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# Wanted: Food for the Future

## Final Report

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Bioeconomics Working Paper Series

Working Paper 2018/8



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## **Wanted: Food for the Future. Final Report**

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The current agro-food system has been linked to persistent sustainability issues that are characterised by uncertainty, unclear cause-effect relationships, complex interdependencies, and an impossibility to define consequences of actions. Hence, they have been referred to as wicked problems. Due to the uncertainty and complexity that characterizes wicked problems it is thus difficult to identify clear pathways that will lead to (increased) sustainability. Traditional, linear modes of governance are therefore not able to deal with wicked problems. Moreover, sustainability issues in the food system are caused and perpetuated by and affect a wide range of actors. Hence, multiple actors need to be involved in the governance of sustainability problems. This highlights the need for partnerships, and flexible and reflexive modes of governance. Such modes of governance are about the organization of processes and the continued co-creation of knowledge between partners rather than about predefining definite or linear actions. However, there has been relatively little attention for the processes that take place within such collaborations, despite the fact that they are crucial for the outcomes. This report therefore focuses on the question of how governance processes in partnerships aiming to deal with sustainability problems should be organized given the complexity and uncertainty that characterize wicked problems? The analysis is based on an in-depth action research of the multi-actor collaboration *Wanted: Food for the Future*. We find that there is no blueprint to carry out a multi-actor project. However, based on the learnings from the project, we formulate seven propositions on the way in which processes in partnerships should be organised.

**Keywords:** Wicked problems, partnerships, reflexive governance

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**Acknowledgments:** This report was written with the help of the funding from the project *Wanted: Food for the Future*.

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## Wanted: Food for the Future

### 1 Introduction

It has become widely acknowledged that the current agro-food system – although providing historical levels of abundance – is connected to persistent sustainability issues economically, environmentally, socially and politically (Belz, 2004; European Parliament, 2016). These sustainability issues are characterised by uncertainty, unclear cause-effect relationships, complex interdependencies, and an impossibility to define consequences of actions. Hence, they have been referred to as wicked problems (Turnpenny et al., 2009). Wicked problems need to be managed in a context of uncertainty and complexity, without the possibility of obtaining complete knowledge. Although a general idea exists that transitions towards sustainability are needed, it is difficult to identify clear pathways that will lead to (increased) sustainability based on what can be called ‘sound’ science, in which causes and effects are clear and can be tested (Frame, 2008; Regeer, 2010; Turnpenny et al., 2009). It has therefore been argued that traditional, linear modes of governance are not able to deal with wicked problems. Instead, new, flexible, reflexive modes of governance are needed. Such modes of governance are about the organization of processes and the continued co-creation of knowledge rather than about predefining definite or linear actions (Voss & Kemp, 2006).

Moreover, sustainability issues in the food system are caused and perpetuated by and affect a wide range of actors. The power to deal with them, is thus also widely dispersed (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 2003). “*It is*”, therefore, “*difficult for individual organizations to act unilaterally to solve problems without creating unwanted consequences for other parties and without encountering constraints imposed by others*” (Yaffee et al., 1997, p.2). Hence, multiple actors need to be involved in the governance of wicked sustainability problems. This highlights the need for partnerships, in which multiple stakeholders pool their resources to solve problems which they could not solve individually (Bryson et al., 2006; Frame, 2008; Peterson & Mager, 2011; Regeer, 2010; Yaffee et al., 1997;).

Although there have been many studies focusing on multi-actor collaborations aiming to deal with complex issues, there has been relatively little attention for the *processes* that take place within such collaborations, despite the fact that these processes are crucial for the outcomes (Regeer, 2010; Thomson & Perry, 2006). Therefore, in this report, the following question is central: How should governance processes in partnerships aiming to deal with sustainability problems be organized given the complexity and uncertainty that characterize wicked problems?

The analysis is based on an in-depth action research of the multi-actor collaboration *Wanted: Food for the Future*. The collaboration was between a government agency (Province of Flemish Brabant), a civil society organisation (Rikolto – Vredeseilanden), a retailer (Colruyt Group) and two institutes of higher education (Catholic University of Leuven and University College Leuven-Limburg). The collaboration started as a three-year project aiming to create sustainable food supply chains that provide an answer to current and future challenges, and that were created through new models of collaboration between universities, companies, governments and societal organisations. In this report, we describe how this collaboration was set-up and developed over time. Based on the description we formulate seven propositions on the way in which processes in partnerships should be organised.

