BACKGROUND

The Sustainable Food Lab is a partnership of business and civil society leaders. The Lab’s purpose is simple: to accelerate the incorporation of sustainability in the DNA of the mainstream food and agriculture system. We will succeed when the majority of the food bought and sold around the world is enrolled in a sustainability program with measured and reported impacts.

The Food Lab’s Business Coalition wrote the following in a Call to Action in late 2006: “We, business leaders of global food and agriculture, recognize that we influence the way one quarter of the world’s population earns a living, half the world’s habitable land is cared for, and two-thirds of the world’s fresh water is used. With such influence comes opportunity and responsibility.”

Meeting this responsibility requires leading and collaborating across boundaries—boundaries among competitors, among actors along supply chains, and between business and the rest of society. The Lab was launched in 2004 by thirty-two leaders of organizations as diverse as Unilever and Oxfam in Europe, Sysco and WWF in the United States, Sadia and the Ministry of Agrarian Reform in Brazil. These founders of the Food Lab engaged in a unique series of leadership experiences and then began piloting initiatives together.

Pilot projects are demonstrating how businesses can partner with non-business players and achieve results useful for both. The pilots are linked in a learning framework of case studies, clinics and on-site visits.

More than seventy organizations around the world are now incubating projects, institutionalizing sustainability commitments in their organizations, sharing knowledge, and building the capacity of leaders to work together across boundaries.

Peter Senge, author of The Fifth Discipline and founder of the Society for Organizational Learning, calls the Sustainable Food Lab “the largest and most promising systemic change initiative I know of.”
VISION, GOAL & OBJECTIVES

The Lab’s vision is to make continuous improvement toward a sustainable food and agriculture system so that the fertility of our soil is maintained and improved; the availability and quality of water are protected and enhanced; the air is clean; biodiversity is protected; farmers, farm workers, and all other actors in value chains are treated fairly and benefit economically; the food we eat is affordable, safe, and promotes our health; sustainable businesses can thrive; and the flow of energy and the discharge of waste, including greenhouse gas emissions, are within the capacity of the earth to absorb.

Our goal is that, by 2018, the majority of the food bought and sold around the world is in a sustainability program in which such improvement is planned and measured. Businesses will make the key decisions that enroll food supply in sustainability programs, but businesses will need the engagement of external stakeholders to assess impacts and design supply chains and standards that internalize sustainability costs and benefits. Businesses also need the support of public policies that create a level playing field and market incentives so that the whole system lowers its ecological footprint and achieves social objectives.

Toward that end, our work is aimed at achieving measurable outcomes in several areas:

- **Leadership** – A community of leaders who are learning to manage across boundaries, embedding sustainability inside businesses and business-savvy inside non-business organizations.
- **Living examples of sustainable food supply** – New value chain models and commodity standards that address poverty and environmental sustainability.
- **Organizational Change** – Corporations and non-business organizations collaborating to enroll an ever increasing amount of global food supply in verifiable sustainability programs.
- **Knowledge that Transforms the Industry** – Documented methods, practices, cases, and stories of collaborative projects and policy incentives.

OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

Our membership includes fierce competitors and occasional adversaries – businesses and NGOs that do not always agree – who are choosing to come together in the search for breakthrough solutions.

Food Lab members test new ideas for bringing sustainability to specific value chains and commodity standards, and through the sharing of the results of these pilot projects we catalyze improvements in organizational missions and leadership capacity that lead to system-wide change. That change is manifested through commitments to action made in a Call to Action endorsed by a growing number of our business members; agreements on commodity standards; scaling up of value chain work to new crops, regions, and companies; an increasing proportion of the food supply subject enrolled in verifiable programs and impact assessment; and public policies that provide market incentives that shift the social and environmental footprint of the whole system.

As Einstein said, problems cannot be solved by the level of awareness that created them. Simply launching new projects is not enough. The Food Lab is based on the U-Process developed by Senge, Scharmer *et al.*, and the Lab was co-convened by Adam Kahane, one of
the world’s leading practitioners of U-Process design and facilitation. We use learning journeys, retreats, and other means of encouraging participants to let go of assumptions about how things work, begin to see the food system with fresh eyes, and learn to access deeper ways of knowing.

