



HOW PLATFORMS WORK – OR DON’T WORK – TO SOLVE SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

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A growing number of multi-stakeholder platforms have entered the agri-food sector, as Daniele Giovannucci and Louise Salinas at COSA point out. Coffee is an obvious example in which an increasing number are active, so is cocoa. But how effective are they, and how can their effectiveness be maximized?

One of the most explosive growth areas of the last five years in sustainable development is the multi-stakeholder platform. That’s not surprising considering that the magnitude of the challenges can be daunting and bigger than any one company or organization can handle.

From human rights to incomes to deforestation, we increasingly engage public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives to pool resources and thinking. So, how are these collaborations working and what are we learning from the agri-food sector?

Platforms today are common, but a good number are not really all that useful. One global Sustainability Director that the Committee on Sustainability (COSA) works with quit a major sustainability-oriented platform dismayed by the amount of “wasted time and resources spent in mostly useless posturing and repetitive meetings.”

Looking at many clients and organizations that COSA works with, we expected to learn that collaborative platforms can, at the least, avoid duplicating efforts and can reduce costs, but sometimes the opposite occurs.

Platforms and collective impact

We are fascinated by what makes some platforms work well. To make sense of the salient characteristics of successful collaborations, we applied an established conceptual framework that illuminates the key factors of success and aligns with our own impact focus.

In 2011, the noted scholars John Kania and Mark Kramer published a seminal article in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* that articulates what it takes to achieve collective impact¹. We reviewed an array of multi-stakeholder platforms operating in different agri-food sectors to distill why some are a waste of time and money and why some deliver useful results.

The idea that organizations should work together to solve large-scale problems of sustainability in the agriculture sector has a history². But that idea has only more recently evolved to be a more active dynamic and well-informed approach focused around a common platform or mutual ground.

We have a diverse array including: Global Compact, Sustainable Agriculture Initiative, Sustainability Consortium, ISEAL, Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), Sustainable Food Lab, and SAFE and some that are crop specific such as Swiss Platform for Sustainable Cocoa, Round Table on Sustainable Palm Oil, Round Table Responsible Soy, Sustainable Vanilla Initiative, Global Coffee Platform, German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa, and the Sustainable Coffee Challenge.

Key components of impactful platforms

Kania and Kramer's research showed that successful collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results:

- A clear common agenda
- Shared measurement systems
- Mutually reinforcing activities
- Continuous communication
- Backbone support organizations

There is probably nothing earthshattering in this list and yet, few organizations manage to incorporate these five characteristics well. We review these characteristics as they apply

to today's sustainability-oriented platforms in the agri-food sector to look at how some platforms are innovating and moving toward collective impact.

A clear common agenda

Most platforms have a general common agenda around which they coalesce. Some, however, have an agenda that is so broad that it provides little opportunity to meet any solid objectives. Some of those platforms tend to devolve to function more like a trade association protecting its members rather than really advancing a sustainability agenda. Clarity is critical and that means having specific defined and measurable objectives that are openly revisited on a regular basis. Only a select few seek that level of clarity.

The Swiss Platform for Sustainable Cocoa tended to avoid generalizations such as “generally support” or “improve wellbeing” and established a precise agenda at its founding and included laudable specificity in its objectives, such as: “By 2025, at least 80% of the cocoa...”

Since its members represent a substantial portion of the cocoa industry, their courage to support each other and work collectively could make a substantial difference.

Functional clarity was embedded by the InterAmerican Development Bank's LAB (formerly the Multilateral Investment Fund) when it launched the Sustainable Agriculture Food Environment Platform (SAFE) and that has been revisited as members and the LAB used frequent communication to gauge the platform's realistic needs and necessary evolution.

Shared measurement systems

This area is typically among the weakest features of many platforms. Nearly all have some metrics. The platforms that appear least effective at fostering change, have ambiguous metrics designed to simply nudge the status quo (“how much of your supply is sustainable”). Among the low achievers a common specialty is reliance on simplistic compliance approaches (“do you have a policy against child labor”).

A few are using measurement as a means of driving meaningful improvement. The latter are typically distinguished by three characteristics: they engage trained professional Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) specialists; include both performance and impact evaluation of their work; and have an effective measure of transparent accountability to their members and sometimes outwardly.

ISEAL was an early organization to push members to adopt impact assessment openly and, thanks to its initiative, it is one of the few platforms that actively drives science-based evaluations of members' efforts. Not everyone agreed at first, but with visionary leadership, along with some of its members, it is now a respected source of learning that drives innovation in approaches that its members take.

The Global Coffee Platform was one of the first to push for and adopt common science-based metrics and the necessary data architecture that permits accelerated global learning and opens the use of technology to achieve interoperable shared data systems.

Using data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve was an original commitment of the SAFE Platform where dozens of members commit to ongoing monitoring and shared learning facilitated by a common learning agenda with shared indicators. This has enabled SAFE to develop innovative programmes and fund fast-moving innovations ranging from financial risk management to equitable gender inclusion.

Mutually reinforcing activities

This characteristic is surprisingly difficult for many to achieve, although all platforms foster some activities among members. The idea of mutually addressing a common issue is difficult to achieve when investments and activities are not coordinated to contribute to common advancement.