## **2 New modes of governance for the management of wicked problems**

The need for new modes of governance to deal with wicked problems has been widely acknowledged. In this report, we follow Voss & Kemp (2006) by referring to them as modes of reflexive governance. In this, they define governance as “*those patterns of processes by which society handles its problems and shapes its own transformation*” (p. 8). Reflexive governance, then, is a type of governance that “*calls into question the foundations of governance itself, that is, the concepts, practices and institutions by which societal development is governed, and that [...] envisions alternatives and reinvents and shapes those foundations*” (p. 4). Such new modes of governance are needed because of several reasons.

First, wicked problems interlink many different parts of society. Indeed, sustainability issues in the agro-food system are affected by and affect interrelated physical, chemical, political, social, economic and biological processes (Harrison & Ng, 2011; Regeer, 2010); there are strong

interdependencies between these different fields (De Marchi & Ravetz, 1999; Frame, 2008; Regeer, 2010) and it is impossible to get a clear sense of the various connections between the causes and effects. Consequently, it is impossible to define pathways of action that are based in what can be called ‘sound’ science, in which causes and effects are clear and can be tested (Frame, 2008; Regeer, 2010; Turnpenny et al., 2009). Consequently, wicked problems cannot be broken down into smaller problems that can be dealt with in isolation in a linear fashion. Therefore, an approach that is able to deal with the interdependencies between these processes is needed (Regeer, 2010).

Second, it follows that no sustainable end-state can be clearly defined, and that no blueprints can be formulated for how to get there. Methods that are able to deal with and that take the interconnectedness of problems into account, as well as the indirect effects and feedback effects that actions may have are therefore needed (Voss & Kemp, 2006). Such methods, then, should deal with these issues in a flexible, adaptive and iterative way (Ludwig, 2001; Regeer, 2010; Voss & Kemp, 2006).

Third, sustainability problems are both caused by and affecting different actors, who operate on different levels and scales, over various sectors and locations (Regeer, 2010). Despite the fact that these actors generally agree that a move towards sustainability is needed, they frame the problems and necessary solutions differently. Hence, the governance of these issues is connected to the values, norms, and desired futures of those who govern it (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 2003; Voss & Kemp, 2006). Approaching these problems in a ‘traditional’ linear way, then, conceals the highly value-loaded nature and complexity of the problems at hand (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 2003). This element needs to be taken into account when defining pathways for future action towards sustainability.

Moreover, such processes cannot be organized by one governing body or type of actor alone. Instead, multiple actors need to be involved in the governance of wicked sustainability problems. This highlights the need for partnerships in the management of wicked sustainability problems (Bryson et al., 2006; Frame, 2008; Peterson & Mager, 2011; Regeer, 2010; Yaffee et al., 1997). In practice, this means that governments, businesses, non-profits and others need to be included in the management of wicked problems (Regeer, 2010).

### 3 Methodology

This report is based on the learning history of the multi-actor collaboration *Wanted: Food for the Future*. The collaboration was between a government agency (Province of Flemish Brabant), a civil society organisation (Rikolto – Vredeseilanden), a retailer (Colruyt Group) and two institutes of higher education (Catholic University of Leuven and University College Leuven-Limburg). The collaboration started as a three-year project aiming to create sustainable food supply chains that provide an answer to current and future challenges through new models of collaboration between universities, companies, governments and societal organisations. As researchers, we fulfilled a dual role in the project. On the one hand, we were present to give shape to the project from the start onwards and were involved throughout the full stretch of the project in the practical execution of several of the activities. On the other hand, we took the role of observers, by following and analyzing the interactions and processes between the different partners.

To do so, we were present during the full stretch of the project, including the project's steering group that consisted of two members of the Province, one representative of Colruyt Group, two members of Rikolto, two researchers of the University of Leuven (authors of the paper) and one lecturer of the University College Leuven-Limburg who joined the project after one year. One of the members of Rikolto was hired as a project manager, dedicated to the project. Later on, a second NGO member was hired and also participated in the meetings.

During the meetings with the steering group and the different working groups, we functioned both as active participants and as observers. We took notes during the meetings, that we afterwards structured as a learning history, in which we noted events on the one hand, and our thoughts and interpretations of these events on the other. This information was further developed in a detailed table with a chronological account of all events and meetings during the project. The learning history was used as the basis for two evaluation workshops that were organized over the course of the project. The main goal of these evaluation workshops was to reflect with the participants of the steering committee on the course of the project so far, what could be learned from this and how the course could be adapted in order to organize the governance process more effectively in the future.

