

SIGNALS OF CHANGE FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE ACTION

This is part of a series of Guidance notes designed to assist users of the UNDP Guide to Effective Collaborative Action. You can find the [full methodology here](#).

This Guidance note focuses on providing advice to the Backbone Support Team and Stakeholders participating on how to document signals of change in collaborative action initiatives, while promoting experiential learning through the course of action.

Introduction

Transformation of a system, community, and the individuals within takes time, patience, and skills. The Effective Collaborative Action methodology provides the outline of a journey and points to many of the skills needed to change systems collaboratively. Monitoring and experiential learning are essential to support this effort and ensure that participatory reflection occurs and adaptive action happens to tackle challenges and seize emerging opportunities.

Monitoring progress and change needs to happen with concrete and tangible milestones. And many monitoring systems are still struggling to capture key qualitative outcomes, such as how effectively people are working together, as well what people are learning in the process that contributes to the overall vision of system transformation. The Signals of Change framework helps us to see these qualitative outcomes, document essential practices adoption, and identify contributions to the overarching vision / goals.

For example, multi-stakeholder collaboration in one country may result in the development of new national policies or initiatives supporting sustainable palm oil. The Signals of Change framework aims to support the capturing of this tangible development, as well as what made it possible along the way. In many cases, such developments are the outcome of extensive dialogue processes, which involve system inquiries, the building of trust among stakeholders, consultations and negotiations, new learnings and mindset shifts. This requires, working with power and through conflict, as well as ensuring adequate communication and a safe learning space. These are all necessary ingredients for effective collaboration, and must be adequately addressed in order to increase chances for positive system transformations.

This document presents a simple and systemic approach to monitor and record early signals of change and support adaptive action. We call this the Signals of Change Framework.

Beyond inspiring reflection and adaptive action, the proposed self-assessment outlined below, offers a way to support accountability through the development of

a baseline and documentation of progress over time towards effective collaborative action.

The Signals of Change Framework

Signals of Change offers a way of identifying and documenting progress towards systemic change. Recognizing these signals as they happen can generate impetus to keep going, and provide feedback on direction, as well as a way to talk about the impact the effort is having on the individuals, community and system.

The table below presents some examples of signals of change across different stages of transformation – distinguishing between early, intermediary and advanced signals of change – in the context of changing food and agricultural commodity systems through effective collaborative action.

	EARLY SIGNALS OF CHANGE	INTERMEDIARY SIGNALS OF CHANGE	ADVANCED SIGNALS OF CHANGE
Realization	Relevant initiative design and implementation are enabling preconditions for transformation	Interim outcomes external to the initiative boundaries are evident. Support and advance progress toward transformational outcomes over time	Long-term self-sustaining outcomes are materialising
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New insights • New commitments • New experiments/acting together in new ways • New network, teams • New capacities, skills • New relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New policies and regulatory frameworks • Better incentives • Strengthened support systems • Innovative financing instruments • New budget allocations • Removal of obstacles / letting go of ineffective approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New institutions, alliances, movements • New beliefs/mental models/values • New narratives • Organisational/Institutional level changes • Scaling and replication • Institutional, financial sustainability

This guidance note focuses on early signals of change (left hand column above), and shares how to identify them in the context of collaborative action initiatives aimed at transforming food and agricultural commodity systems.

The methodology for a deeper, external assessment is under development to support the identification of additional, emerging (non-predefined) early signals of

change, as well as intermediary and advances signals of change. You can write to us at methodology.feedback@undp.org to find out more.

How to use the Early Signals of Change

What is it about?

Documenting change in collaborative action initiatives for Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems transformation.

This is a qualitative exercise to track **early signals of change** related to the individual and collective journey of transformation. It is not an exhaustive list of indicators. While there are many potential “signals of change”, the ones we have chosen to include in the matrix are where we want to put stronger attention - where we think one small thing can have a big impact (e.g. changing the way we listen).

