



# The Future of Food Systems Collaboration

A concept note for a post-summit partnership initiative on how multi-stakeholder collaboration can accelerate food systems transformation.

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Part I: MSCFSC to achieve transformational change .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Rationale .....	2
Inherent limitations of Business As Usual .....	3
What is multi-stakeholder collaboration for systemic change? .....	3
<b>Part II: Towards a post-summit initiative on the Future of Food Systems Collaboration .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Process .....	6
Founding Partners .....	7
Annex I: Members of the co-inquiry group .....	8
Annex II: Members of the working group to co-create the initiative .....	9
Annex III: Mapping of MSCFSC services/offers by partner .....	9



## 0. Introduction

In September 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres will convene a Food Systems Summit as part of the Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The lead up to the UN Food Systems Summit constitutes a unique opportunity to initiate a joint reflection among leading institutions on what is needed for systems change to happen going forward, build momentum, and prepare a post-summit partnership initiative that supports summit outcomes and accelerates a new future for food systems collaboration.

The response to COVID-19 cannot be a return the status quo – the “new normal” will require deep systemic change and the development sector will need to be willing and able to change itself. Empowering people to lead transformational change within themselves, their organisations, and the system around them to build a future we all want to live in.

Section 1 of this note highlights challenges we face as a global community trying to make change. New ways of thinking are needed for systemic change to happen. The conversation on what kind of change needs to happen, often based in technical solutions, needs to be complemented by a reflection on the issue of *how changes happen*. We capture *the how* under the concept of Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Systemic Change (MSCFSC).

In section 2, the concept note proposes a process over the next 9 months to anchor the topic and develop a post-summit initiative on the Future of Food Systems Collaboration.

## 1. MSCFSC to achieve transformational change

### 1.1. Rationale

The global community of food system practitioners purport to know what needs to be done: the solutions. But these solutions are rarely adopted, even more rarely scaled up, and more importantly, have not so far transformed food systems to resolve hunger, reduce diet-related disease and heal the planet. Instead, the planet continues on an unsustainable trajectory towards environmental degradation and entrenched farmer poverty. Which leads to the question: are these really the solutions? Solutions are intended to fix problems. In 2019 and 2020 multiple high-level reports came out advocating pathways and solutions such as more sustainable agriculture practices, a reduction in food loss and waste, more inclusive and productive livelihoods for farmers, healthier and more nutritious diets, etc. But to see these pathways and solutions change how global food systems function, we need to go deeper into the why and the how, and not only focus on the what. Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions and reaching incorrect or incomplete solutions, or perhaps we have the right solutions but lack the collaborative and leadership skills to put them into action. Questions central for the summit and the broader global food systems community should be:

- Why aren't food systems changing for the better?
- Why are widely-acknowledged technical and political solutions rarely adopted and scaled up?
- What do we need to do differently with decision-makers from Ministers to farmers to consumers?

How do we change diet? How do policies get changed? How do farmers change practices? What motivations and incentives drive stakeholder's behavior? We know it is not just about communication campaigns, policy recommendations and farmer training. It is much more complex than that. Current theories of change embedded in our project interventions have often failed to deliver the change that billions of dollars in technical assistance are budgeted to achieve. If we are to enable change, we must become more innovative in thinking about how systemic change happens and dive into better methodologies and approaches to make real change happen and stick.

Systemic change involves working with complexity to help people see the whole system, to recognize their agency within it and the opportunities to contribute to positive change through collaborative and innovative processes. Ultimately, systems-level transformation will also require structural changes and broader shifts in mindsets and practice to become a reality.

The UN Food Systems Summit is a unique opportunity to advance an inclusive reflection by all who care about this on what is needed to drive real long-term change.

## 1.2. Inherent limitations of Business As Usual

Problems related to achieving sustainability in food systems are complex problems that are highly challenging to deal with, situated within contentious eco-political contexts and systems and lacking clear solutions. They cannot be solved by one person or one institution.

Current approaches to improve food systems sustainability tend to brush over this complexity. Predictive project design and implementation often ignore relevant risks, emergent dynamics of human collaboration, future trends, or build upon common assumptions which do not appropriately reflect the complexities of food systems.

There is a continuous over-emphasis on ex-ante predefinition of expected end results; of imagined "pathways" full of assumptions (as if development experts can predict what reactions all stakeholders will have to change or if we can determine how entire systems will react to different stimuli as if we can predict unexpected events). Covid-19 has shown the world our need to embrace uncertainty and our limited ability to predict anything or that we can pre-determine the way systems change due to interventions.

