

# HOW WE CAN WORK MORE SYSTEMICALLY TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS TOWARD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM

A CO-INQUIRY PROCESS.

Convened by the UNDP Green Commodities  
Programme, June-July 2020

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**GREEN  
COMMODITIES  
PROGRAMME**



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to Lucinda Garthwaite for giving her time and invaluable support to record and report on all of the sessions.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Many are talking the language of systems change, but few seem to have mastered the practice.

In the UNDP Green Commodities Programme we have been working for the past decade to catalyse systemic change in agricultural commodity production working across a number of countries in Central and South America, Africa and Asia. We have developed ways of facilitating collaboration between multiple stakeholders to build collective understanding of what change is needed and how to make it happen. We facilitate the co-creation of shared visions and action plans – at national and sub-national levels – to strengthen the enabling conditions for more sustainable agricultural production.

While much has been achieved over this period, we have also struggled to be as effective as we would like given the constraints of:

- Funding that requires project interventions to be designed in detail before projects have been launched and that leave limited room for adaptation through the process as we learn what works and what doesn't.
- Institutional practices which also encourage more linear and predictable ways of working, rather than approaches that are more iterative and adaptive.

- Human capacity issues, in that many people can find it challenging to facilitate and stick with change processes that are, by definition, complex and unpredictable.

We recognise that these “constraints” are also simply a reflection of the way the world is and cannot be magically wished away.

However, we also see that the experience of COVID-19 may create opportunities for more cutting-edge approaches for how we facilitate transformational change.

UNDP convened this co-inquiry with a small number of partners and allies who we believe have a good understanding of what it means to work systemically through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

**'I learned that the system is more and more complex, as we continue to find so much activity going on out there; broadening my understanding and networks have been very helpful.'**

– Tania Straus, Head of Strategy and Global Projects, Food Systems Initiative, World Economic Forum.



## CO-INQUIRY PROCESS

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FULL GROUP - June 1

What's the "secret sauce" for working more effectively on whole systems change in sustainable food and agricultural production?

GROUP A / GROUP B - June 16

What gets in the way of more effective multi-stakeholder collaboration to catalyse systems change?

GROUP A / GROUP B - June 29

As international agents of change, how can we work more systemically, even within current limiting conditions?

FULL GROUP - July 16

How can we change the constraints for systemic ways of working in the longer term?

After each session, participants were provided with a synthesis of key themes and insights from each session. This report summarizes those insights, as well as the synthesis of participants' proposals for activity to continue progress on applying a systems approach to accelerate progress toward a more sustainable global food system.

**'I really appreciate that this process acknowledged that none of us have the answers, it's an openminded inquiry, where nothing is ruled out.'**

- Bjorn Rask Thomsen, former CEO of Denofa.



## KEY INSIGHTS

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- 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.
- 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 and influencers are; breaking down silos; including the unusualls 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.

**'I now recognise the need to leave preconceived notions at the door and enter into discussions fully, open to collaboration and compromise.'**

Laura Barneby - Senior Global Advocacy and Partnerships Manager. Sustainable Agriculture and Nutrition, Unilever



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

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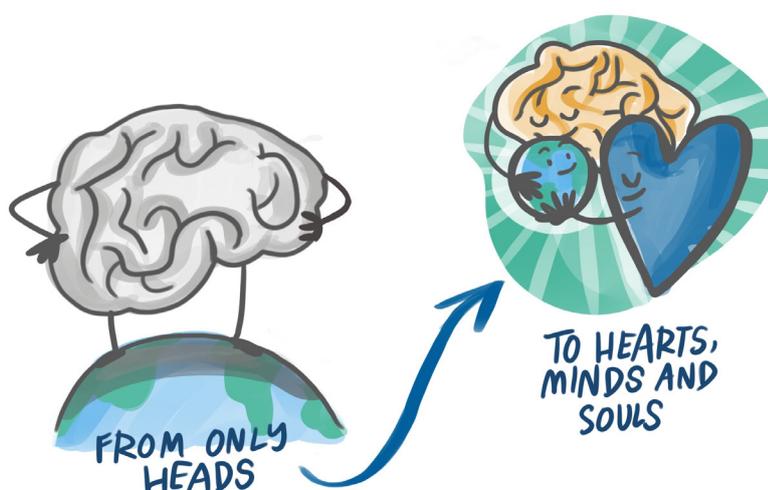
Five key areas emerged as having the most energy for members of the co-inquiry group. A live poll in the final session asked participants to pick one preferred topic. The top two were:

- Case clinics: how to apply systems change in practice in the field?
- How to support the emergence of systems leadership in the field?