Where the initiative is facilitated or funded by UNDP, this self-assessment exercise is complemented by a yearly assessment conducted by UNDP and adapted from outcome harvesting methodology. Please write to methodology.feedback@undp.org for more on this.

There are 10 key principles along which signals of change can be tracked. These principles reflect the building blocks and essential practices of Effective Collaboration Action.

1. Build a safe collective space - *building trusted relationships*
2. Understand the system - *embracing complexity and aligning around a powerful shared intent*
3. Build systems leadership capacity - *developing the necessary skills and competencies to drive system change*
4. Include and work with power - *understanding and shifting power dynamics*
5. Work through conflict - *creating spaces for divergence*
6. Collaborative actions and investment - *experimenting our way forward together and demonstrating value*
7. Participatory learning - *continuously reflecting and adapting*
8. Communicate effectively - *building a common and compelling narrative*
9. Gender equality - *equal rights, resources and opportunities*
10. Institutionalize the new - *sustaining long-term outcomes*

Why?

To reflect, inform capacity building needs, support learning and adaptation, drive innovation, guide collaborative actions, etc.

For whom?

Participants of collaborative action initiatives (group self-assessment) and Backbone Support Teams (to inform key activities to implement and necessary adaptation to plans).

When?

At a minimum, at the start and end of the initiative. At the beginning when initiating the dialogue process to form a baseline for learning and at end of the project to understand what's changed. It can also be used iteratively during the life of the initiative to inform learning and adaptation needed in the direction of travel. Depending on the length of the initiative, it can be effectively used at key initiative inflection points or significant junctures in the initiative. See the [effective collaborative action methodology](#) for more about when to use Signals of Change.

How?

Group self-assessment by participants of collaborative action initiatives. The group can select in the matrix more than one “positive change statement” in a row.

The self-assessment is facilitated by the Backbone Support team. The process can be conducted over a couple of sessions as needed. The following steps are suggested for the backbone team. Tailor as you see fit for your needs.

- Share the signals of change matrix (virtually or in person) with your stakeholders and ask them to select from each principle the statement most relevant in their current experience.
- Ask individuals (virtually or in person) to share with the group, so the group sees a collective picture of where they are. If in person, this can be by placing a dot on a poster board of the matrix or doing the same in a virtual environment.
- Hold a discussion about results (see questions below), and any take-aways

A more detailed self-assessment process is suggested at the end of this guidance note.

THE SIGNALS OF CHANGE MATRIX

Words highlighted in blue are explained in the definition section.

Below are ten key principles for effective collaborative action with early signals of change mapped out for each. These principles reflect the building blocks and essential practices of Effective Collaborative Action. In the Matrix below, each principle has limiting conditions, what gets in the way of being effective, and five early signals that indicate a shift toward systems, community and individual change. This matrix can be used as a tool to measure and monitor change in your initiatives movement toward systems change. If you are ready to look at the intermediary and advanced signals of change, please write to us at methodology.feedback@undp.org

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE ACTION	LIMITING CONDITIONS <i>What gets in the way of effective collaboration</i>	EARLY SIGNALS OF CHANGE				
1. BUILDING A SAFE COLLECTIVE SPACE <i>Building trusted relationships</i>	Conversations between stakeholders is mostly focused on technical content. Building trust and relationship is neglected resulting in limited personal connections among stakeholders.	Effective tools such as check-in; story-telling, mindfulness; generative listening and conversation practices are being used to better connect stakeholders within themselves and to each other.	Backbone support team is a role model for facilitation, system thinking and collaboration.	Stakeholders feel in a safe space that cultivates trust and relationships and have personal connections. They can say what they really think.	Dialogue is characterised by generative listening, increased trust, and compassion for/understanding of the specific perspectives and needs of others.	Stakeholders support each other outside of formal dialogue events.