### **Common assumptions or risks ignored by predictive project design and implementation:**

- Government project counterparts may include officials unwilling to support project objectives. Or one ministry supports and a more powerful one does not
- Companies are also often cautious on committing to project objectives
- There are assumptions on linear correlations such as between training and adoption of standards by farmers
- Assumptions about dialogue leading to common understanding and conflict transformation
- Assumption that the simple creation of multi-stakeholder platforms means that you are being inclusive
- Assumptions about the sufficiency of available budget to achieve results

The result of not appropriately addressing the complexity of food systems in the way projects are conceived, designed and implemented increases the risk of project failure, or at least limits their ability to tackle underlying structural problems. In 2019 the Stockholm Environment Institute organized a workshop called “Hard Truths” which specifically delved into the complexity of supply chain problems and revealed a multitude of limitations we encounter as a development community in confronting them, reinforcing the problem with assumptions and uncovering wider risks we don’t know how to tackle.

### **‘Hard truths’ in food and agricultural systems<sup>1</sup>:**

1. Few consumers are willing to pay the price premium necessary to support more sustainable production practices.
2. Farm-to-fork traceability is expensive or practically impossible for some commodities.
3. Shifts in global markets often mean that the share of commodities traded by actors with strong sustainability commitments is decreasing.
4. The consolidation of the food supply chain by the retail sector can help to solve food security issues but is also contributing to a negative nutrition transition, as well as to greater economic and social segregation within societies.
5. Companies more transparent about their supply chains are more exposed to risks to their brand.
6. Blanket boycotts undermine efforts to improve production practices.
7. Without legislation for minimum agricultural production standards there is no business case for sustainability.
8. Reductions in meat and dairy consumption are only possible through taxation, which is politically difficult.
9. Consumer activism for sustainably produced goods is limited by existing options.
10. If buyers are unwilling to make long-term sourcing commitments, adopting sustainable production standards is unacceptable for producers.
11. Market incentives are mostly sticks and not carrots for producers and the cost of sustainability is mostly passed on to producers, which then pass it on to the environment.
12. Sustainable consumption based on a western meat- and dairy-rich diet is not viable worldwide.

Facing these hard truths, and engaging in how to confront them, is often not done. They are impossible to solve by one actor alone, and even to begin thinking about them puts people off trying. We have to think together as individuals and organizations within the system to be able to approach solving them.

This is why we believe part of the solution and change needed is to shift the emphasis and balance of technical assistance from technical analysis, planning and solutions at a project level and more towards multi-stakeholder collaboration in the context of system change (MSCFSC).

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Stockholm Environment Institute.

### 1.3. What is multi-stakeholder collaboration for systemic change?

Multi-stakeholder collaboration for systemic change (MSCFSC) is a process of participatory governance that enables stakeholders with common sustainability problems and distinct interests to align and collectively learn, innovate, and act upon a complex and changing environment. It can facilitate transformational change and can build on the disruption caused by COVID-19 to help identify and create innovative unimagined possibilities and futures. All the actors in the food system – from smallholder farmers to processors, investors, governments, traders, manufacturers, brands, retailers, and consumers commit (through global and local commitment platforms) – can be actively involved and collaborate. Special attention should be given to the engagement of vulnerable communities.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration is about more than just bringing different stakeholders to the table. It is a process of interactive learning, empowerment, and participatory governance. It's about understanding the mental models underlying current practices, facing hard truths, addressing systemic power imbalances, breaking down silos, and identifying champions and influencers that can lead systemic change at country and global levels and working to empower them to do so. The more diversity we can get into the room, the more the ideas flow.

UNDP's Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems (FACS) team has been strengthening its approaches and methodologies for collaboration on systems change in recognition that many stakeholders have been excluded from having a meaningful role in determining and shaping their future and the way collaboration was designed and facilitated, thus inhibiting systemic level change from happening. However, challenges remain since there is not enough attention, time and resources given in most development projects to *how* collaborative processes and systems change initiatives are done. Planning for *Beyond Recovery* provides the opportunity to develop MSCFSC in a meaningful and impactful way. This requires three levels of attention: on the individual, the community and the system.

1. Engage hearts and minds at the individual level by:
  - Leading by example
  - Introducing different elements of consciousness, mindfulness and awareness
  - Diving into barriers, assumptions, mental models (beliefs, values) and staying with them
  - Working from what is with experienced guides / expert facilitators
2. Co-create at the community level by:
  - Working in true partnership
  - Building trusted relationships (connection, listening)
  - Engaging whole-system groups in innovative ways of collaborating
3. Embrace complexity at the system level by:
  - Working iteratively and adaptively - letting go of predefined outcomes
  - Challenging the status quo
  - Prioritizing work with requisite resources and actors' willingness to change
  - Surfacing power dynamics, lobbying, private interests, corruption in a system

Systems thinking is complex. Most of us (humans) are educated and trained to think linearly, so we have to learn to think like a system – and one way is experientially, by working as a system. MSCFSC enables individuals who feel challenged by the requirement to be a systems thinker to achieve the same effect by working together as a system.