We will investigate further whether there is sufficient interest in the following:

- How to measure the impact of systems change approaches?
- What are the enablers and scale factors from positive experiences of systems change?
- How can we identify, engage and uplift change agents, local to global?

A second cycle of inquiry will run in the fall / autumn, and will be designed to take into account feedback and suggestions received from members of this group.





# THE 'SECRET SAUCE' FOR WORKING MORE EFFECTIVELY ON WHOLE SYSTEMS CHANGE

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<b>Adaptation and emergence</b>	The ability to adapt plans, actions, processes and objectives based on new learning or changing circumstances; learning and reframing while in action.
<b>Diversity</b>	Ensuring that all system stakeholders are at the table; culturally integrated and sensitive approaches; relevance to all stakeholders; allowing for the inclusion of different experience, motivations and mental models.
<b>Deep understanding of other</b>	Listening to understand; guarding against assumptions; checking egos and letting go of knowing.
<b>Whole human experience</b>	Paying attention to and inviting engaged "heads, hearts and minds" into the work; and facilitating trusting relationships.
<b>Well-managed power dynamics</b>	Being well-informed about power and political dynamics; neutralize determination to maintain status quo; ensure voice and agency for all stakeholders in process, decision and action.
<b>Process-management</b>	Well-facilitated dialogue; capacity to hold tensions; strong project management; inclusive, shared leadership/agency; clear roles and accountability.



# THE 'SECRET SAUCE' FOR WORKING MORE EFFECTIVELY ON WHOLE SYSTEMS CHANGE

<b>Shared wide vision</b>	Shared investment in change; value proposition for all actors; something decision-makers can believe in; deep alignment, not only a shared vision statement.
<b>Systems intelligence</b>	Strong systems change practice; deep collective sensing of the system including the social-ecological context; reflection on relations in the system.
<b>The right people</b>	Powerful, empowered and influential people; minorities and marginalised groups; all stakeholders represented; create a strong core committed group.
<b>Well-managed tensions</b>	For example: global experience vs local realities; demand vs production; desire for quick wins vs long term systemic change; shared mental models vs diverse perspectives.



# LIMITING CONDITIONS

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Limiting conditions	
<b>Donor requirements and approaches</b>	Project design and reporting approaches that constrain options for action and timelines in the field. E.g. predetermined impact and outcome indicators, log frames.
<b>Limitations in the development field</b>	Limitations in the behavior, worldview, and structures of the professional field of sustainable development. E.g. outdated operating procedures, low appetite for taking risk, learnings not feeding back into the system, conflict avoided.
<b>Motivation</b>	Why actors do what they do; the challenges of effectively convincing actors to engage in systems change; often requires individual new insights and personal transformation.
<b>Power, ego and exclusion</b>	Who is at the table, who gets more attention and resources, and relative power and access to power.
<b>Resistance</b>	Actors resist or obstruct a systems change approach.
<b>Silos, conflicting interests and disconnection</b>	Actors operate separately from each other, often at cross-purposes.
<b>Tensions related to timelines</b>	Conflicts and tensions about when things need to get done, a sense of urgency or impatience versus the reality of time to change.



# ACTIONS TO TAKE DESPITE LIMITING CONDITIONS

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Actions to take	
<b>Co-create from the start</b>	Develop initial strategy with a diverse and inclusive group pre project proposal or donor contract, especially people not often included, or not thought of as relevant or connected.
<b>Expand access, understanding and inclusion</b>	Focus on developing and tapping into the collective intelligence of a more diverse group, not just sectors, but cultural norms, values, knowledge and class. Create processes that remind actors there is more than one "truth".
<b>Grow systems leadership capacity</b>	Patiently focus on growing a subset of systems leaders now, to build critical mass of systems leadership capacity. Build self-awareness in ourselves and others. Develop specific systems leadership tools and skills.
<b>Learn, and adapt based on learning</b>	Reflect on successes, failures, root causes, bright spots, drivers for change. Share learning: share success stories, create distributed learning opportunities. Adapt to new learning: change our own behavior, tailor plans and actions to what we see.
<b>Sharpen clarity and understanding of systemic forces</b>	Develop clarity about what the system is designed to do now, what it will result in, and for whom. Be clear and honest about "gives and gets," clarify meanings. Reflect on and integrate understanding of the politics of evidence, knowledge, colonial legacies, white supremacy, oppression of women, neocolonialism.
<b>Take small, doable steps</b>	Take on "bite sized chunks" of change and small steps toward vision; focus efforts on people you know are open to doing things differently, understanding and shifting to a systemic approach; don't waste time on active resisters early on.



