A Guide to Effective Collaborative Action

DEEP COLLABORATION FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL COMMODITY SYSTEMS

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A Guide to Effective Collaborative Action: Deep collaboration for systemic change in food and agricultural commodity systems

UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet.

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Foreword

The global community of food system practitioners knows what needs to be done. But they have not so far transformed food systems to resolve hunger, reduce diet-related disease and heal the planet. Instead, the planet continues along its trajectory towards environmental degradation and entrenched smallholder farmer poverty.

In 2019 and 2020, multiple high-level reports came out proposing pathways and solutions, such as financing farmers and adopting a better diet. But to see these pathways and solutions actually change how global food systems function, we need to go deeper into the why and the how, and not just the what.

Those working to achieve sustainability in food systems face complex problems that are highly challenging, lack clear answers and are situated within complicated eco-political context and systems. They cannot be solved by one person or institution alone. Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions and therefore reaching the wrong or incomplete solutions. Or perhaps we have the right solutions but lack the collaboration and leadership skills to put them into action.

Current approaches tend to give inadequate attention to complexity. We try to pre-define the end results with "pathways" that are full of assumptions. As if development experts can predict what reactions all stakeholders will have to change. As if we can determine how entire systems will react to different stimuli. As if we can predict unexpected events. If COVID-19 taught us anything, it's the need to embrace uncertainty and accept our limited ability to predict or predetermine anything.

When we don't properly address systemic complexity when conceiving, designing and implementing solutions, we increase the chance that projects will fail and limit their ability to tackle underlying structural problems.

This is why we believe that a major part of the solution lies in shifting our approach. Technical assistance can't just involve technical analysis, planning and solutions at a project level. We must shift the focus to changing systems through collaborative action.

Working with FAO, UNEP and other specialist partners, UNDP aims to catalyse a shift away from business-as-usual land use and agricultural systems towards practices that restore long-term productivity, bolster livelihoods, safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services and provide climate solutions. This requires a renewed focus on strengthening the participatory and inclusive governance of food systems.

In this regard we are very pleased to offer our new Guide to Effective Collaborative Action, a methodology built on the foundation of 10 years' experience in transforming food and agricultural commodity systems by UNDP's Green Commodities Programme. Over the decade our work has evolved from dialogue and collective action (and our methodology on National Commodity Platforms) to Changing Systems through Collaborative Action. And we are broadening the application from support to commodity production to the transformation of food systems.

We believe that Effective Collaborative Action is central to UNDP's support to countries and partners addressing the root causes and drivers of changing food systems.

Our four building blocks of putting systems change into practice, integrated with backbone support and essential practices for stakeholder actions, provide a thoughtfully evolved framework for your own work in Changing Systems through Collaborative Action.

Lise Melvin, Senior Programme Advisor, UNDP & Andrew Bovarnick, Global Head of Food & Agricultural Commodity Systems, UNDP.

Sharing the Credit

The authors would like to share the credit of this Guide with those whose shoulders we stand on, the countless good thinkers and hard-working collaborators who have contributed to the amazing body of work that exists on multi-stakeholder collaborative action and systemic change. We wouldn't be here without you. Explicitly we'd like to call out the following, whom we have learned from: Herman Brouwer from the **mspguide.org** team at Wageningen University and Research; Otto Scharmer at the **Presencing Institute**; Russ Gaskin and team at **CoCreative**; Jane Weber, Anna Leong and team at **Leadership Coefficient**; and Giulio Quaggiotto, Head of the Strategic Innovation Team at UNDP.

This is a living guide. If you have suggestions on how we can make it better, please write to us at **methodology.feedback@undp.org**

Photo: © Paul Vincent Roll, Unsplash

"We can't achieve systemic change only by developing the parts. The collective capacity of a group, organisation, or network depends greatly on the relationships among the people involved, the quality of their interactions, and the clarity of the collective understanding of purpose, principles, and values."

- Reos Partners

Table of Contents

PART 1

MEET THE METHODOLOGY

An introduction to effective collaborative action

Catalyzing change in food and agricultural commodity systems

Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems (FACS) touch every aspect of human existence. They are fundamental to sustainable development in all of the 170 countries UNDP supports. FACS are often the largest contributor to their economies; play a key role in providing food and nutrition fundamental for citizen health; and FACS have a multi-dimensional impact on achieving the SDGs.

Yet, food systems are in crisis. Too many of the world's food systems are fragile, unexamined, and vulnerable to collapse. The production practices and consumption patterns in global FACS are on an unsustainable trajectory with negative impacts on human development, the environment, and economies.

The world faces a remarkable opportunity to transform food and land use systems over the next ten years in a way that can reap massive societal and agroecological dividends. However, among the common action agendas and prevailing discourse on what is needed for systemic change to happen in the sector, barriers are often overlooked:

- Solutions and improvements in the functioning of food and agricultural production and consumption are often expected to derive from technical, financial or technological innovations. Yet individual, institutional and societal innovations and best practices are essential for change.

- The quality of current multi-stakeholder collaboration in the sector is inadequate to meet the scale and nature of this challenge. Traditional FACS governance mechanisms, including inter-institutional and multi-stakeholder components, are often characterized by power and information asymmetries. Fostering deeper spaces for collaboration and reflection and explicit inclusion of marginalized groups requires patience, time, and sustained commitment and support from participants, facilitators and sponsors.

Understanding and managing the interdependencies globally in this sector requires more collaborative mindsets and involves putting in place innovative governance arrangements. We need new systems thinking leadership – with new approaches, practices, tools, incentives, metrics and ways of working that can navigate and measure complexity and collaboratively deliver future food and agricultural commodity systems that are fit for purpose, particularly at the national and sub-national levels. Many are working on systemic change tools and methodologies but very little of this expertise is benefiting country-based collaborative networks.

Risks of Maintaining the Status Quo

What happens when we rely on predictive project design and implementation:

- We assume that the simple act of creating multi-stakeholder platforms means that we're being inclusive.

- We assume that dialogue will lead to common understanding and conflict transformation.

- We assume linear correlations, such as between training and adoption of standards by farmers.

- We assume that the available budget is sufficient to achieve results.

- Government officials may resist or be unwilling to support project objectives, or one ministry supports and a more powerful one does not.

- Companies might be cautious about committing to project objectives.

This guide is designed to fill these gaps and meet the needs of our times.

Food and agricultural commodity systems need to be radically transformed to become sustainable, in ways that address climate change risks, preserve biodiversity, and improve livelihoods. They can no longer be viewed through a unidimensional lens but must be addressed in an integrated manner. Transformation must happen at the system, organizational and individual levels.

Making our food systems more sustainable is among the most powerful ways to change course and make progress towards all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Rebuilding the food systems of the world will contribute to a green recovery and "build forward better" from COVID-19. Transforming FACS is critical to achieve UNDP's Strategic Plan and Vision. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has worked for decades on Food & Agricultural Commodity Systems (FACS), supporting transformation through UNDP's signature solutions from climate to biodiversity to inclusive growth. In July 2021 UNDP has a $1.2 billion portfolio of technical assistance for FACS.

To support all this work on technical solutions this Guide provides practical ways for how to change food systems through deep collaborative action.

We call this approach Effective Collaborative Action.
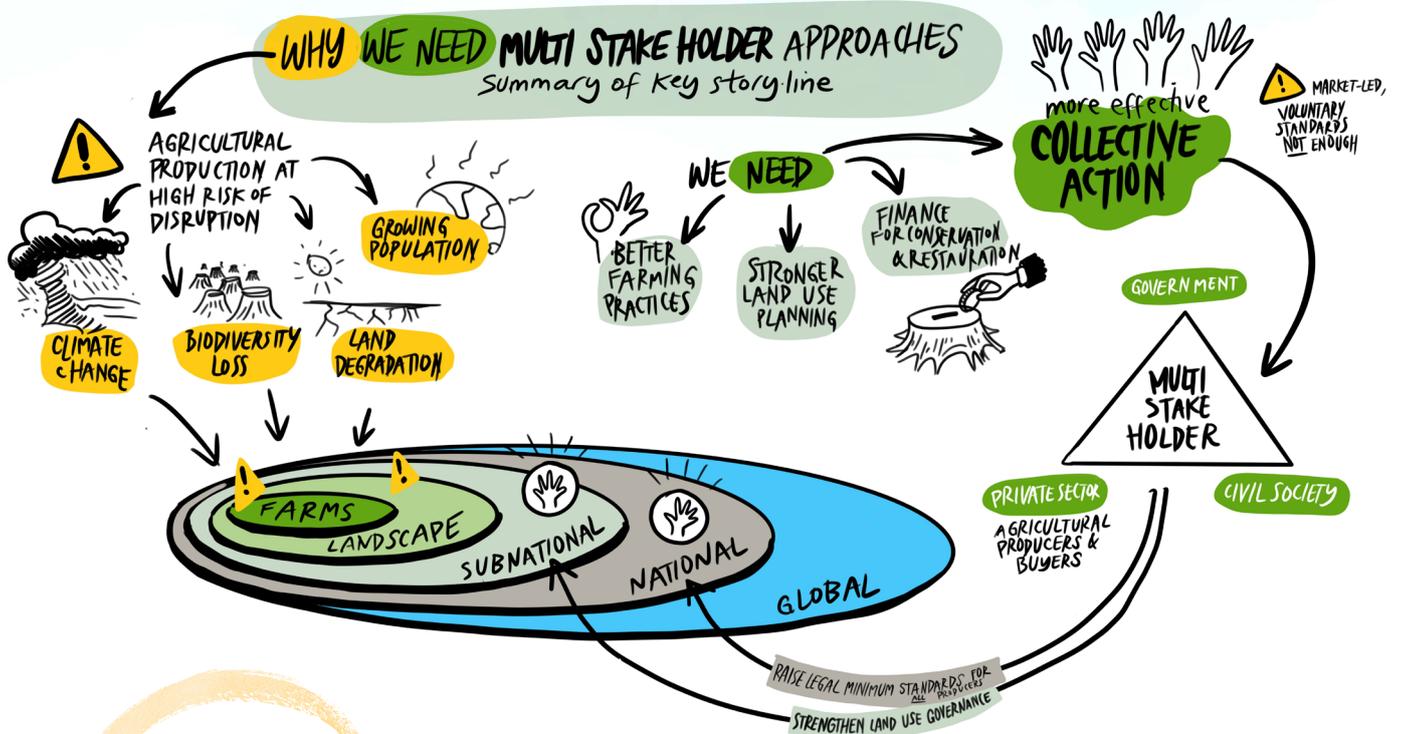
This simple picture captures the why, what, where and who of multi-stakeholder collaborative action for agricultural systems. This guidebook focuses primarily on the HOW. Drawing by Carlotta Cataldi © UNDP.

This methodology aims to make Effective Collaborative Action understandable and practical. So we'll start with some definitions.

What do we mean by "Changing Systems"?

In our minds, changing systems is about addressing root causes rather than symptoms, by altering, shifting and transforming relationships, structures, customs, mindsets, power dynamics and rules. We do this by collaborating across a diverse set of actors with the intent of sustainably improving societal issues on a local, national and global level.

Over the past decade, we have continually refined this approach through the UNDP Green Commodity Programme's national commodity platforms and dialogues. This upgraded version of the methodology incorporates our learnings and expands how it can be used.

Here are some shifts in the how this methodology can be applied:

- Previously our methodology for National Commodity Platforms co-created a National Action Plan which was handed over to government to operate. Now this methodology offers a wide range of options for institutionalization and sustainability. Joint commitments such as land use management plans, new alliances and new projects all represent collaborative action with positive outputs.

- This methodology can now be used for single or multiple commodities, whole food systems and across landscapes.

- This methodology works at every spatial scale – locally, sub-nationally, within a jurisdiction, region, nation or even internationally.

At its best, we believe this methodology enables us to transform systems by using an experiential approach to empower the people engaged on an issue to work as a system and co-create to solve it. We have identified four essential practices that are foundational to doing this well, which you will see reflected across the building blocks contained in this guidebook.

What do we mean by "Effective Collaborative Action"?

We define Effective Collaborative Action as any multi-stakeholder effort formed to address systemic problems using systemic solutions.

One might utilize a platform to support collaborative action— a structure that facilitates exchanges between two or more interdependent groups to harness and create large, scalable networks to address issues and create change

Collaborative action could also take the form of a dialogue, or a series of conversations and discussions with the aim of understanding an issue and then collaborating to achieve a desired outcome.

Ultimately, Effective Collaborative Action requires working together to understand and take action towards a shared, co-designed future. During this work we use different forms of engagement with different stakeholders, depending on the outcomes sought. The framework below from CoCreative offers one of the best overviews on what collaboration takes and where different levels of engagement are needed in systems change work.

Where can this methodology be used?

This methodology has been developed to support the transformation of food and agricultural commodity systems in countries with significant environmental and social challenges. But it can also be applied to much broader issues or simpler engagements as well.