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2. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM <i>Embracing complexity and aligning around a powerful shared intent</i>	<p>Dialogue is focused mostly on the parts of the system, such as sharing information on individual initiatives, or discussing symptoms rather than underlying structural problems. Oversimplification of issues and failure to identify interconnections.</p>	<p>Stakeholders engage inclusively in participatory exercises to understand and seeing the system they are part of and trying to change (e.g. system mapping, learning/sensing journeys, scenario planning, iceberg model, etc.)</p>	<p>Stakeholders identify key leverage points for system transformation and generate new insights.</p>	<p>Stakeholders recognise that no single entity has authority over the entire system. Capacity to collaborate between stakeholders' groups has strengthened.</p>	<p>A clear and powerful shared intent is co-created, providing energy and purpose to collaborate across boundaries, take risk and think and act at scale.</p>	<p>Shared systemic solutions are being proposed for collaborative action and new collaborations are emerging outside of the process.</p>
3. BUILDING SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP CAPACITY <i>Developing the necessary skills and competencies to drive system change</i>	<p>There are no capacity building activities in place to support stakeholders in developing their ability to drive system change. Leadership is happening in institutional and/or initiative silos. Low appetite for collaboration.</p>	<p>Financial resources are available for capacity building to drive system change.</p>	<p>A comprehensive and tailored leadership skill building/learning plan exists and is implemented to support stakeholders in their journey.</p>	<p>Stakeholders are exploring the interconnections between individual work, collective and system transformation through targeted training and support from</p>	<p>Stakeholders are encountering a number of "A-Ha" moments/new insights.</p>	<p>Leadership is characterised by stronger self-awareness and awareness of others, coalition building and complex</p>

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	Individual change is neglected.			expert organisations.		system insights.
4. INCLUSION AND WORKING WITH POWER <i>Understanding and shifting power dynamics</i>	A few key actors drive the process. Marginalised groups are not represented (may not have the opportunity, permission, skill, language, or confidence to participate). Power is not discussed or analysed.	A thorough mapping exercise endorsed by early-stage actors reveals all stakeholders, their interests and positions in the system. Particular attention is being paid to peripheral voices, who are not at the table and why.	Stakeholders are given the tools to jointly explore different forms of power and what to do about it.	Inclusive decision-making rules are created that support shared power.	Better/different working relations between the marginalized groups and those who have more power are emerging.	Strategies for change are developed to support marginalized group and reflected in collaborative actions.
5. WORKING THROUGH CONFLICT <i>Creating spaces for divergence</i>	Significant sensitive issues are denied and avoided which may lead to break down due to conflict later. Too much emphasis on the harmony of the group – too diplomatic.	Spaces are created for conversations about divergence and the “Elephant in the room” so these topics are not ignored and instead	Stakeholders are given the tools to address conflict efficiently by looking at underlying causes (e.g. interest-based negotiation or	Solutions to prevent or resolve existing conflict are starting to emerge.	Compromise are being made. Deals are agreed that are clear, acceptable and attractive to each negotiating party.	A safe space for people to be honest about their beliefs, daring to disagree and shifting their perspective led to increased

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		proactively explored for greater understanding. The backbone team have the confidence and skill to do this.	other similar approaches).			collaboration among previously opposed parties.
6. COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS AND INVESTMENT <i>Experimenting our way forward together and demonstrating value</i>	Zero or fragmented collaborative actions. No resources available for prototyping/experimenting together. Too many commitments, studies or dialogues but not enough action (Analysis paralysis).	Stakeholders are given the tool to build prototyping capabilities: how to test multiple possibilities, prioritise and iterate rapidly rather than focusing on one optimum solution /plan.	Collaboration groups are operational in accordance with key leverage points identified during a system mapping exercise.	A set of collaborative actions prototypes are developed inclusively with a core team for each.	Quick wins support evidence of collaboration working/demonstrating value and help maintain momentum.	Successful collaborative prototypes are going into full implementation and are resourced adequately.
7. PARTICIPATORY LEARNING <i>Continuously reflecting and adapting</i>	Learnings are not captured and/or shared with stakeholders. Learning not feeding back into the system.	Limited opportunity for reflections on process (e.g. what works, does not work) is captured through initial	A process is in place to document results and learning.	A safe space has been built to talk about mistakes and failures so that learning can occur. The backbone team encourage this	Commitments, actions, and processes are regularly adapted due to collective knowledge, learning and	Stakeholders identify a strong learning culture as one of the key success

