNE 2004
SENSING FOUNDATION
WORKSHOP

LOCATION: THE NETHERLANDS

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.

NOVEMBER 2004
PRESENTING AND REALIZING
INNOVATION RETREAT

LOCATION: ARIZONA

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

APRIL 2005
REALIZING
DESIGN STUDIO

LOCATION: SALZBURG AUSTRIA

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

NEW YORK

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
REALIZING VENTURE
LAUNCH

NOVEMBER 2005
MID-COURSE REVIEW

INITIATIVES

This session was to review, support and identify the projects identified in Salzburg. Location: EARTH university (Costa Rica)

COSTA RICA

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.

THE FISHERIES INITIATIVE

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

"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



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

DECEMBER 2007
BUSINESS COALITION MEETING
(hosted by General Mills)

APRIL 2008
CHINA LEARNING JOURNEY

JUNE 2008
VALUE CHAIN CLINIC

SEPTEMBER 2008
SUSTAINABLE FOOD LAB SUMMIT

NOVEMBER 2007
GREEN MOUNTAIN COFFEE KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS PROJECT SUMMIT

NOVEMBER 2007
CIAA & SAI PLATFORM CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE.



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

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





4. PROCESS

In this section we outline the facilitation design and methodologies that provided the direction for the early and formative stages of the Lab. Firstly the overall process of the Change Lab over 2 years is described. We will 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 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".

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 and identifies areas for further research and learning. Location: Bergen, The Netherlands

Learning Journeys: [date] Trips are organized around learning agendas developed in the first workshop designed to help the participants learn about a system by observing it (and other relevant systems) first hand. Location: [City], Brazil

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. Location: 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. Location: Salzburg, Austria

Mid Course Review: November 8-11, 2005. This session is to review, support, and develop the projects identified during the Design Studio. Location: 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 will determine how this will be accomplished, with what resources and by which institutions. Executive Champions are invited. Location: New York City, USA

In Depth:

Phase 1: The Foundation Workshop

The 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 would

represent 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



“We are here because we would like to have this food of higher quality with competitive price [while] defending the environment and the social culture.”

“What stands out is that we lack a framework and common definition of what a sustainable, active food system is. There’s not a common understanding among the stakeholders of sustainable food production. I think we still need to look for that baseline, that common definition of understanding and agreement. What is our view on mainstream, sustainable, agri-food systems?”

“The first part of our work was co-sensing: immersing ourselves together in the complexity of our current and emerging reality. This required us to venture out beyond the comfortable boundaries of our everyday world—our habitual places and relationships and thoughts—to see afresh what is happening and is possible. In Bergen we had a team that constituted a microcosm of the social system involved in food, and as they talked with one another openly and honestly, the whole group was able to see more of the whole system, from multiple perspectives, in all its complexities and contradictions. At the end of the that meeting, one of the participants said:

“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.”

Innovation Retreat, framed in a Learning Agenda and a Research Agenda. The 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

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.

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. People got more confused, at first, as they started to wonder how others could have such different reactions to some of the visits. 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.”

In three groups of 15, sub groups made week-long trips to three different parts of Brazil, where many aspects of the global food system - production and consumption, rural and urban, traditional and modern, sustainable and unsustainable - could be fully experienced.

Adam writes in his book, *Love and Power*, that he learnt the impact of the Learning Journeys (LJs) when one of the participants told him that “it had only been in Brazil - with its long bus rides and meals and late night chats - that the team had really gotten to know one another and to open up themselves and their thinking.” (Kahane, 2009)

Phase 2: The Nature Solo

Four months later, the Lab reconvened in rural Arizona to experience co-presencing,

and 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 things being the way that they are. 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.

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 weather was clear and warm. The campsites in the desert environment were isolated, except for the local wildlife: native coati mundi, musk hogs and open-range cattle. 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. Here are some of their reflections:

“I didn’t think of the Food Lab at all. I looked in. It takes courage to visit yourself from within. Who am I? What is needed of me? I saw two shooting stars, in parallel paths and I was completely amazed and excited until I realized it was actually the flight path of some airplane. You see what you want, and I decided not to stay with the truth (flight path) but to remain thinking it was two shooting stars.”