For example:

- It can inform a dialogue series to find solutions at the landscape or jurisdictional level.

- It can be used to develop a land use management plan or local policy reform.

- It can be used to design a multi-year platform process at the national or subnational level.

- You could use any of the four building blocks to help support systemic thinking and collaborative action in a different kind of process that relies heavily on those elements to achieve the desired impact.

Who is this guide for?

This methodology can be used by any individual or organization who wishes to initiate a systemic change approach to making food and agricultural commodity systems more sustainable.

This guide can be used and led from within a UNDP Country Office team, a government department, an international NGO, a local NGO, a university, a foundation, a bilateral donor.

Anyone can initiate collaborative systemic change work with this guide.

5 Levels of Engagement from CoCreative

This framework helps us compare and contrast different levels/depths of engagement.

1. Inform – e.g. one way communication, useful for Shared emergencies

2. Consult – e.g. someone else deciding, useful for shared problems

3. Involve – e.g. mediation / negotiation, useful for shared analysis

4. Collaborate – e.g. interest based design/negotiations, useful for shared solutions

5. Co-Create – e.g. sharing power / innovating, useful for shared future

All five levels of engagement add value. Understanding the situation and getting clear on the outcome you are seeking can help you decide which form of engagement is the best fit.

For example, in a collaborative initiative on coffee in Peru there will be stakeholders who have low influence and low interest, such as other commodity initiatives, who will not be involved in "Co-creating" joint commitments. They will however want to be "Informed" about progress.

That said, we believe that shifting complex systems requires a sustained commitment to Level 5 "Co-create" engagement with key stakeholders over time.

"There's no systems change without organizational change, and no organizational change without individual change."

- Jonathan Raymond,
Stuart Foundation
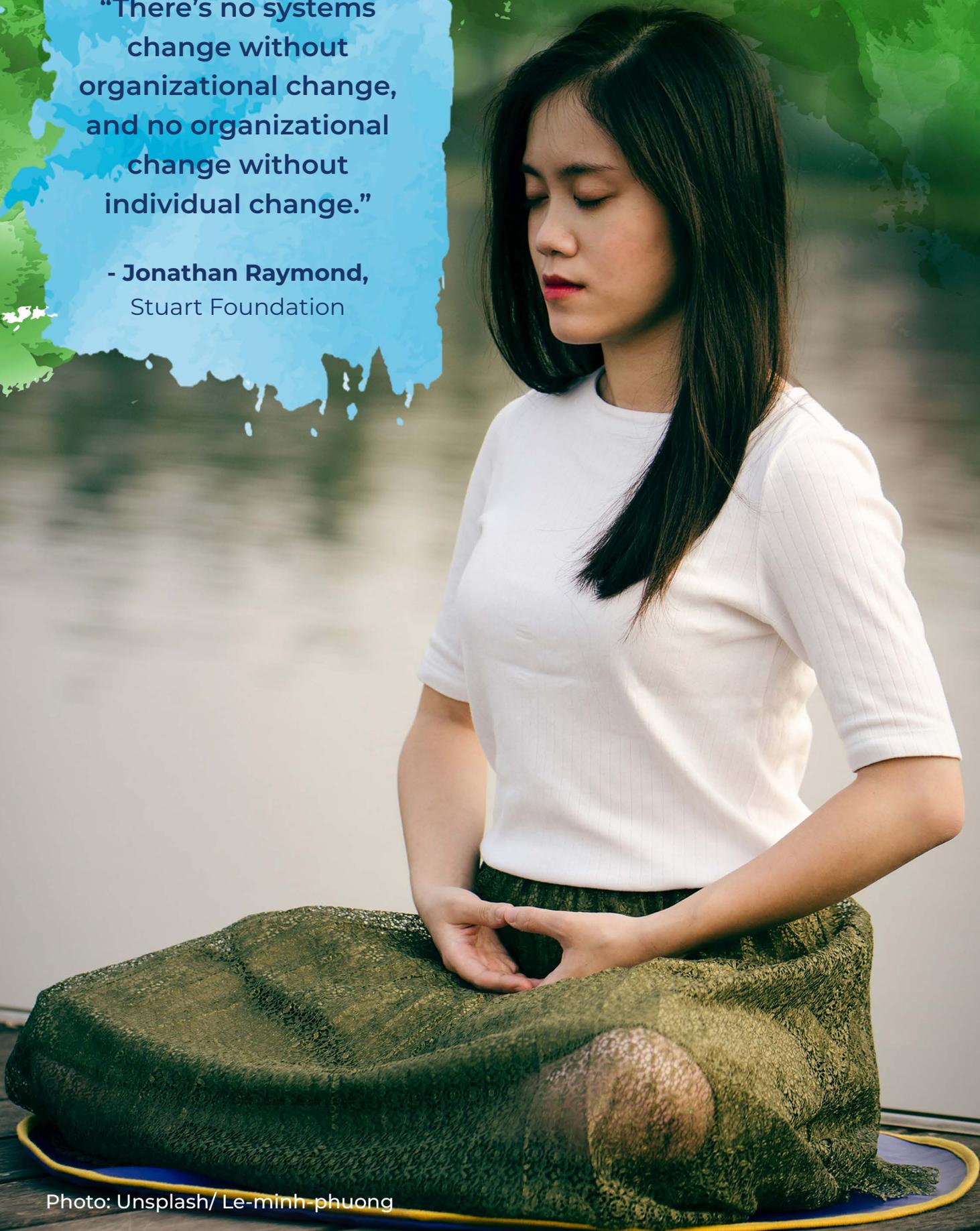
Four Building Blocks to guide the process

There are four building blocks to support an Effective Collaborative Action journey. Each building block represents an important body of work needed to bring about systems transformation. Since the methodology can be applied across a variety of contexts with different lengths and in different subject areas, the application and use of these building blocks will look different for each engagement.

1 UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

2 CO-CREATE THE APPROACH

4 LEARN & ADAPT

3 TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Our first impulse might be to use the methodology linearly, starting with the first block then moving on to the next. Instead, we want to encourage a more fluid approach, one where elements are introduced as they are needed and a component from one building block might be used alongside a component from another.

An example might help. Say you are working in *Understand the System*. You might want to utilize collaborative techniques and tools found in the *Co-create* building block as well as tools to capture learning found in the *Learn and Adapt* building block. We've designed the methodology to be flexible in how it can be used and urge you to experiment with it so it adds the most value to your systemic change journey.

For example you might be taking collaborative action together and discover something new about the system, while also co-creating a new solution to test from what you have already learned.

Or you might be co-creating an approach, while one of your partners is also taking some action and sharing what they have learned on the ground, that adapts what you co-create.

1. UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

Shifting perspective to see the whole.

Before we go about changing a system, it's important that everyone understands how the system currently works — the relationships between critical stakeholders, what's driving current impact and where the levers for change are. Since each of us is a part of the system, our actions have impact. Seeing and understanding this is the work of this building block, along with developing a shared vision for how it could be different. This building block will help us move forward in a more collaborative way and shed light on who we should engage along the way.

2. CO-CREATE THE APPROACH

Building trust, partnership and shared commitment.

Once we have a shared vision across a group of aligned stakeholders, creating a roadmap to realize that vision is powerful and essential. When we are able to bring together a range of stakeholders with different mental models and values to build a plan around a complex problem, chances are we'll end up with a more creative approach and learn a lot along the way. This building block helps us plan how to achieve the vision and build the structure needed to support the roll-out of the plan. It is important we include regular review of our process here given the inevitably changing world around us. Doing this well — truly co-creating — builds trust, allows people to feel bought-in and gives all an experience of true partnership while cementing a shared commitment. The hard work of really listening and learning from different perspectives helps to shift our understanding in ways that create more innovative, in-depth and systemic solutions.

3. TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Experimenting our way forward together.

At some point, we have to move into action mode for our shared vision and plans to become a reality. We know that there is more power in a diverse group taking aligned action, than in taking action individually or taking disjointed actions. In this building block, we test a variety of actions and apply learnings about what works and what doesn't into the actions we take next. Prototyping and testing with a systems view gives us the best chance of making innovative ideas a reality. This building block is based on action learning — where experimenting, failing, adapting and starting again are part of the process, and where the courage to try and fail is key.

4. LEARN AND ADAPT

Transforming systems through experiential learning – and making it a habit.

Systemic change requires a transformation – a move from one state to another. To do this we have to be willing to learn and adapt, to let go to move forward. This is a critical building block and set of tools to be applied across all the other building blocks to support systemic change. Learning can happen when we pay attention to what is occurring (monitor), reflect on what works and what doesn't, and then make new choices based on that reflection. A practice of doing this on an individual, community and systemic level must be designed into the process. Learning is not something we do only once; it's a lifelong daily pursuit — a practice - and practice requires paying attention, repetition, consistency and commitment. Ensure that regular reflection and adaptation is an ongoing part of the process.

Three elements to consider in each building block

As we move through the Building Blocks in our multi-stakeholder work, it is helpful to understand who is expected to do what and how everyone can best collaborate.

We generally find that there is a difference between the actions stakeholders need to take (Stakeholder Actions), and the actions that a central coordination team (what we call Backbone Support) needs to take. We explain these actions under separate headers for each Building Block.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

★ BUILD SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP CAPACITY
★ WORK WITH →POWER←
★ WORK THROUGH CONFLICT →
★ EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE TO SEE THE WHOLE

TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - MAKING IT A HABIT

1 UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

2 CO-CREATE THE APPROACH

4 LEARN & ADAPT

3 TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

BUILDING TRUST, PARTNERSHIP & SHARED COMMITMENT

EXPERIMENTING OUR WAY FORWARD TOGETHER

BACKBONE SUPPORT

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

This illustrates how the Building Blocks, Stakeholder Actions, Backbone Support and Essential Practices inter-relate. Drawing by Carlotta Cataldi © UNDP.

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

Stakeholder Actions refer to the actions that need to be taken by the individuals who join the collaboration, as well as what those individuals need to know for those actions to be effective. Given that multi-stakeholder collaboration is at the center of this methodology, it is important that the universe of stakeholders impacted by the issue being addressed are invited and represented in the work. This is so that all key actors have the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the collaborative effort.

This does not mean they all have to be in the room or virtual meeting at the same time. It may be necessary or beneficial to engage stakeholders in different constellations to serve time zones, specific interest groups or as a way to work through conflict and with power.

Each building block needs an explicit strategy to identify, engage and ensure the meaningful participation of target groups, in particular women, smallholders, youth, indigenous peoples and other discriminated and marginalized populations.

It is important to have:

- An understanding of who key stakeholders are

- A good mapping and categorization of key stakeholders

- A plan for how to best engage your stakeholders

Generally, we can think of stakeholders in four categories:

- Government

- Private sector (including farmers)

- Civil Society

- Development Partners

The composition of people involved and taking action will evolve along the journey. As we understand more, take action, learn and reflect, we adapt and our initial network of stakeholders adapts too. We will draw in others and help to orient them to the collaborative learning and co-creation so far and moving forward.

More guidance on stakeholder engagement is [here.](#)

BACKBONE SUPPORT

The Backbone Support is the foundation required to support the multi-stakeholder work. This primarily encompasses people and funding, but it can also include communications, event organizing, facilitation, convening and lots of coordination. At the heart, the members of the Backbone Support team are process guardians and role models of the Essential Practices (more on that coming up). They are deeply committed to the effort and process and support the learning and transformation of everyone involved.

The Backbone Support can be provided by any organization that has the capacity and interest. It could be a UN agency, an NGO, an Academic Institution, etc. The key is to ensure they are as neutral as possible, putting the interest of the collaborative effort at the center, rather than their own interests.

It is important to resource our Backbone Support teams based on the needs and desired outcomes of the engagement. For example, if we are holding a short series of dialogues, we may just need one person to facilitate the sessions and one person to manage the project. But if we are developing a more complex, multi-year platform, experience has shown us that the roles below are very important.

A link to Profile Descriptions that can be adapted for recruitment can be found [here](#).

What should my backbone consist of?

- Leadership
- Skilled Facilitation
- Project Coordination

- Event Organizing/ Online Collaboration
- Communications
- Political Lobbying/Networking
- Private Sector/Stakeholder Engagement
- Logistics and Administration

If your collaborative effort is somewhere between a multi-year process and a series of dialogues, consider hiring a leader and contracting some of the other key roles, such as a facilitator and coordinator, on a short-term basis.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

The third element vital to consider when going through the Building Blocks is what we call Essential Practices. These are principles with associated practices that are essential to success in collaborative efforts. The Essential Practices support individual learning on subjects critical for transformational change. They guide everyone — stakeholders, conveners, coordinators and facilitators — in the "how" of working together to create systemic change.

When taken as a whole and practiced, the Essential Practices give the multi-stakeholder effort the best chance of transforming the desired system. These practices are used both explicitly (to build the skills and capacity of the Backbone Support team and stakeholders) and implicitly (in how the process of collaboration is coordinated and designed, for example in dialogue design or partnership negotiations).