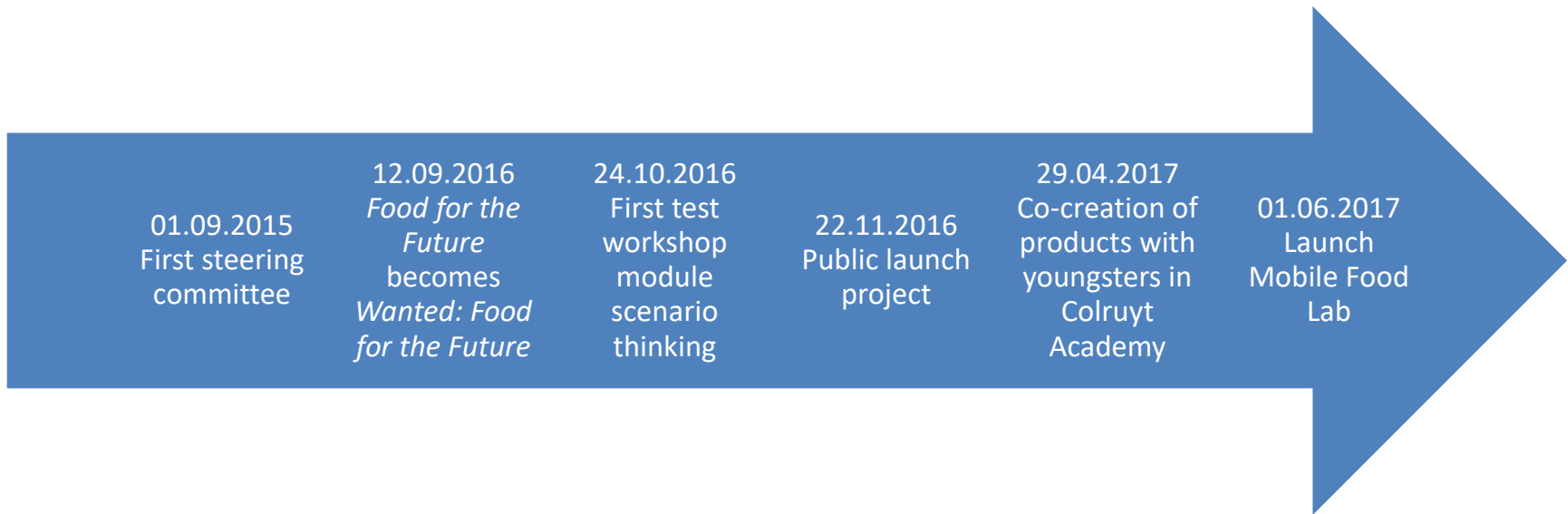
The method for the first evaluation workshop was based on the timeline method by van Mierlo et al. (2010). During this workshop, we prepared a timeline of the project until the moment of the workshop. Moreover, we prepared a more detailed table with an overview of all meetings and events until that moment. All partners were asked to prepare themselves for the workshop by reading the timeline and the table. During the meeting we first discussed the timeline, which was depicted on A0 papers and attached to the wall so that it was visible for all participants. After this, the partners were asked to add what they perceived to be missing elements in the timeline. Then, a discussion was organized around three topics that were decided beforehand. This choice was, however, first also discussed with the participants of the workshop. The workshop revolved around (1) dynamics between the partners, (2) focus of the project and its activities and (3) visions for the future. We saw the fact that the natural course of the discussion touched on these topics, as a confirmation that we had chosen the right issues to focus on.

A second evaluation was organized during a full-day meeting with the partners of the project. This day was not only meant to evaluate the project, but also to think about further possible steps for after the project would be finalized. In order for all the partners to be an active participant during this session, an external facilitator was hired. The activities during the day were prepared in close collaboration with the facilitator. During the evaluation, each partner had 15 minutes to share their findings on how they had experienced the project, what they had learned from it, what difficulties they had encountered, why this project and this method of collaborating were important for their organization and what they had learned from the project as an organization. Detailed notes of these testimonies were taken and analyzed afterwards. After this, we had prepared a document and presentation with the propositions that are at the basis of the discussion of this report. Each of the propositions was discussed with the partners of the project. The input from the partners was used to further fine-tune our findings.



#### **4 Wanted: Food for the Future - a short history**

In this section we discuss the history of the partnership. For the sake of structure, the history has been divided in different phases. It should be mentioned, however, that in reality these phases overlapped and distinctions between the phases were not as clear-cut as they may seem. In figure 1, a timeline summarising the main activities and events has been depicted.