# ACTIONS TO MITIGATE LIMITING CONDITIONS

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Limiting conditions	Suggested mitigating actions
<b>Donor requirements and approaches</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showcase examples of new approaches to funding design and monitoring impact;</li> <li>• Pilot/highlight models of multi-actor system change and experience/evidence of coalition funding;</li> <li>• Create donor collaboratives;</li> <li>• Support donor innovation;</li> <li>• Experiment with different ways of meeting accountability requirements within their own constraints.</li> </ul>
<b>Paradigms and mental models</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make mental models/assumptions visible to all;</li> <li>• Consider cultural enablers and disablers, as well as tangible self-interest;</li> <li>• Create and continue learning communities for practitioners;</li> <li>• Develop/make visible data on what's effective in terms of system change approaches.</li> </ul>
<b>Power, ego, and exclusion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help others to become aware of their own (perceptions of) power;</li> <li>• Create immersion experiences where power dynamics are less important;</li> <li>• Map and analyze power dynamics and developing indicator and monitoring systems to measure.</li> </ul>
<b>Outdated operating procedures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upfront co-design;</li> <li>• Develop true social contract among actors to reach goals and coordinate work;</li> <li>• Build trust;</li> <li>• Agree on the goal (clear vision), but allow flexibility in the "how";</li> <li>• Focus on progress and an iterative approach that allows for change;</li> <li>• Don't over-rely on quantitative results.</li> </ul>
<b>Politics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investing in high level champion(s) in government plus other influencers;</li> <li>• Get other political / government leaders to make the case for this kind of work;</li> <li>• Make detailed and honest cases for change that match the needs of the stakeholders;</li> <li>• Allow a portfolio of initiatives rather than a single solution.</li> </ul>



## FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

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### Summary of participant interest going forward

Members of the Co-Inquiry Group requested collective input into a list of approaches and tools for multi-stakeholder collaboration and systems change. See Annex A for this resource.

#### Interests that emerged from discussion

- Bringing in more voices – producers, unusuals, and more.
- Experimentation
- Build collective understanding of systems approach
- Develop systems leadership
- Develop strong theory of change/supporting data for systems approach
- Sustain systems practice
- Maintain connection with this group
- Outliers (one or two mentions)
  - Explicitly address pandemic and social equity
  - Interventions to build communications skills
  - Understand systemic approaches in other systems beside food systems