Essential Practice #1:

★ BUILD SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Essential Practice #2:

★ WORK WITH POWER

Essential Practice #3:

★ WORK THROUGH CONFLICT

Essential Practice #4:

★ EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

What are the Essential Practices?

For each Building Block, we share four essential practices that work together to build the right mindset, heartset and action orientation for Effective Collaborative Action.

We highlight these practices to call attention to the importance of the "how" when transforming systems. There are many tools that can support these practices, and we encourage you to discover your own favorites. For each practice, we have included a few of our go-to resources to get you started.

Essential Practice #1:

★ BUILD SYSTEMS
LEADERSHIP CAPACITY ⚑

This practice focuses on empowering people to lead transformation at three levels — within themselves, within their institutions and within the system. Capacity building in this area involves exploring the interconnections between inner work, collective transformation and system transformation. Key capabilities include self-awareness, awareness of others, self-inquiry and collaborative inquiry, along with other multidisciplinary skills. This practice is based on the understanding that each individual has the power to be a change agent and leader.

⭐ **HELPFUL TOOLS**

1. **System Change Education** — a comprehensive list of tools, competencies, frameworks and approaches to systems leadership.

2. **Systems Leadership Skill Builder** — this skill builder helps leaders identify five types of systems within which they could be operating, along with common roadblocks and skills and attributes to develop.

3. **Learning Journeys** — site visits to relevant locations or places with great potential, usually best when conducted in small groups of up to five people.

4. **Systems Leadership Training** — expert training videos on systems leadership for the Green Commodities Community.

Essential Practice #2:

★ WORK WITH
→ POWER ←

We know supply chains and food systems have inherent power differences within their systems. In order for collaborative action to be effective, we need inclusive design, inclusive decision making and inclusive outcomes. Conducting a power analysis of the situation and stakeholders can illuminate why being inclusive is important. To build this capacity, we need to understand how equity, representation and distribution of resources has not only played a role in creating the issue being addressed, but also how these realities might influence the group's aim to be more inclusive and effective in future efforts to change the system. Powerful interests can become blocks to change, and specific strategies may be needed to manage this and keep moving forward.

We pay attention to peripheral voices, minorities and less powerful groups, constantly asking ourselves "who is not at the table?" and "who needs to be included?" Starting from system edges helps. Once these voices are at the table, we need to learn to listen in a new way so we can understand the less powerful groups' perspectives. Often, stakeholders are not even aware of their own power.

★ HELPFUL TOOLS

1. **Power Ranking** — experiential exercise that allows the group and individuals to see and discuss how people are influential in the hierarchy of a group and its impact.

2. **Stakeholder Power in Food Systems** — this exercise gives a deeper understanding of the role of stakeholders in the food system, visualizing the relative importance and influence of each stakeholder as well as their place within the food system.

3. **Power: A Practical Guide to Facilitating Social Change** — a handbook that encompasses a number of activities and "how-to's" for understanding power and how to work with it in a group.

Essential Practice #3:

WORK THROUGH CONFLICT

Bringing multiple perspectives together on a subject will inevitably surface different points of view, some which may be in conflict with others. These differences, often the "elephants in the room", should be proactively explored for greater understanding. Creating a positive tone around conflict and setting the expectation that it will be managed and addressed is critical to building trust without hidden agendas. The focus of this practice is on increasing the collaborative's capacity to see conflict as something to work with in order to move the collective forward and even connect the group more strongly together.

HELPFUL TOOLS

1. **Multiple Perspectives** — an experiential exercise that helps a group see an issue from as many vantage points as possible, which can help diffuse tension and open conversation around difference.

2. **Conflict Style** — this exercise generates insights on how different conflict-handling styles affect interpersonal and group dynamics and empowers participants to select the appropriate conflict-handling style for any situation.

3. **Paired Walk** — this exercise involves walking and talking with someone as a way to practice listening, generate understanding and foster collaboration.

Essential Practice #4:

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION 👍

This is a critical essential practice. Continuous, clear communication is vital for building trust and aligning on common motivations, not to mention getting the word out on your efforts. Effective communication works on three levels:

· Personal. On an individual level, it's about how you listen and dialogue with stakeholders who might see things very differently.

· Collective. Within the group of stakeholders working on the collaborative effort, it's about ensuring that key messages are developed collectively so that there's a single narrative. In larger efforts this can take the form of a communication working group.

· System. When communicating with the system or community we are trying to impact, making change happen requires thoughtful and coherent storytelling. This can influence wider circles and enable the tipping point that sustains the transition and helps it scale.
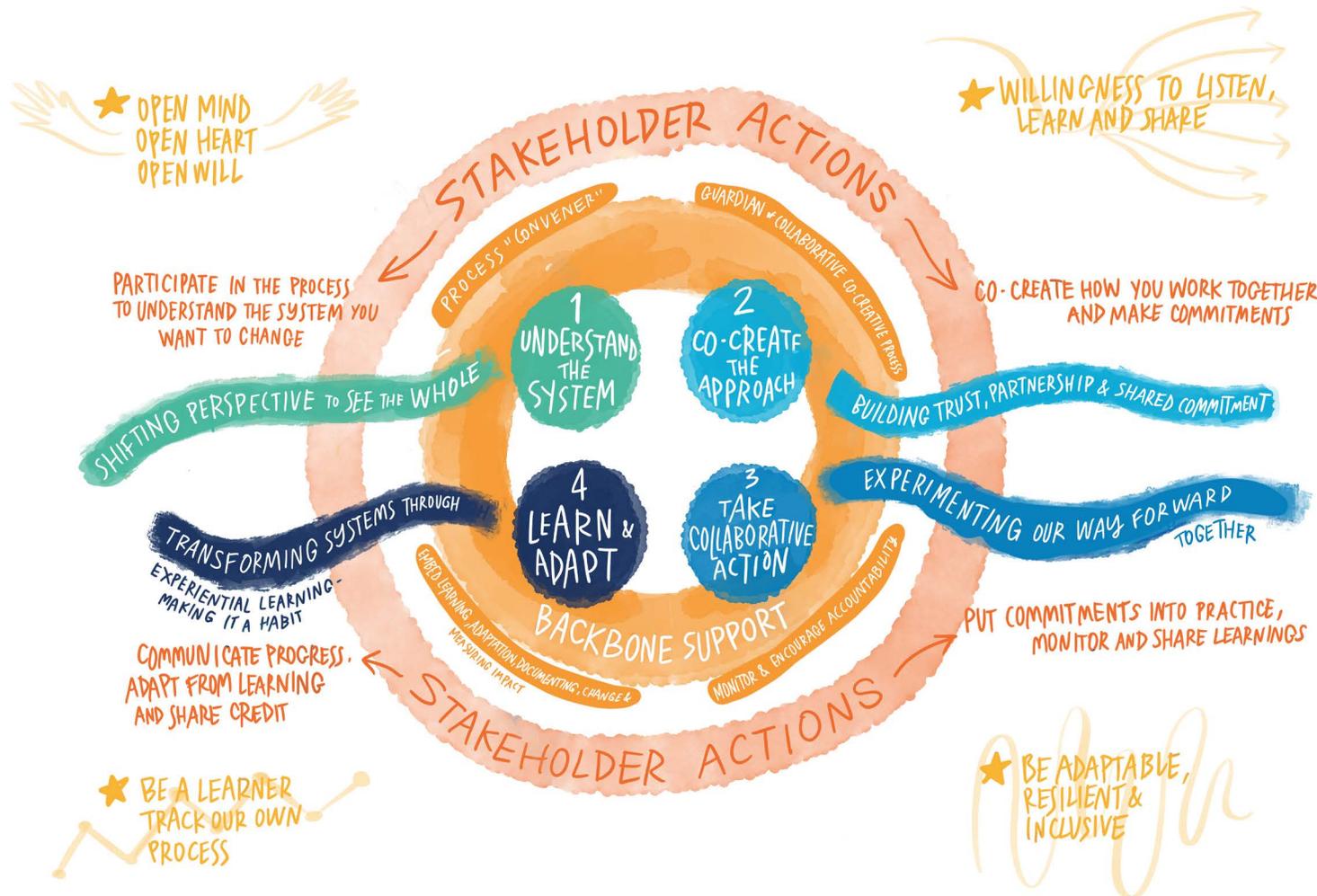
⭐ **HELPFUL TOOLS**

1. **Communication and Systems Change** — identifies five ways in which systemic change communications strategies can vary from traditional communications strategies.

2. **The Four Levels of Listening** or **Deep Listening** — listening is key to many aspects of Effective Collaborative Action; these two resources bring its importance to life.

Effective collaborative action at a glance

We understand that not everyone is going to find it relevant to go through the whole guidebook. So we have created this short overview to give you an "at a glance" look at Effective Collaborative Action and the outcomes it seeks to drive. This is a page you'll want to bookmark.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
- ★ BUILD SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP CAPACITY
- ★ WORK WITH POWER
- ★ WORK THROUGH CONFLICT
- ★ EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

★ OPEN MIND OPEN HEART OPEN WILL

★ WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN, LEARN AND SHARE

PARTICIPATE IN THE PROCESS TO UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM YOU WANT TO CHANGE

PROCESS "CONVENER"

GUARDIAN OF COLLABORATIVE CO-CREATIVE PROCESS

CO-CREATE HOW YOU WORK TOGETHER AND MAKE COMMITMENTS

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE TO SEE THE WHOLE

1 UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

2 CO-CREATE THE APPROACH

BUILDING TRUST, PARTNERSHIP & SHARED COMMITMENT

4 LEARN & ADAPT

3 TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

EXPERIMENTING OUR WAY FORWARD TOGETHER

TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS THROUGH

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING. MAKING IT A HABIT

BACKBONE SUPPORT

EMBED LEARNING, ADAPTATION DOCUMENTING, CHANGE & MEASURING IMPACT

MONITOR & ENCOURAGE ACCOUNTABILITY

PUT COMMITMENTS INTO PRACTICE, MONITOR AND SHARE LEARNINGS

COMMUNICATE PROGRESS, ADAPT FROM LEARNING AND SHARE CREDIT

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

★ BE A LEARNER TRACK OUR OWN PROCESS

★ BE ADAPTABLE, RESILIENT & INCLUSIVE

This illustrates an overview of the Effective Collaborative Action methodology and its key elements and outcomes. Drawing by Carlotta Cataldi © UNDP.

Outcomes from the Building Blocks

1 UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. A well-resourced Backbone Support team with a work plan containing clear roles and responsibilities

2. A stakeholder engagement strategy that meaningfully includes marginalized peoples

3. An analysis of the situation and system which the effort is trying to impact, including data and evidence

4. A secured budget for the next phase (or a fundraising proposal if needed)

5. A plan for monitoring and learning, identifying quick wins and demonstrating value to partners

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. A clear understanding of the system dynamics, the situation and the potential future

2. An initial pathway for next steps

3. A core group of stakeholders that are energized by the opportunities

4. A shared vision and direction, as well as a set of personal connections to this vision

2 CO-CREATE THE APPROACH

BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. A collaborative governance document design process that is coordinated to stakeholder satisfaction

2. A communications plan that supports the protocol and essential practices on communication

3. Marginalized communities are represented and contributions are uplifted in the co-creative process

4. Stakeholder champions are identified and their systems leadership capacity developed

5. Stakeholder skillsets are upgraded to support co-creation

6. Stakeholders have access to capacity building and tools to help them deliver on their actions in this building block

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. A governance document that describes the agreed collaborative structure

2. A communications protocol for ensuring effective communications about the effort

3. A strategy/ plan/ roadmap that documents agreed-upon collaborative action commitments

4. An investment plan to implement the strategy/plan/roadmap

5. An approach for the sustainability of the collaborative effort beyond the existing funding

6. Partnerships and projects to pilot and test ideas

3 TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. A Participatory Monitoring System is established and collecting results

2. Learning and changes are monitored and tracked using the Signals of Change tool

3. Accountability is strong, actions are being taken and the effort is adapting where needed

4. A future collaborative structure is established

5. Results and changes are communicated in alignment with the communications protocol

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. Delivery on individual and joint commitments

2. Periodic monitoring and reporting of collaborative actions

3. Regular communication on progress to stakeholders' organizations and interested parties

4. Joint commitments are adapted as needed

5. Systemic changes are recorded, shared and celebrated (as they emerge)

4 LeARN & ADAPT

BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. Practices, processes and systems for monitoring, learning and adapting are embedded throughout all Building Blocks

2. Results and impact are reported through a Participatory Monitoring System

3. All stakeholders are telling the collective story

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. Learnings are shared and communicated

2. Any change in the system, stakeholder community and/or individuals are documented, measured and communicated

3. Next steps, if any, are identified

4. The collaborative effort can work with the emergent future

PART 2

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

"Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing 'patterns of change' rather than static 'snapshots.'"

- Peter Senge

1. UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM

Effective Collaborative Action starts with a clear issue that needs to be addressed and the premise that a multi-stakeholder approach could provide the best solution.