29.06.2017 UCLL  
becomes official  
partner

13.11.2017 Kick-  
off trajectory  
Future thinking  
@ School

15.11.2017  
Departure for  
Tanzania to  
organise  
workshop with  
young  
entrepreneurs

06.12.2017  
*Wanted Food for  
the Future* wins  
Sustainable  
Partnership  
Award

12.12.2017  
Students UCLL  
present pesto  
based on  
seaweed

21.03.2018  
Departure for  
Peru to organise  
workshop with  
young  
entrepreneurs



#### **4.1 Conceptualizing a project and starting it up**

The first steps of the project were made by the Province of Flemish-Brabant in April 2015. The Province had been involved in development cooperation in the global South. However, a need for renewal and innovation of the development program was identified, both to be legitimate towards the citizens under its jurisdiction and to prevent budget cuts for development cooperation. Two gatherings were organized in which the goal was to identify new and innovative ways to fulfill the development activities of the government agency. During the first meeting, the participants identified collaboration between different societal domains as crucial. Moreover, because of the fact that a government agency always needs to obtain legitimacy towards its inhabitants, the visibility of the project was identified as one of the key criteria of the project from the start onwards.

During the second gathering, officials from different policy domains were invited to identify the domains in which the projects should be embedded. Two sectors were identified as being very strongly represented in the jurisdiction: health care and agriculture & food. It was decided that two multi-actor projects would be created around these themes. In this report, we only focus on the project that revolved around the topic of agriculture and food.

Following the second gathering, a focus group was organized with actors, who were considered to be the most relevant actors around the topic in the jurisdiction. These were the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Colruyt Group – one of Belgium’s largest retailers and Rikolto – one of Belgium’s largest NGOs. This focus group was meant to develop ideas to further shape a possible project, that could bring together actors from the Global North and South to collaborate on the creation of food supply chains for the future.

Based on these different meetings, a first project proposal was developed in which the need for an innovative multi-actor approach was emphasized. The project would be financed by the Province, while the other partners would add their know-how, networks and time. Concretely, the initial goals of the collaboration were to develop (or improve) sustainable supply chains of foods high in non-animal proteins sourced in the global South in collaboration with a wide range of actors within the jurisdiction. These supply chains were supposed to provide an answer to different sustainability challenges and make these challenges as well as possible solutions and improvements visible. These products should be commercialized and offered to the consumers within the jurisdiction. This had to be realized through a collaborative and co-

creative process, in which value would be created for all involved participants. Moreover, the project had to create a clear added value in the global South. Also, the commercialized products needed to be used as a catalyst to inspire the debate around the future of our food, both in the global North and in the global South. Lastly, the importance of innovation (social, ecological, economic, technological) was emphasized, as well as a strong desire to involve young scientists and young people, as they are representative of the consumer of the future.

#### **4.2 Kicking it off, bringing together the actors and defining the focus**

In September 2015, a steering committee was installed. The steering committee consisted of representatives of the Province of Flemish-Brabant, Rikolto, Colruyt Group and the KU Leuven. From each of the organizations two or more people became member of the steering committee.

In a first instance, during this phase, the goals and focus of the project were further developed and refined. These were also concretely formulated in a document in which the end-goals and indicators for success were mentioned. As at this point the main goal of the project was to create multiple food supply chains that would be representative as ‘food for the future’, there was a search for what these foodstuffs would look like and what criteria they needed to fulfil. The criteria were developed through a process of negotiation and deliberation by the partners, resulting in a list of elements. First, the products were assumed to be tropical, given the strong North-South character of the project. In this, tropical products were defined as:

*Agricultural produce or commodities produced in tropical countries, which also find their origin in the South. Tropical products typically cannot be produced in the North, or have a significant advantage to be grown in the South.*

Moreover, eleven criteria were developed to be used as a guideline of whether a food could be seen as a food for the future or not. For example, the product needed to be nutritious, ecologically sustainable and economically viable. There were also criteria that were more specific to the project, e.g. the product needed to be able to create visibility, and it needed to be relevant for consumers in Belgium. The extensive list of criteria can be found in Annex 1.

At the start of the project, there was a search for products that might fit the criteria. The search ranged from highly innovative products (such as 3D printed pineapples), to ‘taboo’ foods (such as insects), to products that were already well-known and widely accepted (such as Andean crops). During this phase many connections were established between the project and other organizations working on similar topics or product groups. A wide range of different opportunities for possible collaborations were explored. Following this, a shortlist of different products was made in June 2016, in which the decision was made to further work around pulses, algae and Andean crops. These products were thought to be feasible while fitting the criteria that were identified best, and were also thought to be of added value to the Belgian market. The search for new opportunities did not stop here, though. Instead, this became a constant factor throughout the whole project alongside the activities that had already started under the banner of the project.