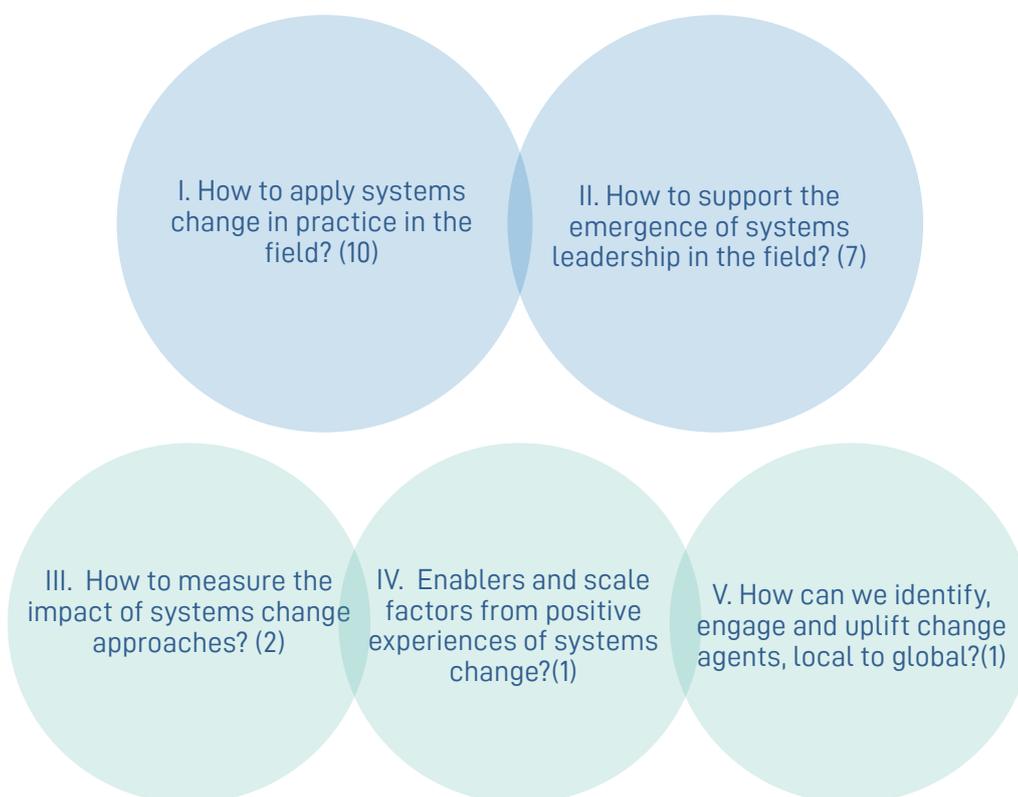


# FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

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## Ranked choices: topics for future inquiry

Five key areas emerged as having the most energy for members of the co-inquiry group. A live poll in the final session asked participants to pick one preferred topic. The top two were:



A second cycle of inquiry will run in the fall / autumn, and will be designed to take into account feedback and suggestions received from members of this group.

If you would like to learn more about this work please get in touch with us: [lise.melvin@undp.org](mailto:lise.melvin@undp.org)



## ANNEX A: Tools, Processes and Reports on Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Systemic Change

- How Change Happens, A book by Duncan Green, <http://how-change-happens.com/>
- Deep Democracy Institute, <https://www.deepdemocracyinstitute.org/>
- Systems change: A guide to what it is and how to do it <https://www.thinknpc.org>

### Multi-stakeholder Collaboration

- How to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships (Wageningen University) [Tools and methods for effective Multistakeholder Partnership](#)
- An open access toolkit offering Arts-Based Methods for Transformative Engagement <https://www.sustainableplaceshaping.net>
- Multi-stakeholder dialogue for transformational change. A GEF Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel Guidance Note: <https://www.stapgef.org>

### Tools and Process for Systemic Approaches

- [Presencing Institute](#)
- [Social Labs](#)
- [The Social Labs Revolution](#)
- [Nesta.org](#) - Range of guides and practical tools
- [Donellameadows.org](#) - Concepts and Frameworks
- Wayfinder: [A Resilience Guide For Navigating Towards Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Kumu](#) - Platform for Mapping
- [ideo](#) - Field Guide teaching tools of human-centered design with the social sector



## ANNEX A: Tools, Processes and Reports on Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Systems Change

- [Reos Partners](#) - Transformative Scenario Planning
- [Reos Partners](#) - Stretch Collaboration
- Worldwork from [Process Work](#).

### Systems Learning

- The Systems Thinking Playbook for Climate Change - [A toolkit for interactive learning](#)

### Systems Leadership

- [Three Principles of Systems Leadership](#) from the Leadership Co-Efficient
- Leadership: [The Dawn of System Leadership](#) By Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton, & John Kania
- Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development: [Strategies for Achieving Systemic Change](#)
- [An introduction to the concept, case studies, skills and learning journeys that support Systems Leadership](#)

### Project Design and Funding

- [Designing Projects in a Rapidly Changing World: Guidelines for embedding resilience, adaptation and transformation into sustainable development projects](#) (Version 1.0), A STAP Advisory Document.
- Resilience, Adaptation Pathways and Transformation Approach. [A guide for designing, implementing and assessing interventions for sustainable futures](#) (version 2), CSIRO.
- [Theory of Change Primer](#).
- Embracing complexity: [Towards a shared understanding of funding systems change](#).



## ANNEX B: Co-Inquiry Group Members

Name	Organisation
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



## ANNEX B: Co-Inquiry Group Members

Name	Organisation
Jane Nelson	Harvard Kennedy School
Jane Weber	Leadership Coefficient
Jason Clay	WWF
Kahtleen 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
Sheila Senathirajah	ISEAL
Silvan Hungerbühler	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO, Switzerland
Siobhan Kelly	FAO
Tania Strauss	World Economic Forum

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Recording and reporting by Lucinda Garthwaite, The Institute for Liberatory Innovation.



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