Once this is clear, we need to understand the system so we can figure out where and how to solve the issue. First, we must acknowledge that we typically operate in a variety of realities and perspectives, usually isolated and disconnected. In any system, there are different stakeholders with different visions, interests and power relationships. Through Effective Collaborative Action, we aim to shift from working separately to working as part of a system collective so we can take on the journey of transformation and collaborative action together.

In this building block, we focus on learning to think and feel as part of a system, prioritizing relationships and links to other programs and partners and recognizing the importance of including their perspectives. By coming together with multiple stakeholders who are part of the system, we are better equipped to see our role in the system, get clarity on how the system works and identify what levers exist to change it for the better.

After understanding the system, stakeholders can define the boundary of the system they are seeking to change. Often this process involves zooming out from the initial scope, like from a landscape to global markets, and then zooming back in to define boundaries.

In short, this Building Block helps us see new and different ways of thinking, acting and being. Often new partnerships and alliances form alongside the collaborative effort. This is welcomed!

This visual shows there are three key areas to consider when working systemically – understanding the system, convening and ways of working. Drawing by Carlotta Cataldi © UNDP.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

This is the beginning of a collaborative journey of transformation and learning. Here, we spend the necessary time in preparation and development so we can build a strong foundation for the process of collaboration, co-creation, collaboration action and learning, while also identifying quick wins, testing ideas and learning from action. It's important not to rush this.

This is the moment when we co-design our shared future direction. We push against the comfort of the pre-defined and let go to work more flexibly with emergent and unexpected issues. At the same time, we recognize relevant previous initiatives and processes and the information that is already available.

Through the process of understanding the system, we define our system boundaries and we may choose an alternative approach to systemic change that does not follow the Effective Collaborative Action methodology laid out here. We decide together whether the conditions are appropriate for establishing a platform or another type of collaboration, like Co-Inquiry Groups or Learning Journeys, or a combination of these with a platform.

If we have a pre-determined solution design (e.g., a donor or legal contract to set up a multi-stakeholder platform) or if the set-up of a platform is agreed through the transformation process, it is formed at a national, sub-national, international, regional, sub-regional, jurisdictional or landscape level. It can include a single commodity, multiple commodities or whole forest or food systems.

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

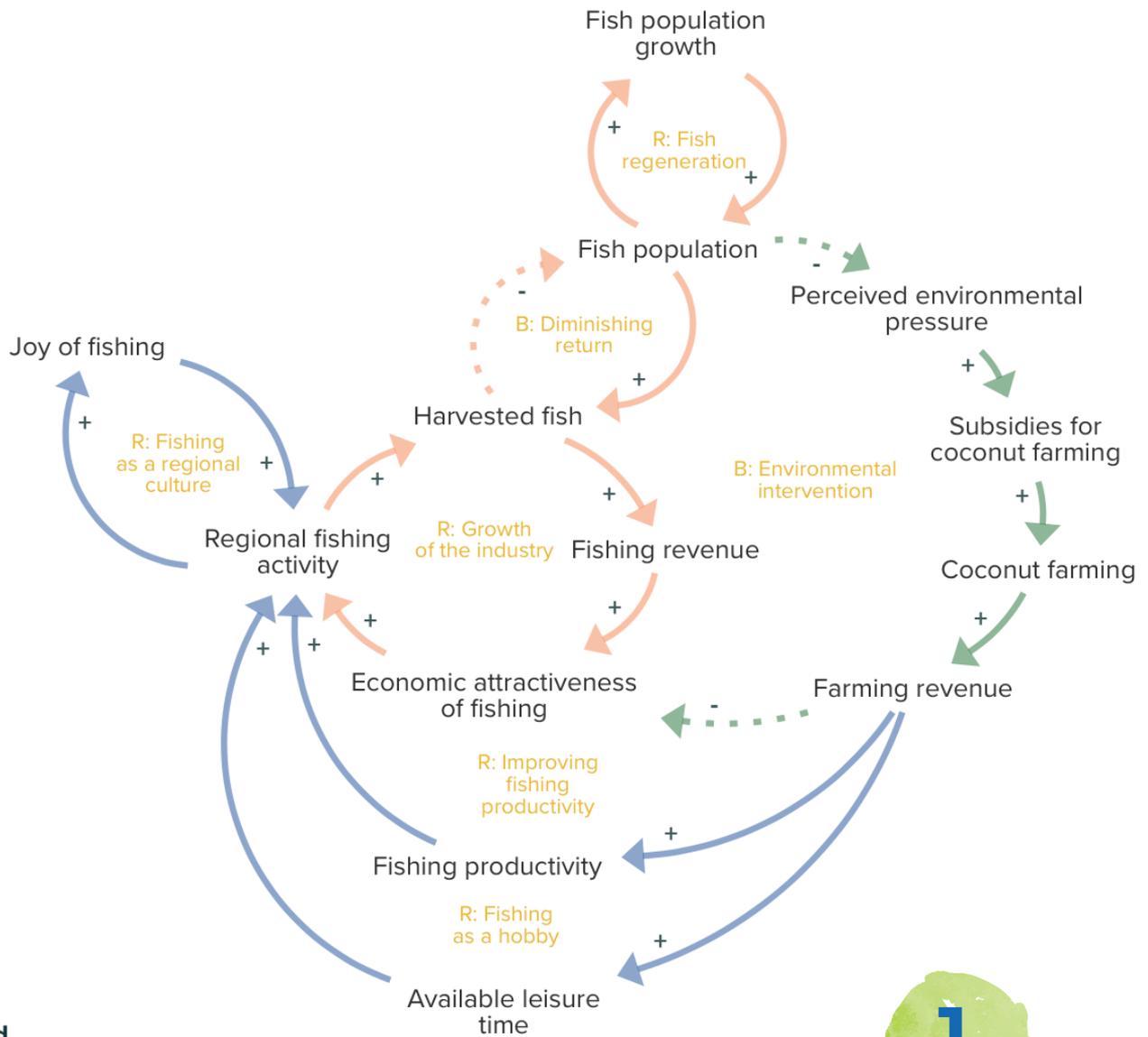*Participate in the process to understand the system you want to change*

Understanding the system and seeing ourselves as a part of it helps us develop a systems approach to change. Right now the key is to secure the commitment and (as) consistent (as possible) participation of the right stakeholders.

To "Understand the System," here are a few actions stakeholders can take:

Create a map of the system. Systems mapping can help stakeholders understand the system's needs, interactions and dynamics and identify focus and potential change levers. There are a variety of tools for systems mapping depending on needs, expertise and budget. Many of these tools are visual and can be supplemented with expert facilitation and group participation. Below are three tools well-suited for food and agricultural commodity systems:

1. **Tools for Systems Thinkers: Systems Mapping** — a write-up on systems mapping.

2. **Kumu** — an online tool to develop systems maps.

3. Systems Practice Team Course — **free online training by Acumen** on how to build a system map and identify leverage points.

Here are three examples of different systems maps.

Fish population growth

+ R: Fish regeneration +

Fish population

- B: Diminishing return

- Perceived environmental pressure

+ Subsidies for coconut farming

Joy of fishing

+ R: Fishing as a regional culture

Harvested fish

+

+

+ R: Growth of the industry

Regional fishing activity

+

+ +

Fishing revenue

B: Environmental intervention

+ Coconut farming

+ Farming revenue

Economic attractiveness of fishing

-

R: Improving fishing productivity

+

Fishing productivity

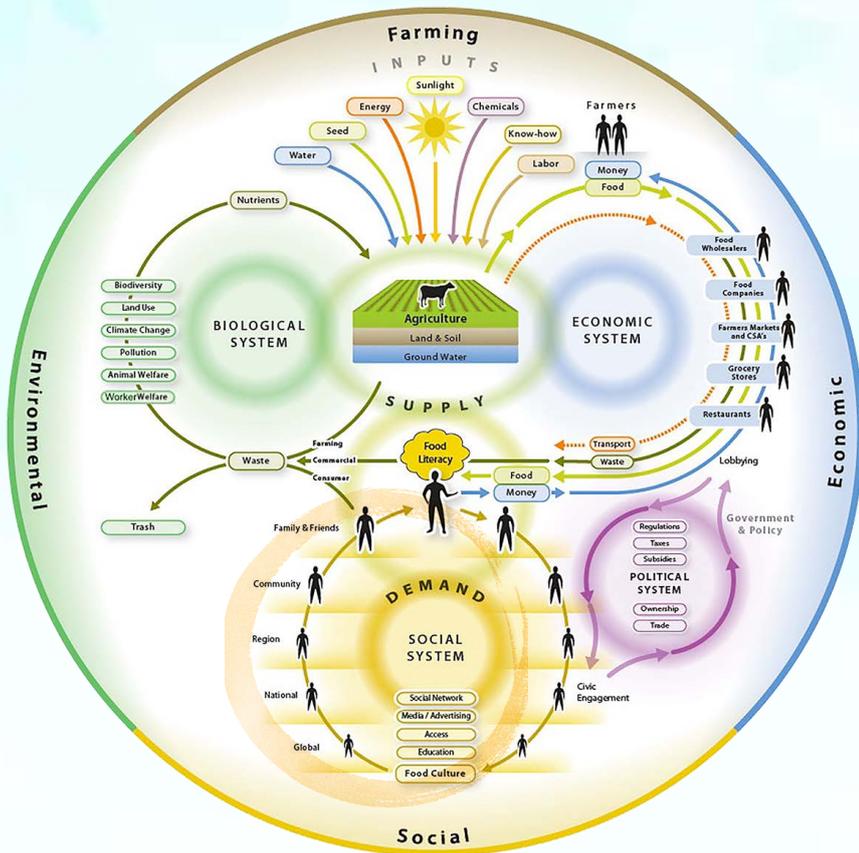R: Fishing as a hobby

+

Available leisure time

Legend

— Problem
— Intended Solution
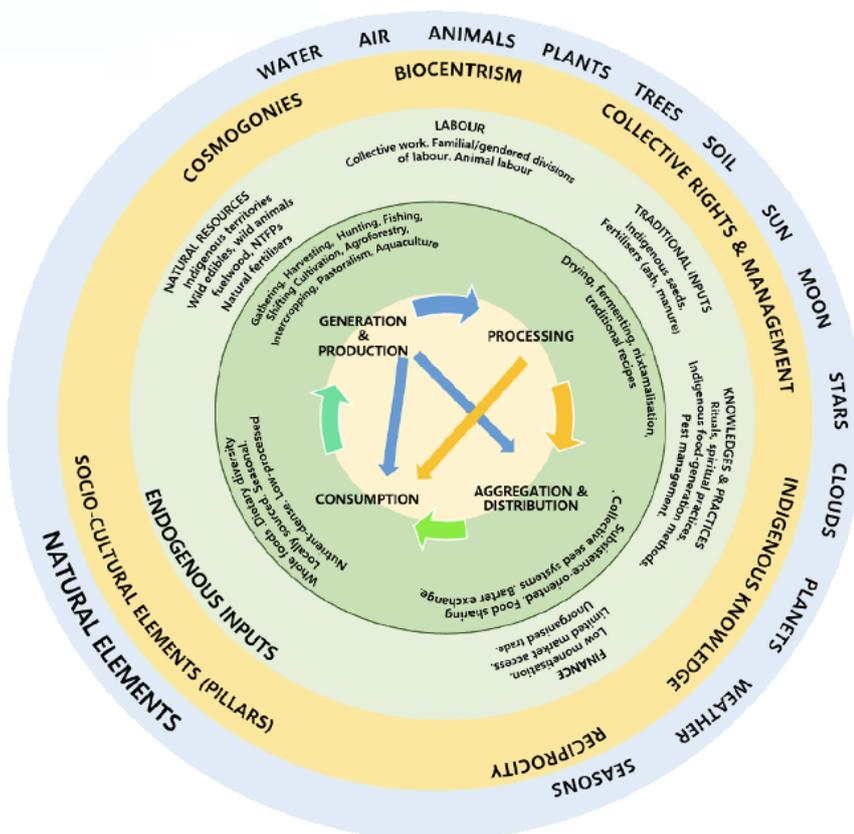— Unintended Consequences

1

A simple systems map *of the fishermen of Kiribati created by Gian Wieck and Malika Virah-Sawmy*

2

A complex systems map *from the Journal of Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*

3

An Indigenous Peoples' food systems wheel from the **FAO White/Wiphala Paper** *showing how processes of food generation and production, processing, distribution and consumption are intertwined and supported by a rich structure of material, epistemological and spiritual inputs.*

Effective Collaboration in Action:
Systems Mapping for beef and soy in Latin America

Our collaborative action platforms in Brazil and Paraguay completed a systems mapping exercise looking at beef and soy. Even early in the process, the mapping added value in two major ways:

1. The action of mapping the beef and soy systems together as a group built a shared understanding of the system among all stakeholders, which had not been the case previously. This shared language and understanding sparked a number of collective insights — for example, the need to create visibility and collaboration across production, market demand and financial transactions to ensure an integrated approach. One insight that became clear was that sustainable finance for farmers needed to be the cornerstone of this integration.