Moreover, while the project had already started, Colruyt Group insisted that there be a link to the education of young farmers in the South—as this is the core of their own South program and it became clear that the retailer’s top management would have to make the final decisions given the nature of the project. As a result, the project agreement had to be changed.

Such changes were possible partly due to the fact that no formal agreement between the partners had been signed yet in which the roles of the participants were clearly determined. However, while the project was starting to become more concrete, and the stakes became larger, the need for such an agreement was increasingly apparent. On the other hand, the lack of the formal agreement allowed for a large range of flexibility in the focus and range of the project.

A last important element during this phase was the installment of a committee for the external communication of the project. This was especially important given the large importance dedicated to the visibility of the project. The committee included members from all partner organizations.

## **4.3 Putting ideas into practice**

### **4.3.1 First steps**

In the third phase, the ideas from the previous phases were brought together and started to be put into practice, although, of course, a large part of the work around the establishment of the food supply chains themselves had already started before. This third phase started with two

official launches for the project. The first one was organized for members from the own organizations of the steering committee members. The second event was organized during a food fair in which the project was introduced to the broad public. This event was also open to and covered by some press.

During the first event in which the project was presented to people from the home organizations, the Colruyt Group placed the logo of one of their sub-organizations – their CSR daughter organization Collibri – on the front-slide of the presentation. This was not done in consultation with the other partners, and thus came as a surprise, as until then, it was assumed that the main body of the organization was a partner in the project. This led to strong discussions within the steering committee of what part of the organization was actually involved in the steering committee, as this had not officially been captured in a contract at that time. On the one hand, the three other partners argued that the overall project would be stronger if it included the name of Colruyt Group, as it is widely known among the public. On the other hand, the retailer argued that for them it made sense to capture this project under their CSR pillar. After a while, it was decided that the name of the umbrella organization would stay part of the project and that some of the activities would be performed under the name of the CSR pillar.

Moreover, during this phase, the goals and activities of the project started to broaden. Among others, the focus on young people became increasingly important, for example through the elaboration of scenario thinking workshops for children about the future of food. This scenario thinking was developed by the KU Leuven, but further developed within the consortium and later on included in an educational package by another organization (GoodPlanet).

Also, starting the ‘putting in practice’ phase did not mean that the search for possibilities to link up with and possible collaboration stopped. Instead, in practice, phase 2 and phase 3 intermingled, in which the boundaries of the focus of the project and the corresponding activities were constantly opened up and closed down. Although this opened up a lot of opportunities, it also led to confusion. Indeed, at times, it was not clear what activities contributed to the final goals of the project, what should be focused on, and what activities had better be left out. In some cases, this constant opening up and closing down of the project also fostered discomfort and vulnerability with the partners themselves, as with the home organizations. This was especially the case since for all partners the flexible way of working was acknowledged as necessary for the nature of the project, but was also completely new.



### **4.3.2 Changing the focus**

Some difficulties were encountered in the creation of the food supply chains. From an early onset, it was found that some of the supply chains would be more complex to put in place than others. Quinoa for example, was relatively easy and was considered to be a quick-win. It was found very early on that the knowledge around algae for human consumption was relatively limited and supply chains from Indonesia lacked transparency. Therefore, Colruyt Group did not consider the algae as a viable track to engage in yet. Although there were discussions around whether the algae should then be dropped as a product group, it was decided to keep on working around this product group, in order to keep the innovative character of the project. The focus for this supply chain therefore shifted to the development of knowledge around the supply chain and how such a product could be made culturally acceptable in Belgium, as well as using the product to foster debates with consumers.

Pulses were at first considered to be a mid-term project, not such a quick win as the quinoa, but neither a product for the long run such as algae. It was decided that red kidney beans would be sourced from Tanzania, and an exporter was identified that worked with smallholder family farmers in a transparent and ethical way. However, when trying to make the first contacts and sourcing the beans from this exporter, it turned out that the exporter had set a minimum order of 2000 to 2500 tons of red kidney beans. The retailer, however, only saw a market for 16 tons. This problem came very unexpectedly. On the one hand it was recognized as an opportunity to illustrate difficulties and bottlenecks in the establishment in the upscaling of sustainable food supply chains. On the other hand, the main goal of the project at that moment was still to create two or three supply chains during the course of the project. In this sense, the identity and main goals of the project were challenged. As a result, the focus of the project was changed into being a *search* for food for the future, in which the direction for the end-state was clear, but the pathways to get there are unclear and winding.