“I thought about people trying to save the hunters and gatherers 3000 years ago. Are we on a similar path?”

Phase 3: Realizing

From solitary reflection to collective action

After the Solo, the participants went into a session indoors where the Lab team members announced what ideas they wanted to work on. They formed teams around these ideas using open space technology. Some of these ideas became ideas that would last in the next 5-6 years of the SFL.

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 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.”

“Robert Browning said, ‘A man’s reach should exceed his grasp.’ I think the biggest insight was about innovation building on other things that already exist. I think there’s a big desire to create something really, really new and it’s a bit of a disappointment that all the projects are building on things that already exist. My big insight is: delivering incremental projects with a whole is something which hasn’t been done and it is a big innovation.”

Susan Sweitzer, the then project learning historian and presently project director, wrote: “Many team members commented on the sense of calm determination in the group after the wilderness camping experience and expressed confidence that

this group was uniquely capable of the work that was needed in the food system. Others remarked on a feeling of good-heartedness and convergence. Many became aware of a new level of commitment and energy.”

Adam Kahane also commented on the role of the Solo in animating the team towards the initiatives:

“I had never before seen a team organize themselves with such alacrity and enthusiasm. It was as if their ideas and energies precipitated out of a super-saturated solution that had been created through their co-sensing and co-presencing activities.”

From this Innovation Retreat were born 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.

Hal Hamilton has reported that since the initial formulation of these projects, they have evolved. Some have since 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.



Growing as a team and the roots of a new organisation

The members of the Lab team were moved by this increasingly dense set of connections. 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 enterprise. They were excited by what they could sense was the enlarging potential within and amongst themselves.

During the last two days of the workshop, as the list of potential initiatives was being narrowed from twenty five to nine, there was talk once again of the importance of focusing on the flow from production to consumption, specifically looking at key institutional buyers who are perceived as having the greatest leverage. Interested Lab Members refined the focus further, considering the following issues:

- Target audiences
- Developing and implementing sustainable screens for institutional procurement
- The pros and cons of a strategy of

regulation vs. a strategy of incentives

- Rewarding improvement
- Minimizing the risks to producers in such a system
- Employing a unified brand
- The applicability of Green Purchasing Programs already in existence in many governments in the EU
- Determining whether there could be sufficient supply

What were the outcomes of the Innovation Retreat?

The tangible outcomes of the Retreat, such as the creation and exchange of ideas, and new teams united by the goal of systemic innovations, were visibly successful. The learning historian also documented the development of less visible dynamics, less rational and more emotional group dynamics that were an equally important element of the process.

In comments and reflections on the Learning Journeys, in the Innovation Retreat, and on the wilderness Solo, team members described profound change on several levels: personally, interpersonally between members of the Food Lab, in relation to the institutions and businesses where they work, and in their sense of the potential of the Food Lab to affect system change.

Sustainable Food Lab Design Studio Salzburg

In June 2005, seven months later, the Lab team came together again, in Salzburg, Austria. The purpose of this meeting was for the team to take their shared understandings of the food system and develop the seeds of the initiatives into actual agreements to create joint pilot projects.

Adam describes:

“What struck me in Salzburg was how much more tension and conflict there was than had been the case during the team’s previous meetings. My colleague Alain Wouters noticed this too and said to me: ‘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.’”

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



“For some, personal and interpersonal changes were as significant as the development of the initiatives. A number of team members reflected in their closing comments on the role of commitment, trust, and respect in enabling the profound changes which they felt were important to cultivating Food Lab’s long-term potential to shift the food system.”

“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.”

“This has actually been an amazing process in relation to building trust within the group.”

“As I remember the people coming to Bergen were quite polarized in their view, which has solely disappeared during this week.”

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. They will address a broad set of issues including farmer income, community impact, land use, water use, packaging, pesticides, transportation and energy consumption. Some pilot initiatives will 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.