2. Mapping the system also allowed stakeholders to identify the biggest levers of change, which were then used to create a prioritized list of ideas to work on. The list included providing financial incentives for conservation and sustainability practices, paying for ecosystem services and standardizing definitions.

Use future techniques. A great way to identify common challenges, observe the current state of the system and lay the groundwork for innovation is through the use of future techniques. Starting to think about the future, based on our understanding of the system and current trends, prepares us to meet the future rather than think based only on the past. It can also help us adapt to emerging issues. We might consider different methodologies for scenario planning depending on the situation, length of the process, support and budget available:

1. **Simple Version** of Scenario Planning — a group activity that outlines different possible scenarios for the future of the effort.

2. **Targeted Scenario Analysis** — an approach that provides focused direction towards specific sustainable development policy and investment choices for public or private sector actors.

3. **Transformative Scenario Planning** — an approach to scenario planning intended to not only understand or adapt to the future, but also to shape the future.

Collaboratively develop a future direction and vision. Informed by activities like systems mapping and scenario planning, a helpful next step for the initial group of stakeholders is to co-create a shared direction and vision that is broad enough to engage a wide group of different stakeholders. It can be a collection of opportunities rather than a traditional vision statement, which runs the risk of being too narrow and excluding people too early on. This **visioning resource** from Wageningen University's Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships Guide can help.

Include marginalized groups in your system and stakeholder mapping. Inclusivity of all stakeholders is crucial when trying to understand a system. Traditionally marginalized groups such as women, indigenous/original people and smallholder farmers are often overlooked, but experience has shown that when such groups' input and "stake" in the outcome is included, results for these groups — and the whole — are better.

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. A clear understanding of the system dynamics, the situation and the potential future

2. An initial pathway for next steps

3. A core group of stakeholders that are energized by the opportunities

4. A shared vision and direction, as well as a set of personal connections to this vision

This **Guide to Getting it Right** from the Center for International Forestry Research explains how to operationalize inclusion in multi-stakeholder efforts.

BACKBONE SUPPORT

Support the process as the "Convener"

The main role of the Backbone Support in this Building Block is to coordinate a collaborative process for understanding the system and situation – to be the Convener. It's important that this initial team can serve as a role model for systems thinking, collaboration and working with power dynamics, so that they are equipped to help stakeholders find their own way on the journey.

Here are a few actions the Backbone Support team can take to support the "Understand the System" Building Block:

➤ **Find the right people for the team.** The size and type of Backbone Support team will depend on the type of convening process in place at this stage. You may have only one person on your team, with plans to recruit a bigger team later in the process. Or in the case of a one-off workshop or a series of dialogues, Backbone Support might already be available in the country office. For longer-term multi-stakeholder platforms, the full team might need to be recruited. A list of Backbone Support team roles and responsibilities for recruitment can be found **here.** One essential hire is an external, independent and experienced facilitator who is skilled and experienced with multi-stakeholder collaboration and systems thinking. An example Terms of Reference for this hire is available **here.**

➤ **Choose your approaches to food systems analysis.** Wageningen University and Research offer **The Food Systems Decision Support Toolbox** that helps to define what type of food systems analysis one can design and implement, depending on the specific context or budget available.

➤ **Map your stakeholders.** This early effort is important to ensure you have the right people in the room. Use **these guidelines** to help you think more deeply about what might be needed. This is key because it is the stakeholders who will describe how the system behaves, design a shared direction and vision and determine the best approach to work together for systemic change. Often, engaging with private sector stakeholders asks us to show up and communicate differently, so consider reading our specific guidance on working with the private sector **here.**

➤ **Conduct stakeholder interviews.** Gather information on stakeholders' challenges, questions and expectations in a way that increases the level of trust between facilitators and participants and helps build a generative field of connections. **This resource from the Presencing Institute** provides a good starting point.

Intentionally create conditions for effective collaboration. A key role of the Backbone Support team is bringing together a microcosm of the system around a common challenge, setting the tone and uncovering a shared intention. We start by building a safe space and conditions for the initial group of stakeholders. This doesn't just happen on its own; the Backbone is intentional in creating this. The first step is important as it lays the foundation for the future process and its impact. This could take the form of a one-day workshop on collaboration and systemic change, or a kickoff meeting for a longer process. The Backbone leader is responsible for maintaining the space and conditions for the length of the collaborative action. Resources created by **the System Leader's Fieldbook** and the **Presencing Institute** might help.

Design mechanisms for monitoring from the beginning. These could be getting feedback in writing or with a simple show of hands following a session.

Create efficient and organized systems for knowledge management. This is key to capturing and holding the learning in a place and way that is accessible and transparent to all, which supports all involved to adapt our actions and behaviour as we learn.

Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will

When creating the conditions for effective collaboration, leaders can focus on building the individual and collective qualities of:

1. Open mind: the capacity to suspend old habits of judgment and to see with fresh eyes

2. Open heart: the capacity to empathize and look at a situation through the eyes of somebody else

3. Open will: the capacity to let go of the old and let in the new

Effective Collaboration in Action: Co-Initiating in Mongolia

The agenda below is from the first multi-stakeholder meeting for the **Mongolia Sustainable Cashmere Platform,** which was held to initiate dialogue and inspire collaboration. This meeting was followed by a learning journey for trade and retail organizations to listen to and learn from cashmere herder perspectives. This agenda might be helpful to see how you can kick off a community conversation with a core group of stakeholders.

Topic	Time	Description
Registration of participants Welcoming tea and coffee	08.30 – 09.00	
Opening remarks from Ministers and Resident Representatives, Ambassadors, etc.	09.00 – 09.20	
Introduction to the day (UNDP Facilitator)	09.20– 09.45	Participant introduction Objectives of the day – agenda Defining multi-stakeholder collaboration – systemic change and what we mean by it? Mongolian context and specificities
Session 1: Panel discussion on multi-stakeholder partnerships *Moderated by UNDP*		
Seven panelists representing the government, development partners, standard setting organizations, and national/international supply chain firms discuss questions and answers focusing on collaboration potential.	09.45 – 11.00	Building the case for increased collaborative action on sustainable cashmere in Mongolia Understanding different perspectives/experience on multi-stakeholder collaboration Discuss what is needed from partners to achieve our respective goals
Coffee break	11.00 – 11.15	
Session 2: Identifying priority themes for collaborative action *Moderated by UNDP*		
Group discussions and plenary reporting	11.15 – 13.00	Jointly identifying/prioritizing where there is a strong case for increased collaboration and collaborative action (e.g. topics that are too difficult to address alone and where space for continuous dialogue are needed)
Lunch Break	13.00 – 14.00	
Session 3: Best practices and options for engagement *Moderated by UNDP*		
Presentation on multi-stakeholder partnerships best practices	14.00 – 14.30	UNDP National Commodity Platform and selected case studies Textile Exchange lessons learned from other commodities
Group discussions and plenary reporting	14.30 – 16.00	How to adapt best practices to the specific context of sustainable cashmere in Mongolia
Coffee break	16.00 – 16.15	
Session 4: Commitment to action, way forward and closing *Moderated by UNDP*		
Scales of Agreement Exercise	16.15 – 16.45	Tools for testing decisions and ensuring all views are heard
Commitment to action	16.45 – 17.00	Individual reflections and commitment
Way forward and closure of the meeting	17.00 – 17.30	
Networking event *hosted by Agronomes et Vétérinaires*	17.45 – 19.30	

Conduct a situational analysis that takes history into account. An Effective Collaborative Action process usually does not start from scratch. The Backbone Support team can collect and analyse data, evidence and background information already available to identify relevant knowledge and data gaps and share this analysis with stakeholders for reflection and digestion. Beyond the usual analysis looking at policies, markets and incentives, these tools may be helpful:

1. **UNDP Farmer Support System Toolkit** — has a diagnostic scorecard that allows you to assess the needs of the producers from a systemic view and can provide helpful direction on what may be needed.

2. **UNEP's Collaborative Framework for Food Systems Transformation** – offers useful insights on the drivers and benefits in analysing food systems in relation to policy making.

3. **UNDP Causality Assessment for Landscape Interventions (CALI) Guide** — analyzes the status and dynamics of changes in deforestation that take place at the landscape level, and assesses the impact of any project that focuses on reducing deforestation in that specific landscape.

Coordinate efforts to secure funding for the next stage. When we start a collaborative action process we don't have all the answers up front. After we understand the system, set our system boundaries for collaboration, and define how we want to work together, we can define how much financing we need. This budget can then be used to support additional investment or as a second stage in a funding partnership.

Act. Learn. Track. Even in the early stages of the journey, we remember two core things. First, we encourage process participants to focus on identifying quick wins through experimentation, adaptation and iteration. And second, we establish a consistent system for documenting results and learning along the way.

UNDP Farmer Support System Toolkit

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. A well-resourced Backbone Support team with a work plan containing clear roles and responsibilities

2. A stakeholder engagement strategy that meaningfully includes marginalized peoples

3. An analysis of the situation and system which the effort is trying to impact, including data and evidence

4. A secured budget for the next phase (or a fundraising proposal if needed)

5. A plan for monitoring and learning, identifying quick wins and demonstrating value to partners

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

For each Building Block, we share four essential practices that collectively work together to build the right mindset, heartset and action orientation for Effective Collaborative Action.

Here are the Essential Practices relevant for Understanding the System:

Essential Practice #1: Building Systems Leadership Capacity

1. Engage in systems leadership training at the beginning of the process. This could be organized for all participants or you could share a list of systems leadership training programs for individuals to sign up for.

2. Go on a **learning journey** to a relevant location. Given the future you want to create, which people and places are likely to teach you the most about that future and how to make it happen? Deep dive journeys are usually best when conducted in small groups of up to five people. Make sure that preparation and debriefing are done in a structured and timely fashion.

Essential Practice #2: Work with Power

1. Conduct a **power analysis:** A lot of people talk about power but very few really understand it. Yet power affects everything we do. Understanding the system also means discussing the role of power in making change happen. A power analysis can help groups navigate the different dimensions of power, to understand how social issues are shaped and what change could be achieved.

2. Pay attention to peripheral voices, minorities and less powerful groups, asking, "who is not at the table?" and inviting them in.

3. Consider designing separate spaces for connection and sharing among those who have less power, and for those who have more power.

Essential Practice #3:
Work Through Conflict

1. Create space in a stakeholder session for conversations about the "elephant in the room" so these topics are not ignored and are instead proactively explored for greater understanding. This will help to avoid breakdowns due to conflict that might come later.

2. Focus on listening and sharing perspectives and seeking to understand different interests and appreciating these differences. This can help address issues before they turn into conflict.

Essential Practice #4:
Effective Communication

1. Start a practice of continuous communication among stakeholders to build trust and common motivation.

2. Use a combination of virtual and in person communication tools that support collaboration, such as Zoom break outs, Slido, Mural, Trello.

See the Master Resource List for a range of tools and resources that can support this work.

Learning and Adapting Along the Way

Though it is a Building Block of its own, lessons from the "Learn and Adapt" section are relevant for all parts of the process. Here are a few ways that we can apply these practices to Understanding the System:

- How does a system learn? Learning won't occur if no one is paying attention or making a conscious effort to reflect. Identifying key areas to monitor and reflect on regularly is important. Understanding what's best to monitor at the system, community and individual level for learning is also important.

- Incorporate a moment of reflection at the beginning and/or at the end of each meeting. It can be as simple as asking all participants to answer one question. Building a learning culture by reflecting and discussing lessons being learned is critical to success. **This article from Harvard Business Review** shares a few other tips.

- This might be the time to introduce the Signals of Change measuring and evaluation framework to monitor learning. You can use this tool to create a baseline of stakeholders' understanding at the start of the learning journey. We recommend using this framework again mid-way through your work together as well as at the end to capture the qualitative learning that can be so hard to track.

"If you want to
go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far,
go together. .'"

- African proverb

Photo: ©UNDP Ghana

Building trust, partnership and shared commitment

2. CO-CREATE THE APPROACH

The "Co-create the Approach" Building Block takes the solid understanding and shared vision developed by the multi-stakeholder group in "Understand the System" and builds a clear path to action. Two outcomes are critical in this Building Block:

- Co-creating a strategy, roadmap or plan, along with a supporting monitoring system and

- Learning to co-create the "how" of working together now and in the future

Our experience has shown us that looking at complex problems from multiple perspectives shifts understanding of the collective in ways that create more innovative, in-depth and systemic solutions. Experience has also shown that when bringing together a diverse group of people with different mental models and values, building this way of collectively seeing and understanding takes time. Generating trust among stakeholders and building true partnership — where everyone has a stake in the outcome and a shared commitment to the collaborative effort — are critical.