Applying an MSCFSC approach requires a set of skills, including the ability to embrace conflict & connection in complex and stuck situations. There is much expertise in this field but until now it is rarely integrated with sustainable development and FACS efforts. Techniques for more effective stakeholder collaboration which embrace cultural sensitivity, unpack hidden agendas and employ skills to learn and reframe while in action and guided by the ability to facilitate trusted relationships are essential for the change we aspire to achieve. One good example is the approach called Stretch Collaboration pioneered by Reos Partners (see figure below). Just changing the way we work with these three practices could revolutionize how we connect with and influence decision makers, from Ministers to farmers to consumers.

	CONVENTIONAL COLLABORATION	STRETCH COLLABORATION
How we relate with our collaborators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the good and the harmony of the team (one superior whole)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Embrace conflict and connection (multiple diverse holons)</li> </ul>
How we advance our work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agree on the problem and solution (one optimum plan)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiment our way forward (multiple emergent possibilities)</li> </ul>
How we participate in our situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Change what other people are doing (one paramount leader)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Step into the game (multiple co-creators)</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Stretch collaboration (@ ReosPartners)

In summer 2020, UNDP facilitated a **co-inquiry process** with leading food, agriculture and systems specialists<sup>2</sup> to identify ways to do systems transformation in food and agriculture. Key insights resulting from this process that are highly relevant for the UN Food Systems Summit agenda and the co-creation of this partnership include:

- 1 Systemic approaches require more flexibility and room for adaptation than current practices, especially donor requirements, allow.
- 2 Systemic change is actively resisted in the field, as are systemic approaches, for a variety of reasons including misunderstanding, power dynamics, and self-interest.
- 3 At the same time, there is an opening to strengthen field-wide capacity for systemic approaches to change, and to drive a deeper level of “systems intelligence” throughout the field.
- 4 There are current examples of small- and large-scale systemic approaches that work; we can learn from them and leverage their success to drive scaled adoption of systemic approaches.
- 5 There is still a need to provide further proof for the efficacy of systemic approaches and that they meet a broad range of stakeholder requirements.

<sup>2</sup> See Annex 1 for a list of members of Phase I of the Co-Inquiry Group.

- 6 Greater inclusion of stakeholders from across the system strengthens systemic change but often doesn't happen for various reasons including self-interest, lack of reflection, systemic power imbalances and varied understandings of what it means to be "inclusive," e.g. including marginalized sectors; including champions and influencers; broadening our understanding of who champions change; breaking down silos; including the unusuals like tech, finance and insurance people; and attending to power relationships.
- 7 Shared vision can be a strength or a hindrance; too often vision is created by a small group, often with more systemic power; this makes it harder for everyone in the system to play a part. Consider having a wide vision or north star, that makes enough room for all to find their role and place.
- 8 Shared mental models can be a strength or a hindrance; finding the balance of shared and diverse mental models, and managing the tension between them is a core skill for successful systemic change.
- 9 The sustainable development profession itself creates a limiting condition regarding systems change, insofar as professionals are attached to particular paradigms and ways of working and are not individually or collectively self-reflective about those attachments and assumptions.
- 10 Paying attention to a process that invites people to engage with heart, mind and soul, with the intention to have a true understanding of others, by deeply listening, guarding against assumptions, checking egos and letting go of knowing. This needs to be supported by professional facilitation and the development of more trusting relationships.

## 2. Towards a post-summit initiative on the Future of Food Systems Collaboration (FFSC)

### 2.1. Process

As mentioned, achieving progress on the SDG agenda requires a departure from traditional top-down, hierarchical, and linear approaches to implementing change. Transforming food systems requires innovative and adaptive approaches that engage broad networks of diverse stakeholders to advance progress towards a shared understanding of the levers of change and transformation in a system and agree on key actions to work on collaboratively to advance towards systemic change.

In 2020, UNDP and FAO agreed – as part of a broader partnership agreement to work jointly and with UNE (via the One Planet Network Sustainable Food Systems Programme<sup>3</sup>) – on the development and application of a 'ladder of change' tool that starts putting these ideas into practice. Pilot interventions are underway in Brazil and Uganda on promoting sustainable food consumption and production patterns through that and other integrated tools, advocacy and multi-stakeholder action.

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<sup>3</sup> The Sustainable Food Systems (SFS) Programme is a multi-stakeholder partnership (under the One Planet Network) focused on catalyzing more sustainable food consumption and production patterns.