At the Salzburg meeting Erika Gregory from

the Idea Factory introduced prototyping as a new discipline. She suggested the following criteria for testing prototypes throughout the meeting:

- **Feasibility:** can the partners & funding be secured in order to make the necessary progress by June 2006?
- **Personal commitment:** can the time required to move forward be committed by all parties?
- **Impact:** is this intuitively where this group has the capacity to make the greatest difference?
- **Fit:** is this where Food Lab expertise and networks are best suited?
- **Strategy:** will this lead us to the objectives we have envisioned for change in the system?

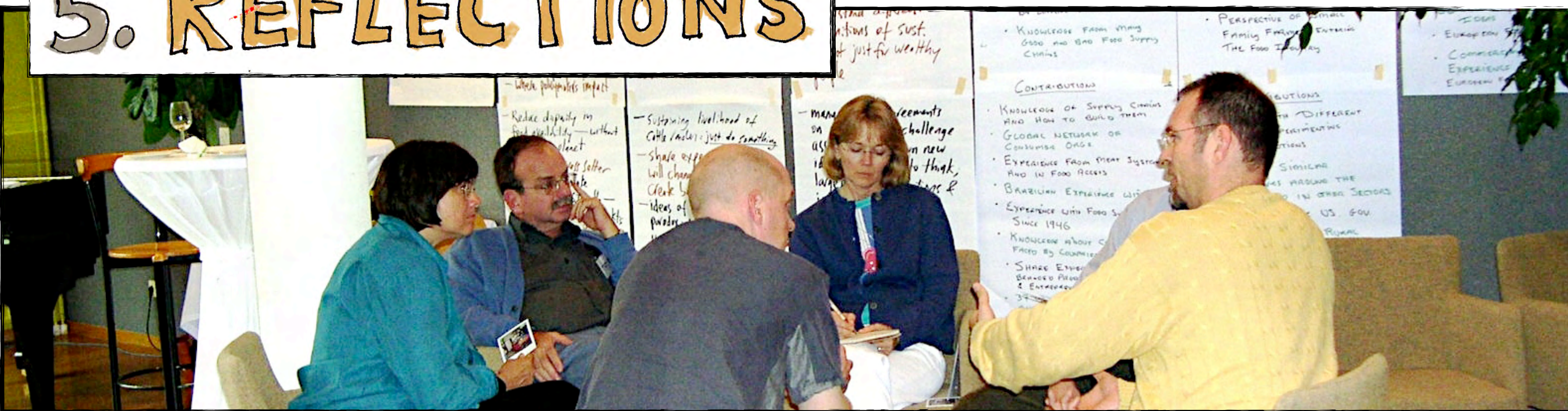
The initiatives were further refined and developed six months later and presented at the Mid Course Review, November 8 – 11, 2005, at the Earth University in Costa Rica.

Was the U Process successful for the Lab?

“Some Lab members remain highly committed to the spiritual and reflective components of the U Process (and seek more of it), but these elements are uncomfortable or

of questionable value for some newcomers. While growth may hold the potential for greater leverage, it also complicates development of the mutual understanding, trust and shared intentions that would typify true partnerships.”

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. What are the opportunities created by the Lab? What was missed out? Who serves to benefit from the Lab in its current form? What were the boundaries marking who was in and out and marking the parameters of the food system?

It is useful to turn to the work of systemic thinkers on what are the boundaries of a system and what are the roles of human nature in drawing the boundaries of a given system. In contrast to the idea that natural systems have natural boundaries, Churchman argues that it is a moral or ethical judgment how much of the system the viewer takes into account at any one time because systems are expansive in space and time. Thus a boundary judgement is made as to the scope, the size, the scale and the purpose of a given systemic project. Churchman recommended critique as a way of understanding the boundaries in which a given project operates and we will apply this definition boundary judgements to understand the scope and form of the Food Lab.