### **4.3.3 Moving on with a different project identity**

After this change of focus, the project was turned into an umbrella under which debates on the future of our food could be initiated and facilitated while using the three products as a tool for illustration. In this, especially the focus on young people as consumers of the future became more prominent and explicit. For example, scenario workshops were organized in which children were encouraged to think about the future of our food system. Also, a workshop was

organized in which youngsters between 12 and 16 years old developed new and innovative products based on the three product groups (quinoa, seaweed, pulses).

Another element that became important in this phase was the inclusion of students. Indeed, to create concrete results around the marketing of food for the future to youngsters, the steering group of the project teamed up with a university college that was also active in the province (University College Leuven-Limburg - UCLL). As a first step, three of the students from the university college started ‘working for’ the project instead of doing an internship at a company. They got the assignment to bring the message of the project across to youngsters. The three students therefore developed a ‘food lab’ (a mobile food truck) that could be taken to festivals and other public events to have tastings of the three product groups and foster the discussion around food for the future. Due to the success of this collaboration, it was decided that UCLL would become an official partner in the project. After this, UCLL organized several activities and projects in which students worked on the marketing and nutritional aspects of food for the future.

Moreover, an important activity to foster the debate on food for the future was the organization of workshops with young entrepreneurs in the South. The concrete collaboration with the global South had been a goal from the start of the project onwards, as the project was funded with development money. A workshop was organized in Tanzania, Peru and Indonesia. In each of the workshops, youngsters with different expertise came together to dream about how they would like their community to develop. During the workshops, steps were made for the teams to come to a concrete final product or activity.

Lastly, the debate was also fostered more widely through public events, lectures and movie nights that were open for the wide public.

#### **4.3.4 Setting up and launching the quinoa supply chain**

A concrete output of the project was the operationalization of the quinoa supply chain and the marketing of the product in the stores of the retailer. After changing the launching date a few times due to developments in the supply chain, the planning of the communication and possible competing events at Colruyt Group, the date was set and the final preparations for the launch of the supply chain were made. First, the packaging of the quinoa needed to be developed by the retailer. However, once the design was finalized the partners nor the project were mentioned

on it. However, the logo of the retailer's CSR brand – Collibri - that was part of the project and of another NGO – Solid - that had helped set up the supply chain were on the packaging. This came unexpectedly for some of the partners, especially for the Province, for whom being on the packaging was seen as an important element to create visibility for the concrete outputs of the project and the province's role in it. This shortly led to a feeling of disenchantment and frustration towards the retailer. During several meetings, the steering and communication groups discussed the issue aiming to resolve the conflict. The retailer explained how the development of the packaging had been organized, and the strict rules that the packaging needed to comply with. Although after a few meetings all partners understood why and how this could have happened, it was discussed that communication during the development of the packaging could have been more transparent so that all partners would have expected the same from the situation.

This situation was followed by discussions on a field trip to Peru to visit some of the quinoa farmers and the production facilities. Different members of the project consortium were supposed to come, as well as buyers from the retailer and representatives from Solid - an NGO representing quinoa farmers in Peru. The main goal of the trip was to check whether the production was really on point to be able to deliver to the retailer. Next to these participants, Rikolto invited a journalist that had previously worked for the project to come and document the process of setting up the supply chain. However, the retailer did not like the journalist to come, as the outcomes in Peru were too unsure, and the field visit was mainly meant to get everything for the operationalization of the supply chain on point. This again unchained a discussion on what agreements had been made and how they had been made. In the end, the decision was made for the journalist not to come. Instead, the employee of Rikolto would document the process of setting up the supply chain instead.

These situations show that, as the project became more concrete, actions became more sensitive and differences between the partners became more clear. Next to dealing with the goals of the project, every organization also had to deal with the goals, values and ways of working of the home-organization, which sometimes conflicted with the goals, values and ways of working of the project. To be able to deal with these differences in these kind of situations, it was decided – based on these situations – that the way of communicating within the steering committee and communication groups would change: to do's would be more clearly defined, and feedback

loops between the members of the steering group and the home organizations and within the steering group itself should be identified and be communicated more clearly.

#### **4.4 Finalizing the project and preparing for the future**

In the final phase of the project, the importance of producing concrete outputs that were coherent with the main goals of the project became clearer. Hence, increasingly, a path was chosen that was coherent with the goals of the project. This also meant that activities that were outside of the scope of the project were not explored or pursued anymore.