We approach the work with more questions than answers. As one corporate member put it, “The Food Lab is a safe space in which we can admit that we don’t have all the answers – which is a prerequisite to allowing new solutions to emerge.”

SCOPE OF CURRENT WORK

The Food Lab’s work is following four main tracks that correlate to the objectives described above.

Leadership – One participant has called the Lab an “epicenter of innovation.” Another, a major player in US retail, described her attraction as follows: “The people who stuck with the Lab are who’s-who of what’s going on. They are people who are way ahead of the curve, and that keeps attracting more such people along the way. I didn’t ‘get’ [sustainability] at all at the beginning, but I am starting to get it now. People saw potential in me and helped me, so now I feel like a convert and have made this my life’s mission.”

3-5 year outcomes:
- An increased number of leaders engaged across organizational and sector boundaries;
- New capacities to see from different perspectives, access emotional and spiritual intelligence, inspire one another, and prototype change; and
- Formal partnerships and projects among food system leaders who would otherwise have solely competitive or adversarial relationships.

Current Activities:
- Multi-stakeholder small group learning journeys on farms and factories (Guatemala and Honduras in 2007, China and California in 2008);
- Food Lab summits (London and Guatemala in 2007, California in 2008) at which several dozen leaders from different continents share case studies and generate partnerships;
Business Coalition meetings at which members challenge one another and learn how to improve their organization’s social and environmental footprint;

Case studies, value chain clinics, and workshops (see Knowledge section below);

A new Healthy Value Chains Network, co-convened with the World Wildlife Fund and the Society for Organizational Learning, to build a community of advanced practitioners of value chain innovation; and

A formal partnership with the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform, based in Europe, to share learning opportunities and the development of procurement standards among industry leaders on both sides of the Atlantic.

Value chain projects – Sustainable Food Lab staff help member companies identify the most important sustainability issues in their businesses. Staff frequently help design pilot projects, find external financial resources, broker partnerships, support project management, and find the best expert resources. In every case, our aim is to work from both ends of the chain – to ground the work in market demand while providing producers with the tools and information they need to be competitive in volatile markets with increasingly stringent specifications.

3-5 year outcomes:

- A portfolio of projects in the United States, Europe, Latin America and Africa that provides best practice examples of improvement in environmental and social performance;
- Measured improvement in economic well-being of farmers and environmental indicators in producing regions; and
- Increasing momentum within each company and NGO, and across the industry, to enroll more and more product lines in sustainability initiatives with documented impacts.

Selected current activities:

- In Guatemala, Nicaragua and Mexico, member businesses Costco and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters are partnering with NGOs and producer cooperatives to conduct value chain assessments and innovations to overcome poverty in rural communities.
- In the Dominican Republic, the NGO AgroFrontera is linking small farmers to major buyers, such as SYSCO, interested in sourcing tropical fruits and vegetables for the US market.
- In Honduras, Oxfam GB is working with US companies to improve farmer incomes by developing new trading relationships.
- In Africa, a portfolio of projects is supported by the Gates Foundation to secure and increase market access for small farmers while rewarding strong environmental performance. This work focuses on dried beans in Ethiopia, fresh vegetables in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, bananas in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, and cacao in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Corporate partners include ACOS, Flamingo-Homegrown, Chiquita, Scharffenberger-Hershey, and Kraft.
- In the United States, one project links major buyers with African American farmers in Mississippi, and another links New York state farmers with New York City retailers, and a third is designing a better procurement system for dairy products across the country.

Organizational Change – Food Lab staff design and facilitate events and provide individual coaching to leaders as they shepherd their organizations along the sustainability journey. Risk mitigation is often the entry point. Then, as managers develop the capacity to see the food system with new perspectives, they begin to see opportunities for competitive advantage through branding, better supply, and new products. In a third stage, companies see themselves within the context of the whole system, with responsibility (for example) for contributing to

The Sustainable Food Lab – 4
poverty reduction and reducing their ecological footprint. At this stage, companies and NGOs see the necessity of working in collaboration with others, even competitors, in order to shift public policies and create industry-wide agreements. The Food Lab has developed a set of services designed to help companies at each stage of their work.

