



The Sustainable Food Lab

Growing Mainstream Sustainable Food Chains

“The Sustainable Food Lab is the largest and most promising systemic change initiative I know of”

Peter Senge



THE PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

Issue: Food & Sustainability
Geography: Global
Duration: 2004-present
Co-Convenors: Unilever, The Society for Organizational Learning (SOL), The Kellogg Foundation, and Hal Hamilton

Impacts: Global and local initiatives to address a wide range of social and environmental sustainability--related challenges in global food systems, including: Climate impact assessment and mitigation; more even risk/reward distribution; commitments to phase in sustainable supply chains; and new metrics for sustainability in agriculture.



HUMAN
CAPITAL



SOCIAL
CAPITAL



INTELLECTUAL
CAPITAL



The Sustainable Food Lab

Growing Mainstream Sustainable Food Chains

In 2004, a group of leaders and pioneers from multi-national food companies, global and local NGOs, farmers' associations, and government agencies were invited to experience a new way of learning and working together. This initiative was called the Sustainable Food Lab (SFL), reflecting the intention to create a laboratory for an experimental form of collaboration and innovation. The SFL was the first large-scale, multi-stakeholder, global Change Lab. The aim of the SFL was to bring corporations, NGOs, and governments together to accelerate the incorporation of environmental, economic, and social sustainability into the DNA of the mainstream food and agricultural system.

The Context

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

Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, p. 352

The challenge of the Sustainable Food Lab is to create a more sustainable food system where:

“The fertility of our soil is maintained and improved; the availability and quality of water are protected and enhanced; our biodiversity is protected; farmers, farm workers, and all other actors in value chains have livable incomes; the food we eat is affordable and promotes our health; sustainable businesses can thrive; and the flow of energy and the discharge of waste, including greenhouse gas emissions, are within the capacity of the earth to absorb forever.”

From the SFL Website: sustainablefoodlab.org



Moving the global food system toward sustainability is a big and difficult task because it requires a shift in an interrelated network of institutions and relationships entrenched in complex social, political, and ecological systems.

The SFL was born out of the work of several actors. These included Peter Senge from the Society for Organizational Learning, Oran Hesterman from the Kellogg Foundation, and Jan-Kees Vis from Unilever. It grew from the vision and experience of Hal Hamilton and Adam Kahane, leaders in the fields of food systems change and multi-stakeholder systems change respectively.

The SFL began by applying the Change Lab – an innovative methodology for multi-stakeholder systemic change – with a diverse group of key professionals and individuals linked to the global food system. Together they identified the potential for innovative, cross-sectoral collaboration to transform the system. Over the years, the SFL has evolved from this idea into a large ongoing programme, involving a wide variety of influential international stakeholders and leaders from across the food system.

Larry Pulliam, executive vice president of SYSCO, said about the diverse and unique composition of the Lab:

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

One of the conditions for the successful launch of the SFL was the alchemy and the diversity of the people being convened. These people came from various backgrounds and countries, from the Netherlands to Brazil, from organisations such as Consumers International and Brazilian farmer organisations to large food corporations such as SYSCO, Unilever, and Carrefour.

For a complete list of current participants and organisations involved in the Sustainable Food Lab, see: sustainablefood.org/membership/membership-directory



The Process

To begin the project, the facilitation and design team conducted deep dialogue interviews that not only identified the participants in the Lab, but also helped to construct a clearer understanding of the global food system and the systemic challenges it faces. The interviews identified several complex systemic issues that helped define the scope of the Lab. At the end of this process, the SFL comprised 32 stakeholder leaders from the business, government, and nonprofit sectors from three continents. The Lab team went on to undertake the three phases of the Change Lab from 2004 to 2006.

“[The Sustainable Food Lab is] the largest and most promising systemic change initiative I know of.”

Peter Senge

The members of the Lab then undertook an ongoing and integrated series of action learning activities — learning by doing — that transcended and cut across the barriers between stakeholders from different organisations and sectors who do not normally collaborate. In this case, the participant groups got out of the meeting room and viscerally experienced the system they desired to shift through learning

journeys, retreats, innovation workshops, initiative prototyping design studios, and other hands-on activities. Out of this process, pilot projects were designed to leverage the resources and expertise of the diverse team members. These projects were launched with the intent to impact crucial nodes in the value chain of the global food system, focusing on issues such as farmer livelihoods and ethical sourcing policies. These pilots were designed so that people from the collaborating organizations would learn from their activities on an ongoing basis and evolve their work according to their learning.