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		discussion, interviews or surveys and shared with actors in the process.		culture by role modelling it.	changed circumstances.	factors for the process.
8. COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY <i>Building a common and compelling narrative</i>	Stakeholders are not clear about their participation and roles in the process; and/or the vision, objectives and activities of the process they are participating in. Weak business case developed for participation. Communication work is under resourced as not seen as strategic.	An external communication strategy is in place and shared with all stakeholders – Initial communication tools are created to build trust, commitment and collaboration (e.g website, newsletter, personal storytelling, amplifying message from each other, etc).	A multistakeholder Communication working group is active to develop key messages collectively, support amplifying each other voices, drive progress and maintain momentum.	Narratives used in meetings by stakeholders are converging and reflect shared understanding (e.g. “we have diverse needs, interests and priorities but we’re collectively committed to this powerful shared intent”)	Results and learning from collaborative actions are shared transparently to all with humility (sharing credit for success with others) and vulnerability (openly sharing mistakes made. Challenges, learning from failure, etc).	Champions are taking the lead in sharing the collective narrative externally.
9. GENDER EQUALITY	Significant under-representation of women on platform. Gender issues are not	A psychologically safe space has been built so that all gender	People are given the tools to call out inappropriate behaviour	Women are represented at all levels and targets are put in place to increase the	Group recognise and embrace the value of diversity of thoughts – men	Collaborative actions integrating gender

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Equal rights, resources and opportunities	/minimally considered and discussed. Patriarchal practices. Lack of disaggregated data.	feels comfortable expressing their opinion and know that it will be valued. Participants reflects on gender inequalities.	when they see it (e.g. Vulnerability, learning how to speak out, being an active bystander, having difficult conversations, etc).	participation and retention of women at all levels especially at the top.	in the group don't feel discriminated against due to increased participation of women.	equality perspectives are implemented Male allies in the group are championing gender equality
10. INSTITUTIONALISING THE NEW <i>Sustaining long-term outcomes</i>	Activities and backbone support team are funded by one project. Political commitments to dialogue and collaboration routinely perish at the change of government.	Partner institutions take leadership in managing dialogue activities and securing funding from public and private sources for their continued operations	Multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration broadly recognized by different stakeholder group as a priority, independent of political rivalries.	Permanent institutional arrangement in place with funding streams to sustain dialogue and collaborative actions.	New institutional structure in place for scaling up activities.	Stakeholders are widening the focus of implementation in terms of sectors, partners, location, etc.

Suggested Facilitation Notes for the self-assessment process

1. Backbone Support team to schedule time for a self-assessment for early signals of change. Dividing the exercise over a min. of 2 meetings is recommended, due to the preparation time needed for stakeholders to review the matrix (requests for clarifications should be addressed) before the assessment.
2. Depending on whether the meeting is held in-person or virtually, the following preparations are recommended:
 - *In-person* – the Backbone Support team prints out the Signals of Change Matrix in a large format, so that all participants can read the content of each cell. If any limitations to this, it is recommended to provide handouts of it to each participant.
 - *Virtual* – the Signals of Change Matrix should be reflected in Mural (or a similar software) so that it can be clearly visualized and read by all participants. A PDF version of the Matrix can also be shared with participants ahead of the sessions, so that they can start familiarizing themselves with the content.
3. Depending on whether the meeting is held in-person or virtually:
 - *In-person* – after having positioned the large print of the Signals of Change Matrix in such a way so that all participants can see clearly the content of each cell (and distributed handouts, if needed), explain the purpose of this exercise. Then, participants are given enough time to understand the limiting conditions and early signals of change for each key principle. It is suggested to limit the assessment to a max. of 5 key principles per session, to make sure enough time is dedicated to review and discussions. Any requests for clarifications on the terminology or the exercise should be addressed by the Backbone Support team at this stage. **Participants should be provided with as many stickers as the early signals of change and limiting conditions under assessment (e.g. 30 stickers per person, if 5 principles under assessment) and asked to apply one sticker on the large print, for each of the limiting conditions and/or early signals of change that they find applicable to their cohort.** The Backbone Support team should decide whether they prefer to make the scoring public (by maintaining the large print in front of everyone) or anonymous (by hiding it behind a

curtain). The second option may help reducing bias. Additionally, the Backbone Support team should consider providing stickers of different colors to participants representing different stakeholder groups. This would allow to provide more nuances to the analysis of results.