Collaboration doesn't just happen; it is a capacity that must be built. A reflective practice model works well — where we as a group learn about a subject, have a place to apply it, and then reflect on what was learned and how to upgrade our thinking and approach moving forward. In particular, it is recommended in this Building Block to build capacity around understanding different perspectives, unearthing power dynamics and not just managing but getting the most from conflict.

Another way to build a co-creative approach is to encourage partnerships to test or pilot simple ideas. This can encourage two results: quick wins and learning from those wins, or failure and then learning and adapting. This iterative approach, when supported, can yield high value results. Quick wins at this stage can prove that collaborations are working, which might serve as useful evidence for funders, and also keep participants engaged with the satisfaction of taking action, finding success and learning.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

At this stage, stakeholders come together to define how we are going to work together, what actions we are going to take to transform the system, how we are going to know that change happened, how we will ensure that we are learning together and how we are going to communicate about our work.

As these outputs get created, we are learning how to best work together so that all voices are heard and factored into what is being created. We are building on each others' good ideas, navigating the power dynamics in the group and effectively working through conflict to build the best solutions.

We are experiencing how to work effectively with those who think differently and represent different perspectives. By listening and seeing the range of perspectives that exist, everyone's perspectives expand, and this creates more meaningful solutions and impact.

Great visions come to life when our hearts and minds are committed. By engaging with what people care about and what they are good at, co-creating and collaborating might be the best hard work we ever experience.

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

Co-create how you work together and make commitments

In this Building Block, various stakeholders from government, civil society, private sector and other development partners, are engaged in co-creating ways to move from shared vision to strategy to action.

To "Co-create the Approach," here are a few actions stakeholders can take:

> **Co-create the collaborative structure needed to achieve the vision.** This should include how the group will work together in person and online, how the group will be led, what roles are needed and an outline of responsibilities. The depth will vary depending on the efforts needed. Here is **more specific UNDP guidance** on how to set up a collaborative structure, with examples from our experience.

> **Co-create an agreed communications protocol.** This should support ongoing communication between group members as well as how we each communicate externally. Here is **guidance on what you could include in a communications protocol.**

> **Co-create a strategy or plan that lays out everyone's agreed commitments to achieve the shared vision.** Investments might be financial, social, time, in-kind and environmental. Here are some examples:

Sustainable Coffee Challenge Commitments

Indonesia National Action Plan on Sustainable Palm Oil

Ghana Cocoa & Forests Initiative National Implementation Plan

National Roadmaps for Deforestation-Free

> **Determine the level of formalization needed for the strategy/ roadmap/plan.** It is important to clarify early on how to validate the commitments and agreements that are being co-created. We should ask ourselves: When we have agreed on our collaborative actions, how will we formalize them? We may need different ways to do this depending on our organizational context. As a private sector participant, will I publish my commitments online? As the government, will I legalize my commitment or put it in my annual budget? As an NGO, can I commit via our website?

> **Co-create a way to ensure the sustainability of the collaborative effort beyond the existing funding.** We should ask ourselves: Who would convene stakeholders? Who would host the Backbone Support? How "official" do we need to be to successfully achieve our outcomes? What would be a good governance mechanism for working together? Guidance on what the UNDP Green Commodities Programme has found key to sustainability can be found **here.**

> **Build a practice of reflection.** Routinely take time to reflect after actions taken individually and collectively and share learnings with one another. Embed this practice in opening or closing sessions, or online in between dialogue sessions.

> **Tell the story and share the credit for success.** When groups take ownership of success, versus individuals or organizations, that indicates the trust built in the collaborative effort. This Stanford Social Innovation Review article shares more about the importance of sharing credit.

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. A governance document that describes the agreed collaborative structure

2. A communications protocol for ensuring effective communications about the effort

3. A strategy / plan / roadmap that documents agreed-upon collaborative action commitments

4. An investment plan to implement the strategy / plan / roadmap

5. An approach for the sustainability of the collaborative effort beyond the existing funding

6. Partnerships and projects to pilot and test ideas

Effective Collaboration in Action: Sustainable Oceans Lab

The **Sustainable Oceans Lab** is a collaborative action aimed at systemic change that addresses the question: How can we work together to enhance the sustainable management of our marine ecosystems globally?

The Lab was designed to support a portfolio of initiatives and efforts across multiple institutions and geographies. It uses a "Social Lab" methodology, which is aligned with our Effective Collaborative Action methodology and utilizes many of the same tools.

Below are two elements of this effort that illustrate our Understand the System, Co-create the Approach and Take Collaborative Action Building Blocks.

- *Using a framework for deconstructing problems.* The Lab provided members with the opportunity and tools to deconstruct problems, assess them in a group format and then rebuild them differently —instead of just identifying a problem and looking for a direct solution. This allowed the group to come to a common understanding and created space for innovative solutions to arise based on the different experiences and perspectives of the diverse group of participants.

- *Setting up prototypes.* A prototype is an action-oriented approach that tests new ideas and emergent strategies in order to address challenges systemically and foster innovation. The Lab uses an iterative prototyping approach that allows it to test potential solutions with the wider oceans community in order to assess probabilities of success. During the first module, small strategy groups set up four prototypes of solutions to be developed over the next 12 months. These solutions go beyond dealing with symptoms or a part of the whole and instead address the root causes of why things are not working in the first place. Selected prototypes were linked to the participants' organizations and initiatives, and prototyping teams met to test, reflect, consolidate, adapt and refine their strategies.

BACKBONE SUPPORT

Guardian of a collaborative, co-creative process

The role of the Backbone Support in this Building Block is focused on facilitation and acting as the guardian of the co-creative process. This is critical to ensure an inclusive process that is transparent and fair. The recruitment of a full Backbone Support team that started in "Understand the System" is completed here. The facilitator should already be in action.

Here are a few actions the Backbone Support team can take to support the "Co-create the Approach" Building Block:

> **Model the essential practices of collaboration.** The Backbone Support team should lead by example for essential practices like active listening, ensuring that less powerful voices are lifted up, leading, creating together, being comfortable with the unknown, communicating on time and transparently, holding the interests of the whole and prioritizing collective learning. Refer to the tools in our Essential Practices list. This **Collaborative Innovation Roadmap from CoCreative** gives a good sense of the journey and what is needed.

> **Build a culture that embraces mistakes.** To do the work needed, the Backbone Support team must work with stakeholders to build a culture of trust and psychological safety so that learning can occur. The courage to admit mistakes is contagious. We can encourage this by role modeling it.

> **Coordinate development of a governance structure.** Coordinate the co-designing and documenting of a collaborative governance structure that supports the current process. Ask questions like: How are decisions made? What will be needed from whom? How will this be supported? How will ideas and learning be shared across groups? Guidance from UNDP on how to do this, and examples of how it has been done, can be found **here.**

> **Support quick wins.** This team also supports achieving quick wins at this stage, particularly in partnership building and essential practices like communicating effectively, working with power dynamics and building systems leadership capacity.

> **Facilitate commitment-setting.** Shepherding and facilitating collective commitments, agreements and associated investment is a key task for the Backbone in this Building Block. Ensure that stakeholders make actionable plans and support partnership and alliance-building around commitments.

> **Facilitate collaborative communications planning.** Oversee the co-design of a communications plan by a working group or a few stakeholders related to the commitments and actions being formed. Guidance for this can be found **here**. Be aware that different types of stakeholders and organizations have different interests and needs. For example, working with the private sector often requires a different approach than working with the public sector. **Here is our guidance for working with the private sector** in such collaborative action spaces.

> **Take notes.** Creating a comprehensive record of every meeting and gathering — and sharing it — helps to build a culture of transparency and allows for access to the same information across the system.

> **Ask for feedback.** This is most valuable when it's requested on three levels — from the individual, from the community as a whole and from the system in the form of change indicators. Ask participants: what are you learning? What does the group need to learn? How does this help the system?

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. A collaborative governance document design process that is coordinated to stakeholder satisfaction

2. A communications plan that supports the protocol and essential practices on communication

3. Marginalized communities are represented and contributions are uplifted in the co-creative process

4. Stakeholder champions are identified and their systems leadership capacity developed

5. Stakeholder skillsets are upgraded to support co-creation (systems understanding, collaboration, leadership)

6. Stakeholders have access to capacity building and tools to help them deliver on their actions in this building block

What if we get stuck in our co-creative process?

- Take a break

- Separate collaboration between interest groups

- Create a special strategy for 1on1 engagement for highly influential but unsupportive stakeholders.

- Bring in conflict mediation expertise.

Effective Collaboration in Action: Co-designing an Approach to Tackle Homelessness in Perth

A strong example of "conditions for co-designing" comes from a Western Australia initiative working to end homelessness. This list was developed by stakeholders and agreed upon as ways of working together. It was shared in the initiative's **Co-design Toolkit.**

The Conditions for Co-design

Co-design can't happen in isolation, but instead requires us to focus on the conditions:

1. ***Willingness to act on new learnings****: Co-design should only be used when there is an appetite and a readiness to take action on the changes that result.*

2. ***Leadership Support****: The success of co-design depends on leaders supporting an open-ended design process and getting behind the changes that came from it.*

3. ***Time Carved Out****: Staff need to be allocated time to participate in co-design processes.*

4. ***Diversity of People****: Co-design requires the involvement of individuals with lived experience; and works best when staff from all levels of organisations participate.*

5. ***Optimism from leadership****: In co-design, we ideate many concepts that may not work, and then we test these ideas. This process works best when leaders are optimistic throughout.*

6. ***Open-mindedness****: When we hold back snap-judgements and listen with an open mind, we can discover new insights.*

7. ***Knowledge sharing throughout an organisation/system****: Leaders should enable ideas and knowledge to spread breadthwise throughout an organization.*

8. ***Distributed leadership****: Co-design should involve the empowerment of all-*

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

For each Building Block, we share four essential practices that collectively work together to build the right mindset, heartset and action orientation for Effective Collaborative Action.

Here are the Essential Practices relevant for Co-Creating the Approach:

Essential Practice #1: Building Systems Leadership Capacity

- Continue to build systems leadership capacity among stakeholders – particularly champions who can take more leadership of the process. Can this process pull out innate leadership qualities and build on them? Support more ownership of the whole process by the individuals in the group.

Essential Practice #2: Work with Power

- Continue to build capacity around power dynamics and understanding different perspectives.

Essential Practice #3: Work through conflict

- Continue to build capacity around managing and getting the most from conflict.

Essential Practice #4: Effective Communication

- Ideally, key messages are developed collaboratively so that different narratives have the opportunity to converge. Consider setting up a multi-stakeholder communication working group to focus communications between stakeholders on what people value in their hearts to sustain the momentum of the co-creative efforts.

- It is important that individuals in the co-creative process communicate often and effectively, bringing findings back to their organizations to ensure authentic representation and gather support from decision makers. Providing tools to support this effort, like tailor-made presentations and quickly-distributed meeting records, will help a lot.

- Deep listening is key to ensuring that team members understand each others' perspectives. Building this skill requires continual focus but will contribute to effective communication in a collaborative effort.

- Taking a systems approach means breaking silos. This applies to essential practices as well. Critical to the success of co-creating a shared approach is maintaining a balance of commitment between stakeholder interests. Gender equity must be respected, and marginalized participants need to not just be represented but actively encouraged to participate. This element is critical for each of the four essential practices.

Learning and Adapting Along the Way

- Though it is a Building Block of its own, lessons from the "Learn & Adapt" section are relevant for all parts of the process. Identifying and monitoring key areas for learning is helpful in each building block. Here are a few ways that we can apply Learn & Adapt to Co-creating the Approach:

- Adopt a reflective practice that has been co-created and use it regularly to support the group's learning through and from experience. This in turn supports the group in gaining new insights into themselves and the collective. This practice should be fully embedded among stakeholders at this stage, with time allocated in the majority of group interactions.

- All the work of the Backbone Support team and collaborative processes — from the development of a workshop agenda, to complex negotiation processes, to the design of a strategy to communicate change and impact — are opportunities to role model cycles of reflective practice, as well as maintain trusted relationships with the project in action.

- Depending on the length of the collaborative action process, the Signals of Change framework can be used again here to understand where and how learning is happening and how we are changing as a system ourselves. Share current results against earlier results and have a discussion about what they are saying. Continue asking the question: is there anything that can be done better here?

- Encourage stakeholders to bring what they are learning back into the system they are there to represent. This spreads the learning around into adjacent systems.

- Check out this **resource** about learning from mistakes for tools that can be helpful in this stage.

> "I raise up my voice—not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard ...we cannot succeed when half of us are held back."
>
> - Malala Yousafzai

Photo: ©UNDP Peru

3. TAKE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

Experimenting our way forward together

Whether the co-created strategy, roadmap or plan is for five years or for the next few months ahead, if you've made it here with some co-created commitments and agreements in place, it's time to take action. Congratulations are in order! The bonds of partnership and trust have been strengthened; now we need to test them in practice and ensure that they are maintained as we implement our joint commitments.