In other words, some activities of individual platform members can be counterproductive if they are not shared for learning or do not tie into and advance the common objectives. It takes a high level of commitment and coordination to programme activities that are designed to be mutually reinforcing. This rare occurrence is usually propagated when one or more leaders come with a compelling vision.

The larger platforms such as TSC, SAI, and IDH have active working groups or sectoral groups on key topics that can advance specific shared agendas quickly when they agree on mutual accountability and metrics of success. The Sustainable Food Lab offers learning journeys for members to learn about each other's work first-hand and to stimulate insights into better ways of approaching sustainability.

The SAFE Platform encourages crossfertilization of efforts and members seek out others to craft collaborations that span multiple organizations to take advantage of diverse skills. The IDB Lab stimulates creative innovation by providing financing support to the most

viable initiatives and it incentivizes the inclusion of private firms and civil society or public organizations.

Seems easy. But many platforms communicate vigorously but all too often it is more marketing rather than purposeful education and stimulus to improve and innovate.

The difference is a commitment to share – at least internally – successes and failures in ways that build trust and relationships among all participants. Done well, it is a vital feature of a platform that dedicates itself to continuous improvement.

Continuous communication

All platforms communicate but very few have dedicated that effort to encompass new ways of learning. With ever shorter attention spans and ever more available data, leading platforms must discover how people learn best and how to effectively use data visually and for not only learning but also to drive better decision-making and continuous improvement among members.

When not standardized, data costs to gather, process, and share can be high.

This is especially true when platforms seek quality (accurate) data. The cost of distilling different forms and formats of data can be exorbitant and a hindrance to learning unless members utilize similar metrics.

TSC, ISEAL, and SAI have made very notable efforts in this direction. The Global Coffee Platform and SAFE have boldly achieved at least the first steps of what all successful platforms will need in an information-rich future: the basis of common science-based metrics to gauge progress and to benchmark or compare results for learning.

Backbone support organizations

Platform lead organizations serve a critical role in ensuring successful collaborations, because they act as the necessary convener and facilitator among partners³. Each organization has its own priorities and ways of operating and it rarely works to have one serve as volunteer coordinator of a platform. To bring the kind of coordination that can address the four points above, requires having dedicated personnel time and resources that allow an independent (at least somewhat) operation that rises above the day-to-day

distractions that exist in companies, NGOs or governments to help deliver a compelling vision.

All successful platforms have a coordinating body that responds to members and some such as ISEAL, SFL and SAFE (Hivos) have a healthy measure of independence (and their own funding) to allow them to maintain the group's vision and objectives when some members' pressure may retard progress.

One role of backbone organizations is to ensure work quality by assisting in monitoring performance and ensuring some level of evaluations. Few rise to this level but some (especially IDH and ISEAL) have made clear commitments to impact evaluation and engaged credible independent evaluators.

Summarizing key features of effective platforms

More business, more local. The platform is a fitting vehicle for bringing pragmatic tools to the global problem-solving table. Civil society organizations and governments have traditionally sat at the head of this table. There is wide agreement that, as intractable problems persist, that platforms require broader participation and action from the private sector and local actors. The key is to cultivate the ability to listen to each other and to stakeholders.

Diversity is not easy, but it is necessary. Kim Elena Ionescu, Chief Sustainability Officer at the Specialty Coffee Association, put it well when she said, "What I like about working with the SAFE Platform is that it has convened a group that is big enough to represent diverse perspectives, but small enough to make a decision or to start collaborations, maybe even with some unlikely collaborators."⁴

Accountability, enables effective working relationships and accountability starts with clearly defined measurable objectives that demonstrate commitment to the partnerships that are considered key measures of platform success.⁵

Evaluate your own effectiveness regularly is a mantra of good programme management. That includes frequently soliciting feedback from participants but also a more independent and thorough process of full accountability.

Transforming data into actionable intelligence is a key role for a platform. The ability to gather, store, access, and analyze data has grown exponentially over the past decade. However, a successful sustainability platform is built with the right information systems for managing knowledge, not just data to enable decision making.

If platforms want to become a greater force for large-scale change then they must become efficient vehicles for widespread learning and knowledge sharing. Platform facilitators need to ensure that knowledge and shared tools are easily available on the platform.

Much like business intelligence technology that gathers, analyzes and utilizes business data, web-based digital platforms are driving advances via a virtuous circle of data-based learning and shared sustainability knowledge. The better ones can test, and push, innovation faster than individual organizations as shared mutual learning is applied among members, who then drive toward greater effectiveness and even scaling. ■ C&CI

1 John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact”, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

2 Elena Serfilippi, Carlos de los Rios and Keith Child, “Historic Approaches and Key Challenges in Rural Development”, Committee on Sustainability Assessment, January 2019, <https://thecosa.org/historic-approacheskey-challenges-rural-development/>

3 Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart, “Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives for Sustainable Development Goals: The Importance of Interlocutors”, Wiley Online Library, February 2017, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pad.1795>

4 Harvesting Transformation Magazine, https://issuu.com/safeplatform/docs/ht-safe_-_5-2-2019

5 Elyse Maltin, “What Successful Public-Private Partnerships Do”, Harvard Business Review, January 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/01/what-successful-publicprivate-partnerships-do>

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