It is also useful to consider the work of Bent Flyvbjerg, author of phronetic planning research. This is an approach to research that sets out to answer 4 questions: where is the project going with planning?; who gains and who loses and by which mechanisms of power?; is this development desirable?;

what, if anything, should be done about it?" The main task that Flyvbjerg proposes of research is to unearth the way that power and values work in planning and with what consequences to whom. We shall also refer to this phronetic planning approach when we try to understand loosely power and values in the Lab.

Gender and diversity in the Lab

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."

This issue was also identified by Hassan and Eisenstadt in the Bhavishya Child Malnutrition Change Lab and is important to explore when considering the design of future Labs. What would a Change Lab look like that actively was conscious of gender and power imbalances? What would it take to instrument this kind of change? For what reason does this issue surface again and again in systemic projects with little effort to address it?

Membership and Participation

The Food Lab intended to create "a multi-sector partnership of business, civil society and government agencies directed towards the problem of making food systems more sustainable by identifying and implementing high leverage systemic interventions." Organizers sought "to work with the diverse set of influential food system leaders on ambitious solutions to the most difficult problems in our food supply."

In its efforts to forge tri-sector, tri-continent partnerships, it has widely been suggested that 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.

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.

However, the evaluator 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 is also heavily weighted toward US and European players.

The question of why the Lab was less successful at engaging NGO and grass roots players is an important one. Was a boundary drawn that had the effect of engaging some players and disengaging others? The main factors identified by the evaluator for the absence of civil society organisations was the cost of participation (such as attendance in lengthy, sometimes distant meetings). 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. That said, some 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 limited participation of producer groups has become more evident as Business Coalition members have deepened their focus on new procurement standards,

local sourcing, reducing “food miles” and the like. These hold the potential for both positive and negative impacts on producers.

The lack of government participation

A boundary is also apparent between the work of the Lab and, for the most part, national governments as they remain absent from the table. The evaluator Berkenkamp, wrote that

“Despite significant effort, the Lab has also struggled to secure government participation, particularly in the United States. Contributing factors likely include the exploratory nature of the Lab’s work, unease about collaboration with non-profits, lack of familiarity with market-based change, and concern that participation in the Lab could be viewed as advancing the interests of private business.”

The most recent SFL meeting in London, however, sparked growing interest in food purchasing by European public institutions. That work could potentially lead to more involvement with municipal officials in the US. The Food Lab also gave more attention to policy issues and actors at the Fall 2007 SFL meeting in Guatemala. The question of whether and by what means governmental issues should be better integrated into the Lab remains a topic of discussion.

These challenges notwithstanding, the

evaluators 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.

A question also remains as to who the dominant voices are in the Lab and why. The implicit reading is that the large corporations and large NGOs are the major players in the Lab and it would be useful to understand if this just happened or whether their was a deliberate attempt to engage these types of players. More to the point, are these the players that are needed to produce systemic change?

Who is not invited to become a member of the Lab?

“We don’t have the people who are not seen as supportive of the approach of the Food Lab,” LeAnne Grillo explains. On the other hand as the Food Lab grows, they, the secretariat, are starting to include a wider variety of organisations. LeAnne suggests that “There was a lot of disagreement when large companies with no record of an interest in sustainable practice were being proposed as a potential Lab member. On the other hand, having the diverse perspectives makes the Lab unique. Through structured partnerships the pool of who the Food Lab are working with is broadening. There is also a greater emphasis on trying to embed sustainability



into organisations. We are doing a lot more training and capacity building and leadership development."

What capacity building services does the Lab provide?

The capacity building helps companies to think through and act around sustainable sourcing. For example, one of the big issues was sustainably sourcing soy, due to companies not knowing where their soy was coming from. The Lab built capacity amongst members and within members's organisations, raising awareness of how companies can intervene in their own supply chains to source sustainably.

How did learning and action-learning occur during the Lab?