Results

The SFL’s initiatives, from those developed early in the Lab to those that are continuing and emerging today, target critical systemic leverage points within the global food system that, as they are acted upon, can shift the system towards greater sustainability. The initial strategies and initiatives generated in the Lab focused on changing certification standards to influence production practices, reorganising supply chains and improving market access to better the livelihoods of small producers, and reframing the public discourse about food to increase the demand for sustainable products.



Some of these initial projects have been completed or have reached a logical stopping point. Others, such as the Business Coalition (a partnership of food-related companies formed to identify best practices and to improve the social, environmental, and financial performance of supply chains), were “composted,” or disbanded, in order to support other initiatives, such as the development of healthy value chains and the creation and dissemination of best practices for sustainable fisheries.

One longstanding project, the Sustainable Livelihoods Initiative, which focuses on improving the competitiveness and sustainability of small-scale farming systems, continues to identify and address important barriers to small-scale farmers’ participation in national and international food supply chains. Two areas of emphasis are developing new business models and building market demand for ethically sourced products. Projects in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic are contributing to a body of work that can be replicated in other food supply chains. In Africa, with support that the Gates Foundation is providing to the Rainforest Alliance, the Food Lab is creating new market opportunities for bean farmers in Ethiopia, cocoa farmers in Ghana, and produce farmers in Kenya and Uganda.

As new needs and insights continue to emerge from Lab participants, new projects are being initiated. Recently, the Lab has begun to develop and test ways to measure and incentivize low-carbon agricultural processes through the food supply chain. Other current Food Lab initiatives and strategies include prototyping and implementing new business models in Central America and Africa that are designed to distribute risks and rewards more evenly across food chains, and helping large-scale producers and distributors like SYSCO prototype and implement local and regional sourcing and procurement.

In 2012, the Lab hosted its Annual Leadership Summit in the Dominican Republic, where members explored sustainable sourcing in global supply chains. These gatherings give participants a face-to-face chance to grapple with the issues they are working on, forge partnerships with “unlikely allies”, and dive into specific themes that require further exploration and discovery. Learning Journeys are an important part of these meetings. They catalyze conversations, challenge perspectives, and give participants a chance to immerse themselves in the current reality of different aspects of the food system. Lab members value the opportunity to spend intense time with colleagues in seeing the system afresh, which fosters new relationships and new projects.



These collaborative efforts take time, and the Food Lab has been successful because it has developed a permanent staff to serve as a backbone for facilitation and convening. The Lab is an ongoing, long-term systemic intervention in an age-old system, and while time is not an endless resource, the Lab members are not looking for quick fixes. A collaboration among Costco, CIAT, and the SFL took several years to come to fruition, with communities in Guatemala planting broccoli and peas as part of an effort to bring the output from poorer Mayan communities around Lake Atitlan to high-value markets. Such partnerships are important, and the processes they develop have the potential to be replicated and scaled up.

In addition to creating the “laboratory” in which living examples of a sustainable food supply can be developed, the Food Lab is also working to institutionalise the conditions needed to support such activities within organisations. Part of the SFL’s work involves embedding sustainability practices through personal and organisational capacity-building and leadership development. Based on their experience of what is happening on the ground, Lab members are also working on ways to influence government policies.

“I come to the Food Lab conferences because I know we can’t do this alone: individuals, companies, even

industry sectors. We have got to work together. The challenges we face, the opportunities that are out there are so complex that no one part can understand that and intervene in the right way. So we have to work together. It’s humbling to see the courage and expertise the Food Lab brings into the room.”

Andy Barker, Ben & Jerry’s

The Sustainable Food Lab continues to evolve. Many lessons have been learned about the potential for positive impact of such an undertaking, as well as the challenges that must be overcome. From creating a safe container where people can come together as learners and say “I don’t know,” to building trust and respect across sectors, to taking those first steps and doing something tangible together, to developing patience and giving this work the time it needs to fully “cook”—all of these are crucial to the success of the Food Lab.

When the Lab began, the average person and the mainstream media weren’t talking about sustainable food, food security, or ethical sourcing. Now news stories appear almost daily. The tipping point for shifting the food system is within reach. Furthermore, as the Lab continues, the knowledge and experience gained from its work will help groups of diverse stakeholders in other areas make progress on effecting systemic change.

For more information about the Sustainable Food Lab, please visit www.sustainablefoodlab.org



Attribution You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).



Noncommercial You may not use this work for commercial purposes.



No Derivative Works You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License.

To view a copy of this license, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ or send a letter to:

Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

This license gives you permission to photocopy and distribute this document in this current form, which includes the attribution. You may not change or edit this document or use it for commercial purposes without additional permission from the owner.

Please contact Reos if you have any questions, concerns or comments.

info@reospartners.com.