3-5 year outcomes:
- An increased number of organizations with strategic planning that incorporates sustainability metrics;
- Implementation by major players of tools and methods for value chain management, commodity standards, and in-house continual learning; and
- An increased proportion of the food supply that is governed by sustainability programs with measured impact.

Current activities:
- In-house training about sustainability and value chains;
- Promotion of the Business Coalition’s Call to Action that commits signatories to continuous improvement in reaching sustainability milestones;
- One-on-one coaching and workshop support for companies to identify risks and opportunities, project opportunities and partners;
- Learning journeys for company groups with external stakeholders to cultivate the adoption of a sustainability perspective throughout organizations; and
- Collaboration with several initiatives aimed at developing metrics to measure progress (Global Reporting Initiative, Scientific Certification Systems, Wallace Center at Winrock International, Ford Foundation).

Industry Knowledge – The Food Lab was founded with the idea that businesses, NGOs, and other stakeholders needed to learn new ways of doing business. Documenting and sharing the learning that takes place in pilot projects has been a priority since the beginning.

3-5 year outcomes:
- A body of knowledge – case studies, stories, indicators for measuring impact – that can be used by food system players around the world.
- A growing community of food system practitioners with better tools, methods and capacities to lead change.

Current activities:
- A Learning History provides a narrative of meetings and other activities, told largely through the words of participants;
- A Principles of Food Booklet, written as a joint venture among food service companies and WWF to help institutional food buyers understand the basic framework and terminology of sustainability in the food system;
- Case studies of value chain projects and organizational change initiatives, shared at meetings and clinics;
- An online resource center of tools and practices for value chain initiatives, and a collaborative effort to map sustainable food projects around the globe;
- A participatory research project with the Ford Foundation on best practices and indicators for measuring triple-bottom-line impacts of value chain projects;
- A partnership with the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (SAI) Platform through which we mapping sustainability initiatives around the world with annotated descriptions so that similar projects can be matched with each other;
- Collaboration with the FAO on a paper about corporate social responsibility to be
presented at a global agro-industries forum in 2008;
- Collaborative research with Rainforest Alliance and a corporate law firm on national policies that support or impede progress toward sustainable food supply; and
- Support from both staff and members for industry-wide efforts like global commodity roundtables, the Global Reporting Initiative, the SCS Sustainable Ag Standard initiative, and the Keystone roundtable.

**Defining our Niche**

Among the growing constellation of sustainability initiatives and platforms, the Food Lab is explicitly multi-sector, governed by a consortium of business and social leaders. The Sustainable Food Lab also embraces all dimensions of sustainability, rather than dealing only with environmental or social aspects of food systems. We bring special competence and attention to both ends of the value chain, incorporating into projects the market imperatives of businesses and the need to work with stakeholders to find solutions that improve the health of both people and land all along the chain.

Food Lab staff bring systems thinking and organizational learning capacities that are the heart of our parent organization, the Sustainability Institute, which was founded by pioneering systems thinker Donella Meadows, and continues to be supported by Peter Senge. We create a learning environment in which industry actors can address not only short-term needs but also long-term challenges and the lack of clear answers to those challenges, and we have worked very hard to create a safe space in which players who do not always agree could come together to explore possibilities for collaboration and learning.

The Sustainable Food Lab and its members are not satisfied with well-intentioned trends such as CSR, which too often are marginalized efforts with limited impact. By cultivating values of sustainability within the hearts, minds, and commitments of people who lead the industry—people with significant power to make the large, rapid change we need in order to re-orient the course of human development—we seek nothing less than to embed sustainability and equity within the DNA of the system.

The Sustainable Food Lab is undergoing steady growth. At least half of the participants in our summit meetings and case clinics tend to be new to the Lab. The core group of 32 leaders who convened the Lab in 2004 has grown to many dozens of leaders of more than 70 organizations.

We welcome the participation of others. If you would like to explore how investment and participation in the Sustainable Food Lab would add value to your work and mission, please contact:

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The Sustainable Food Lab – 6