During the final phase of the project, the project won the prestigious Sustainable Partnership Award. This provided the project a lot of extra publicity, which also led to an increased legitimacy of the participation of some of the partners within the project. This was mainly true for UCLL, as the member of the steering committee noticed a strong increased interest in his activities within the institution as well as an increased legitimacy for the activities of the project. Moreover, one of the main activities during this last phase was the organization of the final event in which the outputs of the project would be presented to the public and professionals. Due to the importance that was attached to this final event, an external agency was hired to support in the organization of this event.

Lastly, an important activity during the final phase of the project was thinking about possible future steps and the continuation of the activities of the project. The first steps for this were made during the second evaluation event. Moreover, after this, discussions around this topic arose during steering groups. However, due to the different rhythms of the organizations, and the different mandates that the members of the steering group had, it turned out to be difficult to plan for or even think about activities happening after the closing event of the project. For example, for the Province, it turned out to be impossible to think about their involvement in a possible follow-up, as re-elections were planned, and activities and engagements were unclear until after the dates of the re-elections.

#### **5 What did we learn? Defining seven propositions**

The central question in this report was how governance processes in multi-actor collaborations aiming to deal with sustainability problems (in the agro-food system) should be organized given the complexity and uncertainty that characterize these issues. Our experiences – that were described in the previous section – led to seven learning propositions, which we will discuss in

this section. These propositions should not be interpreted as a blueprint for how to organize a collaborative process. Rather, they are the learnings of one project and can be used as a compass and source of inspiration for other actors aiming to set up similar partnerships. Other projects – although possibly similar – will be different due to differences in challenges, actors and local contexts and “*adequate strategies for sustainable development can*”, therefore, “*only be developed in action*” (Regeer, 2010, p. 1).

## **5.1 Diversity**

In the partnership *Wanted: Food for the Future* various autonomous partners were brought together. Within the partnership, all these partners were equal to each other. Together they worked on a common goal, each based on their own strengths. However, at times, they differed (strongly) from each other and each partner functioned according to different rhythms, visions and values. Most of the involved partners thus had a dual identity in the sense that they wanted to serve the goals of the project while at the same time they wanted and needed to answer to the needs of the home organizations. Being able to answer to and work with the tensions between these different needs and rhythms turned out to be of the utmost importance to bring the project itself to a successful end.

During the implementation phase, these differences between the partners came more to the surface. For example, the Province not being able to plan any activity after elections is just one example showing the different needs, ways of working and rhythms of the partners. Thus, although every partner organization aimed to work towards the same goals, they were also constrained by, and working toward goals from their own organizations. This had an impact on the process itself and the partners need to learn to respect and accept each other’s differences for the partnership to be successful.

**Proposition 1: The autonomy and diversity in rhythms and values of the different partners in a multi-actor collaboration must be taken into account while defining the common goal, the limits of the partnerships, the outputs and the activities.**

## **5.2 Relationships**

Within a multi-actor cooperation, it is primarily individuals who are sitting around the table with each other and who forge personal ties, *but* who have been given the mandate from the

'home organization' to make decisions within the partnership. Over time, these individual relationships may develop into relationships between the organizations. Trust and mutual respect are crucial to create an environment in which these ties can be forged and in which transparent communication and clear agreements can be made. Time and regular face-to-face contact turned out to be crucial factors for building this trust. Or as Thomson & Perry (2006) put it: *"The most costly resources of collaboration are not money but time and energy, neither of which can be induced. Public managers must take this time element seriously if the benefits of collaboration are to be realized"* (p. 28).

In addition, it is important to realize that - in view of the differences between the partners - consensus is not always possible. Indeed, since processes of management of wicked sustainability issues are about decisions on which futures are desirable and how to get there it is impossible to scientifically establish what end-points would be more desirable than others (Meadowcroft, 2011). Given the fact that in these issues a final common ground is inherently impossible – a space needs to be created for their management in which differing views can come together, in which legitimacy of the different actors is recognized, and where common challenges can be faced. In this, a shared dream of the future can act as a catalyst. Hence, it is important to keep on working together and continuing to recognize each other's legitimacy and that of the partnership.

The above also meant that discussions did not always lead to resolution through consensus. However, we found that it was not necessary or even possible for everyone to agree on the best possible solution. Instead, it was important for everyone to be willing to support decisions once they had been made.