The emphasis on learning occurred throughout the Change Lab process and with the support of the secretariat added a lot of value, and opportunity for the Lab and its members. The secretariat enabled members to design their own learning by taking input into the the learning agenda and the research Agenda. Each drew on building on the learning that was in the room amongst different team members, whilst identifying what needed to be learnt, out of the room, in the field. Action learning occurred explicitly in the realizing or prototyping phase of the Change Lab when members form initiatives. There was a more formal process for coaching initiatives in the first 2 years. Members of the Food Lab

have commented that as the number of action learning experiments, pilots, initiatives and projects have increased the potential for cross learning and fruitful discussion at SFL meetings has also dramatically increased over time.

Despite the excellent and thorough learning histories available on the SFL website, it remains somewhat difficult to understand the challenges facing the Lab and to learn from them in a written form. At the moment, most of the learning and experience is embodied in both the secretariat, the Lab team, and colleagues associated with the Lab. The benefit of this is that the team has been undergoing action learning and members have been practicing their learning in projects and their work. One of the disadvantages of this, though, is that the focus on action learning means that when aiming for systemic change in the food system, it is difficult to explore the issue of what is systemic change and what is not, aside from the learning harvested from actually testing ideas in the field, and use the experience of the Lab to build toward this. The definition of systemic is not yet unpacked and remains ripe for further investigation.

Another disadvantage of the focus of action learning is that it is harder to share the knowledge with other actors and players or less well endowed organisations such as small farmers or community groups. There is an opportunity for the rich learning and insights from the experiments and practice

of the sustainable food lab and its members to be more widely disseminated and shared.

What is the communications strategy for the Food Lab?

The Food Lab has a website and sends a newsletter to members and followers. The website is abundantly equipped with a range of tools and documents tracking the learning of the Food Lab. From the website users can obtain case studies, short pieces that describe the work of Food Lab members to assess and improve the social or environmental performance of specific supply chains. Some of the cases come from the Healthy Value Chains Network created by the Food Lab, WWF, and the Society for Organizational Learning.

On the SFL website a document called "Innovations for healthy Value Chains: Case, Tools and Methods" is available containing a compilation of the written cases so far, followed by a draft framework of tools and structural innovations that were used in those cases.

The approach of the Food Lab, however, is to gear communications towards the needs of member organisations and the direction of the secretariat and this raises the opportunity for a wider communications strategy, to share more widely the innovative and ambitious work of the Lab.



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

“It comes down to trust and people not needing to show up as having all the answers. Food Lab members value going to a place where they can talk about food issues, whereas in organisations they are looked to for answers. In the Food Lab no one has to have answers. They 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 judgment. However the value of this is hard to measure.”

Results

What have been the results of the Lab?

The current work areas of the Food Lab cluster around three areas: poverty and market access, climate change and regional food. All these projects add up to a great deal of success in creating the necessary conditions for bringing about change in the food system. It is also useful to ask why the focus has been placed on these three areas, to what extent each of these areas are systemic projects, and whether the work of the SFL contributes to systemic change.

The emerging definition of systemic, simply put, would be a type of project that works at multiple points across the supply chain.

“The Sustainable Food Lab is now far enough along, and its members influential enough,” Hal writes, “to measure project results in large numbers: hundreds of millions of dollars, millions of acres, tens of thousands of people. These results are important but can be distracting. The world is littered with success stories with ‘measurable outputs’ that don’t add up to systemic change.” The role of the Lab, he says, is “to connect these 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.”

Peter Senge has been involved in the Food Lab since its inception. He calls it “the largest and most promising systemic change initiative I know of.” In his book *The Dance Of Change*, Peter 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.”

The Food Lab members have been good gardeners in the sense that they have nurtured growing projects and weeded out or let die the ones that were non-starters.

Since its inception in 2004 the Sustainable Food Lab has:

- 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 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.

Formal Endorsers of the Business Coalition Call to Action:

The following have formally endorsed the Business Coalition Call to Action: General Mills, SYSCO, Ahold / US Foodservice, Unilever, Jasper Wyman, Organic Valley, Laura’s Lean Beef, ForesTrade and Radlo Foods. The Call To Action (CTA) is also now under consideration by Aramark, CH Robinson, Heinz and Starbucks. Chiquita attended the London meeting to explore the possibility of joining the Coalition and potentially signing the CTA.