In this Building Block, stakeholders see their systems leadership capacity being clearly demonstrated through the process of Taking Collaborative Actions using different approaches and learning from results. These same individuals can be seen leading action in their organizations, testing ideas and improving on them. At the same time, there is a sense of individual and collective accountability and monitoring of the work, ensuring that action and commitments are being seen through. This action and reflection cycle is not only more transparent, but it also sparks enthusiasm for sharing and learning because it illuminates the sense of being part of the system as a whole and recognizes the value it provides.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

Taking Collaborative Action strengthens the work of building trust, partnerships and collective capacities. We are all able to take action on commitments and there is space to experiment, test assumptions and adapt and incorporate the emerging issues that arise as part of the system's transformation.

Commitments are prioritized for action according to their leverage point in the system, determined by the mapping done previously. **A Participatory Monitoring System** has been established to document both the learning and the growth of the effort, as well as to report on the agreed joint commitments.

At this point, collaborative learning is intensified and actively shared across the stakeholder group and with the wider stakeholder universe of each participating organization. It could also be a moment of expansion — other initiatives might choose to use a similar process in a new area. The team is on the look-out for a quick win around the process being utilized in other systems close by.

New actors continue to come into the effort. Ingrained reflective practices are used with these new participants to strengthen collaboration and partnerships. The capacity to lead, innovate and adapt is strong and the group feels collective ownership of the actions. Funding has been confirmed to support the establishment of the future collaborative host and structure, to implement commitments, and it will adapt as new learnings surface during the roll-out.

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

Put commitments into practice, monitor and share learnings.

The stakeholders have co-created commitments that are now being put into action. When "Taking Collaborative Action," stakeholders should aim to:

Fulfill commitments. Stakeholders should make good on the commitments made through partnerships and alliances within their organizations or with other organizations. This requires right-sized supporting personnel and funding, as well as continued collaboration with their effort's stakeholders.

Establish the future collaborative structure and process. This has an institutional host and funding model, as agreed through a co-created process. The financial independence will ensure that we are able to continue to work in true partnership, maintain trusted relationships and strengthen and expand leadership in organizations. If a new structure is decided, it's important to have the flexibility to evolve according to the future needs while also maintaining Backbone Support for facilitating collaboration, working with power, experimenting, innovating and managing conflict.

Document and share change, impact and learning through a Participatory Monitoring System. A culture of regularly sharing progress, challenges and learning is built through transparent communication and psychological safety. When stakeholders feel safe enough to be vulnerable and share what didn't work as much as what did work, more people ultimately benefit.

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. Delivery on individual and joint commitments

2. Periodic monitoring and reporting of collaborative actions

3. Regular communication on progress to stakeholders' organizations and interested parties

4. Joint commitments are adapted as needed

5. Systemic changes are recorded, shared and celebrated (as they emerge)

Here is further guidance on **how to establish a Participatory Monitoring System** for such collaborative efforts to change systems.

BACKBONE SUPPORT

Monitor and encourage accountability.

A key role of the Backbone Support in this Building Block is to empower and enable stakeholders to take action on their joint commitments in the co-created model of partnership and collaboration, while maintaining an attitude of experimentation and learning.

Here are a few actions the Backbone Support team can take to support the "Take Collaborative Action" Building Block:

≫ **Ensure that commitments meet a range of needs.** It is especially important to make sure that gender equity, youth and marginalized peoples are considered when delivering on commitments. Consider a way to incorporate traditional knowledge into the design of the learning process. Some examples include using experiential methods such as theater, activities, play or mural painting so that groups are able to tap into other ways of knowing when examining a subject. Exploring and working with these other ways of knowing can bring more depth to solutions.

≫ **Keep stakeholders accountable.** The Backbone Support team should hold lines of accountability to commitments, based on pre-agreed ways of doing so. They should continue to facilitate cycles of reflection amongst the collective. This strengthens a culture of trust, learning and transformational change.

≫ **Track learning progress.** By now the **Signals of Change framework** has been used multiple times since the beginning of the process. The change and growth acknowledged in stakeholders should be clearly seen and celebrated. Share with stakeholders, funders and others as appropriate. Additional tools for monitoring and evaluating learning in systemic change work can be found **here** and **here**.

≫ **Offer "Reflection Only" sessions with stakeholders.** Throughout the journey, periodically hold space for stakeholders to reflect and only reflect. During these sessions, invite participants into a state of being, rather than a state of doing and acting. And don't forget to evaluate, taking time for a discussion following the reflection to talk about how it could be better next time.

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. A Participatory Monitoring System is established and collecting results

2. Learning and changes are monitored and tracked using the Signals of Change tool

3. Accountability is strong, actions are being taken and the effort is adapting where needed

4. A future collaborative structure is established

5. Results and changes are communicated in alignment with the communications protocol

Use the
Signals of Change framework

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

For each Building Block, we share four essential practices that collectively work together to build the right mindset, heartset and action orientation for Effective Collaborative Action.

Essential Practice #1: Building Systems Leadership Capacity

- Consider encouraging stakeholders to take what they've learned about leadership and collaboration to build leadership capacity in their own organizations. Facilitating discussions around how to do this will make it likelier to happen.

- The leadership skill sets needed most in "Take Collaborative Action" are around adaptability and resilience. Rarely do things go exactly as planned. Focus on: how do we build the group's ability to adapt? How do we stay optimistic and keep up our resilience through intentional practices? Here is a **good summary from Generative Somatics** of in-depth research on how we can build our resilience.

Essential Practice #2: Work with Power

- Ensure that the actions being taken have a balance of commitments across stakeholder interests, especially those typically marginalized like women, smallholders and indigenous participants. Check in and ask: how are we working with power as we move into action?

Essential Practice #3: Work Through Conflict

- As plans move into action, different perspectives and understandings can be revealed that were not seen before. Conflict may arise and being prepared and ready to work through it will be important here. Consider running a working-through-conflict workshop for your stakeholders.

Essential Practice #4: Effective Communication

- In this Building Block, communications should focus on telling the story of the efforts' successes and failures, as well as what is being learned.

- There should be a communication plan that ensures that key stakeholders are included in what is being communicated. There are a range of communications that will be relevant for your effort — from reporting results to key stakeholders to sharing lessons learned with other collaborative action initiatives.

Learning and Adapting Along the Way

- Though it is a Building Block of its own, lessons from the "Learn and Adapt" section are relevant for all parts of the process. Here are a few ways that we can apply these practices to taking collaborative action:

- Learning is at its richest here, as everyone continues to learn from doing and shares openly and honestly with each other about what's working, what's not working and what questions they still have. This will be supported by all the practices, systems and tools set up during the process to date.

- Use the **Signals of Change** framework as a monitoring tool again at this point in the process to monitor how much change and learning occurred for each of the stakeholders over the course of the collaborative effort. Use this information to tell a compelling story of the learning journey that the whole group took and capture the qualitative learnings that can be so hard to track.

Use the Signals of Change framework

"When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new."

- JP McEvoy

4. LEARN AND ADAPT

Transforming systems through experiential learning – and making it a habit

Why is Learning and Adapting important in systemic change? Because the solution is rarely known at the outset, participants have the opportunity to engage in learning-by-doing and adapting to discover the best way forward. Whether it's a working group that learns a hoped-for-solution won't work, or a task force that realizes the funding promised is no longer available, or evidence for a committee's hypothesis that didn't materialize, every group of stakeholders trying to change a system will experience a dead-end, a roadblock, a failure and many complex challenges — if they are approaching it right.

Learning and adapting is key throughout the effort, not only when we've achieved our goals. Therefore, developing a culture of learning starts at the beginning of the journey and continues until the end.

What do we know about people who are good at learning? Learners are people who don't necessarily want to fail, but who are not afraid to admit failure and mistakes made. They embrace change, are good listeners, have a bias for action, aren't afraid to be different, want to have impact and have a purpose driven by empathy. Enabling and building these capacities is critical. They build psychological safety within the group, which in turn allows us to be courageous when taking chances with ideas, proposing potential solutions, building on others' ideas and being vulnerable.

Adaptation requires certain mindsets, behaviours, and competencies too. Participants are better able to adapt to their situation if there is a focus on results and impacts; if there is emphasis on facilitating learning and building relationships and if there is support with navigating change. The structure of the effort also needs to provide space for continuous learning and improvement.

Researchers have long understood the importance of a reflective practice to support learning and development. David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is one model that is a valuable tool for learning and adapting. Illustrated by Carlotta Cataldi.

WHAT HAPPENS DURING THIS BUILDING BLOCK?

Embedding a culture of learning and adapting starts with taking the time to "Understand the System" at the beginning of the collaborative action. At that point, we design the practices and processes needed into all aspects of the work. We design sessions to ensure that different types of learners can learn; model that taking calculated risks and failure is a part of learning and provide frequent experiences of effective collaborative learning.

The **Participatory Monitoring System** tracks the shared vision and commitments in the long term. This includes indicators of behavior change identified over time, and supports the transparent sharing of collective learning outcomes, allowing all stakeholders to take accountability for the joint effort.

At the end of this journey, we are able to show strong signs of hearts and minds shifting towards the transformed system we envisioned. We communicate our learnings with other groups who might be interested in the outcomes. We proactively share our story of change and transformation through articles, interviews and case studies that transparently include our failures and learnings as well as our successes. We spread our learnings with the hope that others will be able to apply our process while avoiding some of our missteps.

STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

Communicate progress, adapt from learning and share credit.

Here, stakeholder actions are two-fold. First, we participate in learning and adapting throughout the process (which is why we share guidance for "Learning and Adapting Along the Way" within each Building Block). And second, we embrace learning at the end of a collaborative action, where the focus is on harvesting and communicating the lessons from the project.

For this second effort, stakeholders should be well-prepared since they have been engaging with learning processes and practices over the course of the collaborative action. Here are a few actions we can take:

> **Determine the collective story we want to tell about what was learned and accomplished.** Ask: How do we want to speak about where we started, what's been adapted from the initial focus and where we are now? How is it working? There should be enough trust in the collective to be transparent about challenges and failures, as well as successes. Tell the story of learning and transformation alongside the results the effort is focused on (i.e., improvements related to the specific commodity or food system, or the success of a dialogue between key groups).

> **Prepare stakeholders (and their organizations) to share credit for collective success and impact.** At this point, the pieces come together in a collective impact puzzle, with each participant an author of the transformation in their own way. It is important that stakeholders have a conversation with their organizations' leadership and communications/marketing teams on messaging that honors the collaboration to ensure that credit is shared collectively.

Measure and evaluate the change that has been made. Participate in evaluation, reflection and sense-making exercises throughout the journey. Contribute to **the Participatory Monitoring System** and **Signals of Change** frameworks to collaboratively document and assess systemic change. Track quantitative elements such as new policies, regulations and laws passed by the government, private sector and NGOs. Track qualitative changes if there are new ways of being, working or ideating being launched or embedded. And don't forget to include new partnerships or alliances formed because of the effort. For some great tools on building habits and a culture for learning look **here**.

Look back to celebrate where we are now. This moment gives us the opportunity to look back and review our initial vision and understanding of the system. Chances are, the world around us has changed since we started our collaborative action.

IDEAL OUTCOMES FOR STAKEHOLDER ACTIONS

1. Learnings are shared and communicated

2. Any changes in the system, stakeholder community and/or individuals are monitored, documented, measured and communicated

3. Next steps, if any, are identified

4. The collaborative effort can work with the emergent future

BACKBONE SUPPORT

Embed learning and adaptation, while monitoring, documenting change and measuring impact.

There are two main roles of the Backbone Support team in this Building Block that parallel the actions taken by stakeholders. First, from the start of the effort we embed and support a learning culture in the day-to-day work. And second, we support the effective overall learning and wrap-up of the effort.

During this final step, here are a few actions the Backbone Support team can take to support the overall "Learn & Adapt" effort:

> **Model the learning and adapting capacities.** Throughout the process — but particularly at the very end — it's important for the Backbone Support team to be role models demonstrating what it looks like to learn and adapt. We should embrace experimentation and be courageous about admitting mistakes and adapting from failures. And we should be consistent with sharing credit for the collective impact made by the group.

> **Hold the long view.** The Backbone focuses on holding the long view of the collective, understanding that systemic change takes time and is a continuous process of experimenting and adapting as a whole.

> **Convene around learning.** At key moments in the journey, the Backbone Support convenes key stakeholders to review collaborative action results, collaborative approaches and impact so far. This helps us adapt how we work together and what we are doing together, in service of our shared vision.

> **Adapt our set-up as the journey continues.** Sometime towards the end of a collaborative action, a new home is found for the effort. In this case, the team itself will need to evolve and adapt to support this different stage in the journey.

IDEAL OUTCOMES OF BACKBONE SUPPORT

1. Practices, processes and systems for learning and adapting are embedded throughout all Building Blocks

2. Results and impact are reported through a Participatory Monitoring System

3. All stakeholders are telling the collective story

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

For each Building Block, we share four essential practices that collectively work together to build the right mindset, heartset and action orientation for Effective Collaborative Action.