It is important to make clear to participants that they are absolutely not expected to apply all their stickers: the latter should only be applied if a limiting condition or early signals of change is deemed applicable to their cohort. The hypothesis is that only few stickers will be applied at early stages of the dialogue, while more stickers will show in future assessments. Participants can apply all their stickers if they find this relevant, but they should be instructed to apply only one sticker to each cell of the matrix.

The resulting matrix with stickers applied should then be shown back to the participants (especially if the scoring happened anonymously).

Alternative – to further reduce the risk of anchoring bias, each participant could be requested to apply stickers on an individual version of the Matrix. These would then be handed to the Backbone Support team for aggregation on the large printout.

- *Virtual dialogue* – a similar process to the above should be followed in the case of a virtual dialogue. Participants can either place virtual stickers on the virtual version of the Matrix in Mural, or other supporting software can be used to allow each participant to score applicable limiting conditions and early signals of change independently and anonymously. It is important that the software supports aggregation of results so that the resulting version of the Matrix with the scoring expressed can be presented to all participants in an adequate visual way. The same principles and rules apply as per the assessment in-person.
4. Once the assessment is completed, a discussion in plenary or smaller groups should be facilitated by the Backbone Support team. This is a critical time of the assessment, as it offers the group an important opportunity for sensemaking, learning and the common crafting of potential paths for improvement. The discussion should be as open and flowing as possible; the following questions can help the group get started:
- Looking at the aggregate results, what do you observe? Do you agree with the emerging picture? Is it representative, for you, of the limiting conditions and early signals of change in this cohort?

- How is it similar/different from what you selected? / What do you find the most surprising from the final results? / Why do you think participants selected answers different than yours? / Are there any particular conclusions that you would like to share with the group?
 - After having had a chance to engage in this exercise, which are – in your opinion – the most important principles to be prioritized going forward? Any particular “early signals of change” that you find critical to receive more stickers in the next round? Why?
 - In the case of a limiting condition having received many stickers, ask: Why do you think this received so many stickers? What could you do, as individuals and as a group, to overcome this obstacle?
5. (Optional) if relevant, after the discussion, participants could be given a chance to review and adjust their scorings.

The backbone support team should consider logging inputs from the discussion as per point 4 together with the final Matrix aggregated results (end of the project), and sharing as input for a discussion and brainstorming on the way forward in the spirit of Learning & Adapting. Also consider sharing this information and learning with the projects lead organization, its funders and communicating results related to systems change to wider audiences. UNDP’s Green Commodity Program Collaborative Action & M&E teams would be interested to see your results as well.

ANNEX I: Definitions and Resources

Signals of Change	Ways of observing progress toward transformation, whether at early, interim, or more advanced stages. Signals attempt to respond to the question “how do we know we are making progress towards systemic change”. They can be used for designing interventions, monitoring and reporting systems, adaptive learning, etc.	https://www.climateinvestmentfunds.org/tclp
Generative Listening	According to Otto Scharmer “Listening is probably the most underrated leadership skill. Changing how you listen means that you change how you experience relationships and the world. And if you change that, you change, well, everything” He defines 4 types of listening: downloading, factual listening, empathic listening and generative listening (see video in references).	Four levels of listening
Leverage Points	In systems thinking a leverage point is a place in a system's structure where a solution element can be applied. It's a low leverage point if a small amount of change force causes a small change in system behavior. It's a high leverage point if a small amount of change force causes a large change in system behavior	Leverage Points