Aramark

- Instigated local sourcing program at 24 universities, intending to expand to 48 universities.
- Adopted Monterey Bay Aquarium “Seafood Watch” criteria for seafood procurement other than shrimp (2007).
- Created new VP for Sustainability position (to be filled in 2007).
- Launched Green Thread brand with

attributes including sustainable agriculture production, waste management, energy conservation, green buildings, sustainable facilities systems, and transportation.

Costco

- Initiated Food Lab pilot project to work collaboratively with a 5,000-member producer coop, with wholesalers and with NGOs to assess returns and supply chain relationships for sourcing in Guatemala.
- Sheri Flies shifted from Costco legal department to new sustainability management role in procurement department.
- Creating sustainable procurement standards for produce, seafood, and dairy among others in tandem with Food Lab member the World Wildlife Fund.

Ahold/US Foodservice

- Started working with suppliers to develop new sustainable procurement criteria (begun 2006).
- Developed new Code of Business Ethics and Expectations Manual for suppliers (2007).
- Launched analysis of carbon footprint in Ahold retail operations (2007).
- Asked suppliers to document their sustainability practices using Business Coalition self-assessment tool (2007).



- Created and filled new VP for Corporate Social Responsibility and Manager of Sustainability positions (2006).

General Mills

- Put in place environmental footprint analysis at General Mills processing facilities.
- Established corporate sustainability goals and performance targets.

Goals include:

Reducing energy consumption and green house gas emissions by 15% over 5 years;

- Reducing solid waste 15% by 2010;
- Reducing water use 5% by 2010;

Taking a leading General Mills brand of canned and frozen vegetables sustainable; and

Engaging NGO's and other stakeholder input through CERES membership, etc.

SYSCO

- Put in place IPM program for frozen and canned fruits and vegetables (begun in 2004) - (375,000 acres and \$700 million in revenues are involved).
- Reported the following milestones, based on SYSCO.
- extrapolations from self-reported supplier data.
- 310,000 pounds pesticides were avoided in 2005.

- 155 million pounds of material waste reused or recycled.
- Instituted social code of conduct for global procurement (2005).
- Put in place animal welfare standards for beef, pork, poultry, eggs, veal and lamb (launched in 2003).
- Began the development of sustainable seafood purchasing guidelines.
- Established goal of reducing diesel fuel and kilowatt hours by 5%.
- Financially supported staff at Association of Family Farms.

CH Robinson

- Using Call To Action (CTA) to engage both senior management and trucking managers to set sustainability targets.
- Began local sourcing pilot project in Mississippi, with five more in planning.

Heinz

- Launched global operating principles based on Sullivan Principles (UN Human Rights principles) for Heinz employees (2003).
- Implemented Corporate Supplier Guiding Principles including environmental standard, regulated via unannounced inspections and product quality standards. (Being rolled out among Heinz' 100,000 suppliers worldwide as supplier contracts are renewed).

Are the outcomes of the Lab systemic?

Whilst there is no doubt that the Sustainable Food Lab encompasses powerful members from influential organisations that now have the capacity to act together, it is not clear whether the outcomes of the Lab can be described yet as truly systemic. Is the Food Lab another case of a successful organization with successful initiatives that do not actually produce systemic change?

“If our human society is to become truly resilient and just, our core human interaction with the earth - extracting, producing, selling and buying - would be governed by social and environmental imperatives as powerful as economic ones.” Hal Hamilton

Hal Hamilton, one of the founders and co-director of the Food Lab explains that the Food Lab is not yet systemic, and he has sketched a picture 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.”

Another point of reflection remains as to who is involved in decision making in the Lab. Is it multi-stakeholder, are some sectors of the systemic issues left out? What is the role of consumers and the public? Is there an education campaign that links the activities of the SFL to the general public, or young people? It is worth considering who is included, who is represented when we think about the systemic nature of the SFL. It is worth considering the boundary judgements that have been drawn, and what parts of the system are within that boundary and what parts are left out? What other issues are less visible in the Food Lab, such as obesity or the rising price of healthy food? It is worth considering questions of power and values such as who is empowered to set the agenda, and who is not and what the wider systems are that the Food Lab operates within?