Here are the Essential Practices relevant for Learning and Adapting:

Essential Practice #1: Building Systems Leadership Capacity

- Be in the practice of learning something new. It could be embracing curiosity and asking more questions, listening more and speaking less, letting yourself be uncomfortable or reaching out to a stakeholder you haven't spoken to yet. The next time something changes, practice embracing it.

- Normalize making mistakes and adapting from those mistakes.

- Consider using **tools to support reflective practice** and **for learning from mistakes throughout your journey.**

- Help others adapt by focusing on results and impacts; facilitating learning and relationship-building and supporting others with navigating change and continuous learning and improvement.

Essential Practice #2: Work with Power

- During the work of the collaborative action, create a feedback loop of reflection on successes and failures in working with power. This ensures that mistakes are noted, new approaches are taken and successes are celebrated.

- At the end of the effort, capture what was learned about working with power and consider contributing to the larger network of multi-stakeholder initiatives to bring learnings into the wider system.

Essential Practice #3: Work through conflict

- Track what is being learned about working through conflict along the lifespan of the collaborative effort, ensuring that new and successful approaches are shared.

Essential Practice #4: Effective Communication

- Communicate with those outside the effort about what is being learned. Share the story of the work and look out for where else you can apply this methodology.

Effective Collaboration in Action: Insights from Allies

In 2020, the UNDP Green Commodities Programme convened a co-inquiry group with a small number of partners and allies who have a good understanding of what it means to work systemically through multi-stakeholder collaboration. The key insights from these thought leaders are good food for thought when using this methodology.

Key insights

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 a systems approach.

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 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. That is, arguably, a relatively easy leverage point for change in the field.

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.

"One of the great errors organizations make is shutting down what is a natural, life-enhancing process — chaos. We are terrified of chaos. As a manager, it signals failure. But if you move out of control and into an appreciation of natural order, you understand that the only way a system changes is when it is far from equilibrium, when it moves from the 'quiet' we treasure and is confronted with the choice to die or reorganize. And you can't reorganize to a higher level unless you risk the perils of the path through chaos."
- Margaret J. Wheatley

Photo: © UNDP Indonesia

A final reflection

In the previous chapter, we shared the importance of Learning and Adapting as a key Building Block that doesn't just wrap up the project but is incorporated throughout.

So we would be remiss if we didn't take a moment to engage in reflective practice ourselves on the process of putting together this Guide to Effective Collaborative Action.

Through reflection, three insights and commitments have become clear:

> This guide was designed to be purposeful and flexible. We see it as a living document within a living system. Systemic change work is not second nature for most of us. It requires us to unlearn old ways of thinking, continue learning new things and adapt to what's needed next. ***We commit to regularly adapting and improving this guide to support the critical work being done on the ground.***

> One of the best ways to learn is from experience. So, we see it as essential to facilitate learning across the oceans of our collective experience. We commit to offering multiple opportunities to interact with each other: as members of our digital community practice; by joining tailor made workshops and training; and through requesting expert advice and coaching.

> There is so much we can learn from other leaders in the collaborative action and systemic change spaces, as well as our UNDP colleagues driving innovation and change on the ground. ***We commit to continuing to seek knowledge from these partners and integrate our learnings into future iterations of this methodology.***

We hope you have learned from this Guide to Effective Collaborative Action. If you have feedback or suggestions on how we can make it better, please write to us at methodology.feedback@undp.org.

Master resource list

For easy access, we have compiled all the resources referenced throughout this guide in this list.

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

Essential Practice #1: Build Systems Leadership Capacity

- **System Change Education** — a comprehensive list of tools, competencies, frameworks and approaches to systems leadership.
- **Systems Leadership Skill Builder** — this skill builder helps leaders identify five types of systems within which they could be operating, along with common roadblocks and skills and attributes to develop.
- **Learning Journeys** — site visits to relevant locations or places with great potential, usually best when conducted in small groups of up to five people.
- **Systems Leadership Training** — expert training videos on systems leadership for the Green Commodities Community.
- Here is a **good summary from Generative Somatics** of in-depth research on how we can build our resilience.
- A Practical Guide to **Create A Culture That Turns Mistakes Into Success**

Essential Practice #2: Work with Power

- **Power Ranking** — experiential exercise that allows the group and individuals to see and discuss how people are influential in the hierarchy of a group and its impact.
- **Stakeholder Power in Food Systems** — this exercise gives a deeper understanding of the role of stakeholders in the food system, visualizing the relative importance and influence of each stakeholder as well as their place within the food system.
- **Power: A Practical Guide to Facilitating Social Change** — a handbook that encompasses a number of activities and "how-to's" for understanding power and how to work with it in a group.

Essential Practice #3: Work Through Conflict

- **Multiple Perspectives** —an experiential exercise that helps a group see an issue from as many vantage points as possible, which can help diffuse tension and open conversation around difference.
- **Conflict Style** — this exercise generates insights on how different conflict-handling styles affect interpersonal and group dynamics and empowers participants to select the appropriate conflict-handling style for any situation.
- **Paired Walk** — this exercise involves walking and talking with someone as a way to practice listening, generate understanding and foster collaboration.

Essential Practice #4: Effective Communication

- **Communication and Systems Change** — identifies five ways in which systemic change communications strategies can vary from traditional communications strategies.
- **The Four Levels of Listening or Deep Listening** — listening is key to many aspects of Effective Collaborative Action; these two resources bring its importance to life.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Systems Mapping

- **Tools for Systems Thinkers: Systems Mapping** — a write-up on systems mapping
- **Kumu** — an online tool to develop systems maps
- Systems Practice Team Course — **free online training by Acumen** on how to build a system map and identify leverage points
- **A simple systems map** of the fishermen of Kiribati created by Gian Wieck and Malika Virah-Sawmy
- **A complex systems map** from the Journal of Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems
- An Indigenous Peoples' food systems wheel from the **FAO White/Wiphala Paper**

Scenario Planning

- **Simple Version** of Scenario Planning — a group activity that outlines different possible scenarios for the future of the effort
- **Targeted Scenario Analysis — an** approach that provides focused direction towards specific sustainable development policy and investment choices for public or private sector actors
- **Transformative Scenario Planning —** an approach to scenario planning intended to not only understand or adapt to the future, but also to shape the future

Situational Analysis and Assessment

- Wageningen University and Research offer **The Food Systems Decision Support Toolbox** that helps to define what type of food systems analysis one can design and implement, depending on the specific context or budget available
- **UNDP Farmer Support System Toolkit** — has a diagnostic scorecard that allows you to assess the needs of the producers from a systemic view and can provide helpful direction on what may be needed.
- **UNEP's Collaborative Framework for Food Systems Transformation** – offers useful insights on the drivers and benefits in analysing food systems in relation to policy making.
- **UNDP Causality Assessment for Landscape Interventions (CALI) Guide** — analyzes the status and dynamics of changes in deforestation that take place at the landscape level and assesses the impact of any project that focuses on reducing deforestation in that specific landscape.

Backbone Support

- **List of Backbone Support Team Roles and Responsibilities** — to be used for recruitment
- **Example Terms of Reference** for an external, independent and experienced facilitator
- **UNDP Collaborative Structure Guidance**
- **UNDP Guidance** on Securing the Sustainability of the Collaborative Effort
- **System Leader's Fieldbook** — resource that can help with creating conditions for effective collaboration
- **Presencing Institute** — resource that can help with creating conditions for effective collaboration
- **Collaborative Innovation Roadmap from CoCreative** gives a good sense of the journey and what is needed.

Stakeholder Engagement

· **Visioning resource** from Wageningen University's Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships Guide — can help with co-creating a shared direction and vision that is broad enough to engage a wide group of different stakeholders

· **Guide to Getting it Right** from the Center for International Forestry Research — explains how to operationalize inclusion in multi-stakeholder efforts

· **UNDP Green Commodity Programme's Stakeholder Mapping Guidelines** – to help create a stakeholder engagement strategy / plan and budget

· **UNDP Guidance** on Working with the Private Sector

· **Dialogue Interviews** from the Presencing Institute — resource that can help with conducting stakeholder interviews

Communications

· Stanford Social Innovation Review article on the **importance of sharing credit in communicating about the impact of a collective effort**.

· **UNDP Communications Protocol Guidance**

· **Strategic and Effective Communications guidance.**

Examples of Co-Created Strategies / Plans

· **Sustainable Coffee Challenge Commitments**

· **Indonesia National Action Plan on Sustainable Palm Oil**

· **Ghana Cocoa & Forests Initiative National Implementation Plan**

· **National Roadmaps for Deforestation-Free Commodity Commitments in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador**

Other Examples

· **Mongolia Sustainable Cashmere Platform**
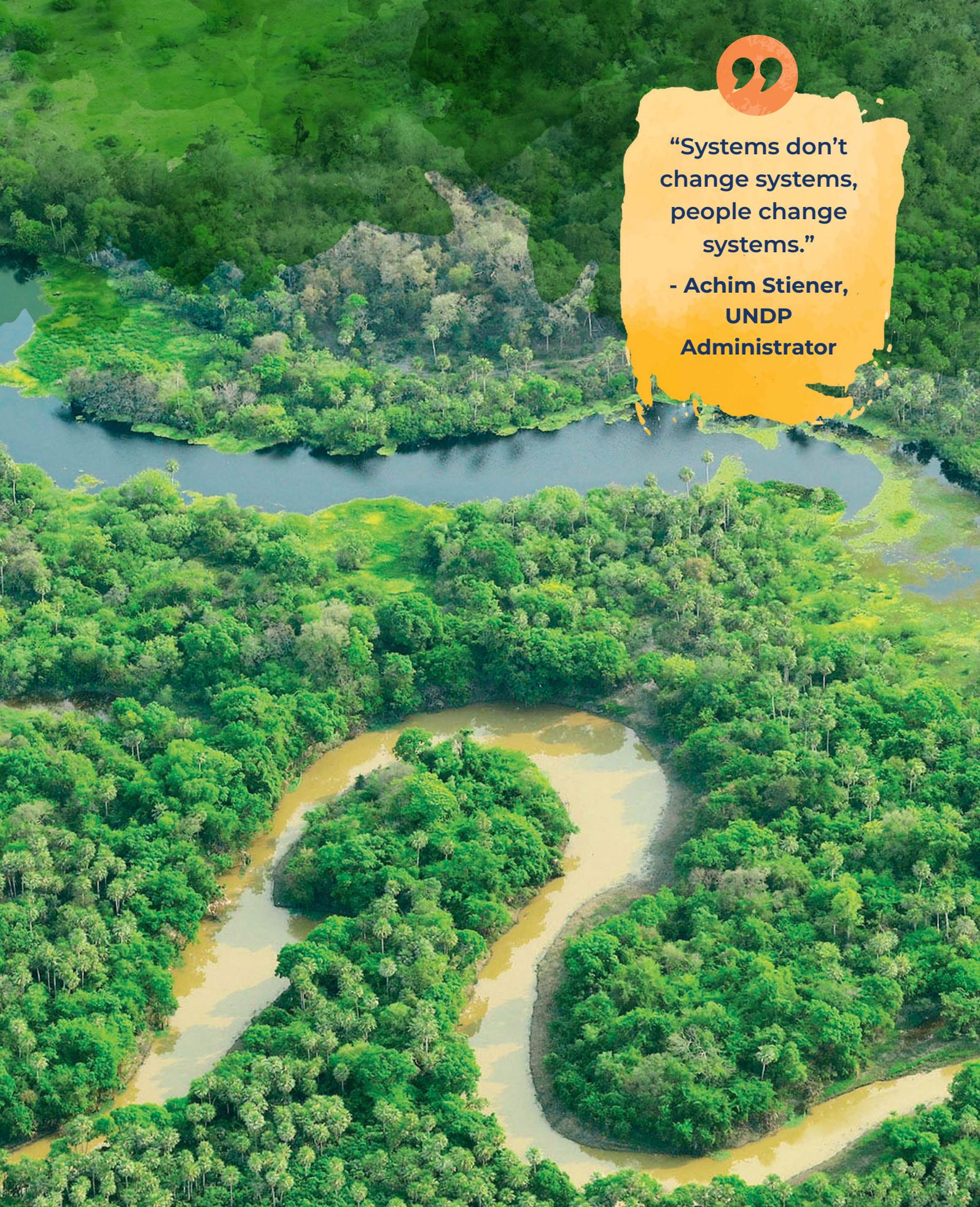
· **Sustainable Oceans Lab**

Monitoring, Learning, Adapting

· **Participatory Monitoring System Guidance**

· **Signals of Change Framework**

· **David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle**

· Four Quadrant Partners have great tools on **building habits and a culture for learning**

· USAID resource on **systems approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning**

· **4 Ways to Create a Learning Culture on Your Team**

Beyond this master list, we have also collated and curated additional resources for those of us who want to know more.

You can access additional resources here.

"Systems don't change systems, people change systems."

- Achim Stiener, UNDP Administrator

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