<https://www.oneplanetnetwork.org/sustainable-food-system>



Building on this emerging work (and a Phase II of the co-inquiry process scheduled to start in January 2021), UNDP, FAO, UNE, the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Norwegian Foundation EAT<sup>4</sup> have convened with the aim of developing a post-summit partnership initiative that aims to support summit outcomes and accelerate a new future for food systems collaboration.

We propose to use the lead-up towards the UN Food Systems Summit to start discussing the above-mentioned limitations of business-as-usual approaches and create momentum for a new initiative that can support transformational change in the post-summit context.

The following three phase process is proposed:

1. Consolidate **conceptual input** (see section 1) among founding partners and share it with the chairs of the action tracks, the UN Task Force, and teams leading the organization of country-level food systems dialogues.
2. Establish a small **working group** composed of founding partners involved in the Summit and possibly as an activity within the innovation lever of change to develop a post-summit partnership initiative focused on the “Future of Food Systems Collaboration”. In December 2020 a working group<sup>5</sup> – comprised of staff from each of the initial founding partner organizations – was formed to co-create the initiative. The working group has regularly scheduled meetings and is guided by an advisory group comprised of principals from each of the partner organizations.
3. Reach out to potentially interested donors/partners to present the initiative, **secure funding and prepare public launch** of the initiative during the Summit.

## 2.2. Founding Partners

This initiative has been initiated by UNEP, FAO and UNDP. The World Economic Forum and EAT have joined as founding partners. Other organizations are invited to join.




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<sup>4</sup> EAT is a non-profit dedicated to transforming our global food system through sound science, impatient disruption and novel partnerships.

<sup>5</sup> See Annex 2 for a list of the working group members

## Annex 1:

### Members of the co-inquiry group

Name	Organization
Aileen Lee	Moore Foundation
Aleksandra Atallah	UNDP Green Commodities Programme
Andreas Brede	GIZ, Germany
Andrew Bovarnick	UNDP GCP
Anna Leong	Leadership Coefficient
Benjamin Kumpf	Department for International Development, United Kingdom
Bjorn Rask	Thomsen Ex Denofa
Charlene Collison	Forum for the Future
Christian Robin	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO, Switzerland
Costanza Rizzo	FAO
Darcy Winslow	Academy of System Change
Gina Lucarelli	UNDP Accelerator Labs
Giulio Quaggiotto	UNDP Innovation Centre
Guadalupe Duron	GEF Scientific Technical Advisory Panel
Gustavo Setrini	UNDP Accelerator Labs
Hal Hamilton	Sustainable Food Lab
Heather Pfahl	Mars
Herman Brouwer	Wageningen University
James Lomax	UN Environment
Jamie Thorn	Starbucks
Jane Nelson	Harvard Kennedy School
Jane Weber	Leadership Coefficient
Jason Clay	WWF
Kathleen Wood	UNDP Green Commodities Programme
Laura Barneby	Unilever
Laurie Newell	UN DCO
Leif Pedersen	UNDP Green Commodities Programme
Lex Hovani	The Nature Conservancy
Malika Virah-Sawmy	Humboldt University, Berlin
Mara Beez	GIZ
Matias Ferreira	UNDP Green Commodities Programme
Nicolas Petit	UNDP Green Commodities Programme
Patrick Mallet	ISEAL
Peter Stanbury	Innovation Forum
Ravenna Nuaimy-Barker	Reos Partners
Richard Margoluis	Moore Foundation
Russ Gaskin	We Are Co-Creative
Sally Smith	Upfield
Sandra Andraka	UNDP Green Commodities Programme
Sara Scherr	EcoAgriculture Partners

<b>Sheila Senathirajah</b>	ISEAL
<b>Silvan Hungerbühler</b>	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO, Switzerland
<b>Siobhan Kelly</b>	FAO
<b>Tania Strauss</b>	World Economic Forum

Facilitated by Lise Melvin and Charlie O'Malley, UNDP Green Commodities Programme.

## Annex 2:

### Members of the working group to co-create the initiative (as of Jan. 2021)

Organization	Name	E-mail contact
UNDP	Lucas Black (primary) (he/him)	<a href="mailto:lucas.black@undp.org">lucas.black@undp.org</a>
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UNE	Marina Bortoletti (she/her)	<a href="mailto:marina.bortoletti@un.org">marina.bortoletti@un.org</a>
EAT and Cambridge University	Dr. Nazia M. Habib (she/her)	<a href="mailto:nazia.research@gmail.com">nazia.research@gmail.com</a>

## Annex 3:

### Mapping of MSCFSC services/offers by partner (to come)