One of the important outcomes of the Food Lab is that it is on the path towards systemic change and the need for systemic, multi-stakeholder action is becoming clearer as is the fact that systemic change will not happen overnight. Hal has raised the point that ensuring that small farmers and rural laborers have an adequate standard of living requires multiple actors,

not just any one buyer or employer. Raising the quality of living requires a joint approach with partnerships to fund and implement projects and ultimately design policy solutions and the Food Lab is an excellent foundation for the process of partnering across boundaries.

Thus for Hal and his team there is a vast array of learning that is very useful in navigating 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. Sometimes environmental savings lead to economic savings. Sometimes, of course, new investments and revenues are needed to support farm infrastructure, water or soil conservation, or long-term transport alternatives and these new investments and revenues are increasingly harder to find in the current supply chain environment.

What opportunity exists for sustainable food systems?

In the current context of the huge and complex, economic, social, political and environmental challenges facing the world there is scope for the alignment of private and public interests in the pursuit of addressing such complex challenges. The opportunity is to ask questions about what a successful society is, locally, nationally and globally, and how to get there together.

For Hal “a successful society” will be a society that has 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.” There is also an opportunity to identify what is wrong with the current systems, what challenges they need to be able to meet or adapt to, and how we can get there together.

How do pilots contribute to systemic change?

Hal has raised the point that in the Lab that Sustainable Food Lab business and NGO leaders all sense a gap between the desire to ‘tip the system’ and the need to take incremental steps along the way.

Sometimes these steps can be 2 steps forward, one step backwards and the existing system remains in place.

One of the steps forward is the case study of SYSCO. Following the work of the Food Lab SYSCO Corporation, the largest mainline food service distributor in the US, has established sustainability guidelines for all of the frozen or canned fruits and vegetables it buys. The VP responsible for this program in SYSCO, Craig Watson, sometimes describes it as “not really sustainable,” referring to the long distances still to go. Nevertheless, it reduced the



application of more than 300,000 pounds of active ingredient pesticides on 375,000 acres.

There are other examples, 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 centers. These partnerships produce measurable changes to massive systems, even if we cannot concretely call it systemic change.

Even examples that we would expect to be fairly advanced in terms of sustainability, such as fair trade coffee projects, often fall short of expectations of both producers and consumers. Fortunately the need for change is inspiring actors to instigate more projects and push for higher standards in environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

For Hal, these examples demonstrate that pilot projects are growing, spreading, and creating enough learning so the companies can take the next steps on their individual and common paths toward sustainability, yet he has reservations as to whether this adds up to systemic change.

Is this systemic change? Or perhaps the question is, what would systemic change of

the food system look like? In each of the above examples of new initiatives Hal has noted there is an internal leader who is capable and committed to the actual projects whilst at the same time identifying what more needs to be done to reach ambitious goals for change. Perhaps through the work of food lab we are seeing the foundations laid and the seeds sown for systemic change, the relationships are being built, the partnerships forming and the need to act for change is spreading and shared across unlikely allies. The field appears ripe for further investigation as to what systemic change in the food system could look like, as is further exploration of the many paths to get there. A key learning is however, that cross sectoral partnerships have been created via the food lab and are making changes, and breaking new ground on the difficult and occasionally uphill struggle towards sustainable food systems, both locally and globally.



Acknowledgements and Further Reading

With thanks and appreciation to Hal Hamilton, Adam Kahane and LeAnne Grillo for their helpful comments and insightful conversation.

For copies of the Learning History by Susan Sweitzer see

<http://www.sustainablefoodlab.org/>

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

JoAnne Berkenkamp
External Evaluator
April 3, 2007 1-30

Books and articles

"The Dance of Change: The Challenge to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations" Peter M. Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, and George Roth (1999)

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