

Our learnings regarding Systems Change

Illustrated by lessons from the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues

The act of designing systems interventions		
Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit Dialogues
1. Local focus and leadership	We focus on a real challenge in a defined place, supporting local direction and authority to create ownership.	<i>National governments nominated convenors who chose the focus, discussion topics and</i>
2. Legitimacy	We provide a structure within which things can legitimately happen and recognize that legitimacy in a complex system may not be clear and will shift over time.	<i>Initial legitimacy provided by UNSG's call for a Food Systems Summit in support of SDG0; strengthened by the inclusive dialogue process</i>
3. Diversity and inclusivity	We help people find new and surprising connections and know that diversity of voices is critical for breakthrough.	<i>Principles of engagement and specific guidance for inclusivity</i>
4. Flexibility and co-creation	We enable people to amend the process to suit their circumstances, the changing mood and environment, to allow an ongoing process of co-creation.	<i>Standardised approach adapted to local context but within principles of engagement of the FSS</i>
5. Identity of the work	We codify a common understanding and language and build belief in the importance of the work and its processes	<i>Creation of common process with defined roles (convenor, curator, facilitator), "pathway", "official feedback form"...</i>
6. Pace, rhythm and readiness	We encourage those leading change to adapt their rhythm and play with time. We are with them as they test when the time is right and then to jump	<i>We encouraged convenors to use a feasible timeframe while also constraining time around national pathways for the summit, to encourage the crystallisation of ideas and a collective global momentum for change</i>
7. Viewing the whole	We view designing systems interventions as an act of enabling the system to develop as far as it can within the overall direction of change. This requires avoiding bias, viewing the system as a whole, not from a specific point of view	<i>We constantly sought to hear different viewpoints, oscillated quickly between fine detail and the big picture, and developed tools that recorded the detail of dialogue outcomes enabling us to see patterns and connections.</i>
8. One step at a time with the direction in mind	we adapt as we go, empowering others through involving them as we focus on the present and what is happening, while thinking of what comes next.	<i>National pathways were always in the design of the process but highlighted only close to the Summit. Some convenors were anxious for detailed guidance on their pathways, but we maintained a broad perspective, encouraging them to shape the documents and process to suit their needs.</i>

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The art of accompanying people through a systems intervention

Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit
9. The tempo of trust	We act deliberately to establish and maintain trusted relationships. We make those relationships in service of those whom we are accompanying, and not the wider process.	<i>Weekly ‘convenor connection’ sessions gave a rhythm to the work, maintaining a regular pattern of interaction and flow of up-to-date information. Relationships were built with convenors every step of the way</i>
10. Language and multi-lingualism	We invest in translation and interpretation services, reach out to people in their language, with materials and instructions that they can easily engage with.	<i>A multilingual team and communications (online sessions, website, manuals...) were a key factor in creating connections across the globe.</i>
11. Radical listening to meet people where they are	We listen not just to the words but also to the emotions, the intent, the story behind the story. We try to feel for what could be possible, in each context and moment, never imposing thought or solutions.	<i>Working with empathy meant listening carefully to the political and cultural context, being aware of personal circumstances and adapting relationships depending on the unfolding situation, including calling convenors when they or their country faced a critical challenge or crisis.</i>
12. Communicating with simplicity & integrity	What we say matters. We try to speak in plain sentences and words. When we don’t have an answer, we say so. We listen deeply to what people say and how they say it. We tune in to guide our responses.	<i>We tried to use simple language in the facilitation of convenor connection sessions, manuals and synthesis documents. When we did not know information (e.g. run-in to the pre-summit or in the forming of coalitions), we said it, yet without blaming others for frustrating situations.</i>
13. Making it easy	We try to make it easy for people: to see what comes next, to do the right thing, to access the people shaping the process, to adapt and disagree. We know that making things easy can be hard.	<i>We built an online gateway as a simple point of access for people looking for information, constantly seeking to improve its navigation. We created handbooks, manuals and two-page pdf ‘how to’ guides to support people at each stage of the process.</i>
14. Enabling connections	We avoid becoming the only point for connection, which would limit each system’s capacity to act and adapt. We connect people in systems with each other to explore and resolve their own differences.	<i>The process was characterised by a constant effort to develop connections and relationships: between countries with similar geographies or issues together; between organisations; between convenors, coalition leads and action tracks...</i>
15. Visibility and transparency	We make what we do visible and transparent. We sense that everyone owns the process, and their generosity is both virtuous and healthy.	<i>The Gateway) hosts all the feedback forms from national, independent and global dialogues and all the data on them can be downloaded by anyone so they can be analysed and further explored.</i>
16. Audacity and tenacity	Carefully and repeatedly testing the validity and legitimacy of the work gives the confidence to take bold steps. Conscientiously deepening understanding of progress and priorities ensures we step from solid ground. We can be bold but never reckless.	<i>We meticulously kept records of every contact and activities within the process. This enabled us to see the overall trend alongside the granularity that made the process come to life. We could make significant decisions (eg about the focus on pathways), based on a deep awareness of context.</i>

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Illustrated by lessons from the UN Food Systems Summit Dialogues

The experience of being involved in systems interventions.

Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit
17. Politics and complexity	Politics is the way societies hold the tensions of complexity. We expect difference, machinations, posturing and positioning. It is part of the fabric of the system. It cannot be resolved even when discrete parts and activities are being explored. The more we engage, the more we see working with politics as positive.	<i>We experienced politics at multiple levels. We were regularly engaged with political leaders and their teams. We gained a deeper understanding of the issues that mattered in each specific context and who needed to be involved.</i>
18. Managing paradox	We hold together different thoughts and opinions, within the work and within the team. We are looking for what connects not distinguishes. We help people to make sense of situations and scenarios, describing them, testing them, and reflecting on them. Moving forward means adapting as understanding changes.	<i>There were constant differences of opinion at all levels. We tried to see each viewpoint as valid from the perspective of the person holding it. We tried to see this as valuable, enabling us to gain a deeper comprehension. We tried to hold difference as an asset rather than rush to resolve it.</i>
19. It's not about us	When a system connects more intimately with itself, the tensions and pressures in that system can become channelled towards or through us. This can be deeply uncomfortable and distressing. We try to avoid being given ownership of the system's problems.	<i>Being the focal point in many conversations meant that many pressures were aired in conversation with us. Our response was to try and illuminate what was happening in these tensions but not take sides or ownership for finding a solution. It was important to never take sides and to give the challenge of finding the solutions to those directly involved.</i>
20. Earning authority	We know that if a system is functioning effectively as a system, the intervention will be superfluous. Until then, we will find ourselves (and others) repeatedly questioning the limit of our authority. But we know that if we stick closely to the authority that already exists, we can be seen as acting to perpetuate the existing system. We seek to create our roles by constant exploration of what is possible. The roles are established through consent and the authority to operate is then earned.	<i>Throughout the dialogues process, we were acutely conscious that as a newer form of intervention the limit of our role and responsibility was at times unclear and untested. We explored what could be achieved through dialogic intervention, aiming to be clear about what we were doing and sharing that with others. We encouraged national convenors to do the same. We constantly questioned ourselves, asking if what we might do was a legitimate activity or next step. We were alert to the political environment and saw our work as an intervention in that environment, as the national dialogues were an intervention in national food systems.</i>
21. Navigating emotions / the importance of care	Moments of transition in systems arouse strong passions. Perhaps we realise that if we don't feel it, it isn't happening. Yet if we become gripped by our emotion our ability to act is diminished. To intervene ethically and effectively is an act of care, and that includes caring for ourselves and those around us.	<i>There were moments of intense pressure, particularly around the pre-summit and summit. We developed team processes that helped us make sense of why we were feeling as we were and relieve the pressure: daily 'check-ins', with Friday check-ins are more reflective. Senior team members acknowledging their mood, or that their week has been tough, creates the space for others to acknowledge this too. Building a strong team ethic is seen as a point of significant importance.</i>

The mindsets that help us work in this way

Quality	Description	Example from the Food Systems Summit
22. Curiosity	We are curious as to what is really happening, in the detail and distance. We ask ourselves how we know what is happening and why things are as they are; what has meant that, however good the ideas, systems transformation has not progressed as anticipated.	<i>Trying to understand the nature of countries we supported was important. Our curiosity fuelled our learning, making us more open to understanding local situations and building a deepening perspective on how dialogues were supporting a process of systems change.</i>
23. Adaptation	We let what we learn through our curiosity feed our adaptation. We help others to let go of fixed procedures and delivery plans when they no longer help, encouraging them to constantly rethink and improve them to fit evolving circumstances.	<i>We adapted the Gateway to fit what was helpful for users. Who had permissions to access various areas changed over time to balance security of the site with open availability of information. As convenors began to use feedback forms or upload pathways, we adapted our guidance.</i>
24. Conscious connections	We become conscious of the extraordinary potential of connections. We pay attention to how we connect and with whom. We help others to find surprising and novel connections. We explore possibilities with new eyes to better understand and strengthen the weave in the systems we work with. We try to make collective sense of situations and find common meaning.	<i>As the dialogues process grew and grew, it was soon apparent that connection would be a critical element of the work. We learned about the importance of timing in connections, how some convenors needed a constant background conversation and others only occasional touchpoints. We paid careful attention to protocol, to political level and who to involve and how in every conversation.</i>
25. Unleashing energy	We look out for opportunities to unleash energy. We show our excitement and at times our despair. We find the brilliance in people and help make spaces for that brilliance to shine. We believe that this is how transformation proliferates, through the infectious energy of people believing in their power to act. We help others build these energy fields in all that they do.	<i>In the training sessions we ran for curators and facilitators, we made the point that how you appear in a dialogue profoundly influences the mood of participants. We made sure we had a positive and enthusiastic demeanour. The aim was to help others find the enthusiasm to bring forward commitment in everyone who engaged in their dialogues.</i>
26. Respecting difference	We respect difference as a critical element for transformation. We picture the world as full of great people who view events from different perspectives. We look for what they are seeing and do what we can to tune in to the feelings. We seek ways to build a bigger picture from this combination of views.	<i>The whole point of a dialogue is to hold together multiple perspectives in order that something new and more valued might emerge. It was critical to model this. When feeding back from breakouts in our online sessions, we reported all viewpoints. We used the phrase 'we can disagree without being disagreeable' as a mantra. In our conversations we portrayed difference as inevitable and beneficial, with variation being the source of adaptation. This created an environment where differences, sometimes long suppressed, could be raised, and although this was not always easy, it was most important.</i>
27. Comfort with anxiety	We know that systems are transforming amidst much uncertainty: this fuels anxiety and it will be ever-present. Our systems interventions touch this anxiety: it is a sign that we are genuinely stepping into the transformative realm. We cannot have all the	<i>There were many times when we were anxious. Sometimes it was because we felt the frustration in others. People needed to let off steam from time to time. We concentrated on building a team environment where we able to discuss these anxieties, notice their impact on us and others and reflect on how to respond. Our</i>

answers. We seek to find comfort in anxiety: our attentiveness and values provide our security, keeping us attentive, caring, questioning and accountable.

work was characterised by an absence of 'office politics' and the presence of care. Care for ourselves, for each other and for the remarkable people we have been fortunate to work with.