**Proposition 2: Working together is about building relationships between people, which can then transfer into a relationship between the organizations. Constant and transparent communication is necessary for mutual understanding and trust.**

### **5.3 Flexibility**

The project *'Wanted: Food for the Future'* was characterized by its flexible nature. Especially during the first half of the project, we observed a constant renegotiation of the goals and activities of the project. This was illustrated by a constant search for activities and alliances

within the scope of the project. Hence, we noticed a constant going back and forth between the setting of goals and aiming to implement them, then re-opening the goals of the project, (re)defining pathways of implementation and thus redefining the roles and responsibilities of the different partners. The project was thus characterized by *cycles* of defining goals and implementing them, rather than by pre-defining the path of the project at the start. The flexibility within the project, then, made it possible to surf along on opportunities that came along, something that would have not been possible in projects with a more linear logic.

However, the flexible way of working was sometimes hard to explain ‘at home’ as it went against what was considered as a legitimate way of managing projects. Indeed, in the home organizations, a preference for linear methods of working was still prevalent. Working in a flexible way thus went against the dominant way of working of the partners. Some of the partners, therefore, encountered difficulties in showing the legitimacy of such a way of working. The participants did, however, need to learn how to work in such a flexible way and in some instances, this created discomfort. The partnership, then, served as a safe space for testing new, less linear ways of working of which the lessons learned from the partnership could afterwards possibly serve as inspiration for the partner organizations.

Furthermore, the flexible approach that characterized the project took along the risk of widening the scope of the project too far. Hence, there was a tension between the need to be adaptive and flexible, and engaging in and exploring emerging opportunities on the one hand and the need to have a certain coherence and structure in the project on the other. This can also be called the ‘efficacy paradox’, which *says that on the one hand to be able to act, complexity must be reduced. (...) Yet, on the other hand, consideration of all possible effects, by fully embracing the complexities, interdependencies and value pluralism, reduces the capacity to act*” (Peterson & Mager, 2011, p. 118-119).

This indicates that – although flexibility is important - boundaries also need to be set, so that decisions can be made and concrete outputs may be realized.

**Proposition 3: There is a constant tension between allowing for flexibility and setting limits in order to ensure the feasibility of the project.**

## 5.4 Dynamics

Along the duration of the project, different phases could be identified. During these phases, the dynamics between the partners and the dynamics of the project changed. Indeed, in the starting phase of the collaboration there was a lot of room for a search process in which the partners were able to think from the needs of the project, rather than from their own boundaries. Coming to agreements was therefore relatively easy. Examples of this were defining the indicators that the products would have to comply with, and coming up with a longlist of products. Moreover, in this phase, the concepts of sustainability and food for the future served as a common goal, something everyone was willing to work on, each from their own experience and expertise. It thus seems like the sustainability of food supply chains served as a consensus frame or a common goal to get everyone aboard. Indeed, Brunori and Galli (2016) argue that *"sustainability is a" consensus frame ", something on which everybody is willing to engage and which, given its relatively broad and undefined meaning, is open to different interpretations and very diverse applications"* (p. 6).

However, as the project progressed and started to be implemented, differences between the partners became clear and increasingly important. Indeed, as the outputs of the project became more concrete, also the different rhythms, visions, ways of working, values and boundaries of the partners became clear. The conflicts about the packaging of the quinoa and the study field trip to Peru illustrate this point.

We found that, in order to deal with these differences, it is important to monitor the cooperation process, evaluate it and, where necessary, gradually adjust it. In addition, clear communication processes and feedback loops are needed, so that it remains clear to every partner what is expected from them, and what they can expect from the other partners.

**Proposition 4: The dynamics between, needs and roles of the partners change throughout the different phases. Constant feedback loops about mutual agreements and role distributions are needed to deal with this.**

## 5.5 Roles

The strong flexibility of the project and the changing dynamics throughout the phases also had a strong impact on the roles of the partners. Indeed, within the project, each partner had its own



role, operating from its own skills and expertise. To make the process run smoothly, it was important that the roles of each of the partners were discussed in advance. However, due to the changing dynamics, and the flexible nature of the project, expectations on the role that each of the partners was supposed to fulfil also changed along the way. This, then, made it difficult to clearly discuss roles in advance and assign roles and responsibilities to each of the project partners. This also meant that not all responsibilities of the partners could be captured in official agreements and contracts between the partners before starting the project. It was therefore found that it is important to make clear agreements on the role that each partner is supposed to fulfil within the partnership, but that these agreements should be reviewed regularly. In addition, regular feedback loops turned out to be necessary on communication processes and whether the distribution of tasks and roles was still up-to-date. Moreover, in the absence of official documents clearly stating the roles and responsibilities of each of the partners trust was found to be of the utmost importance to smoothen the collaboration process.

**Proposition 5: Partners are equal to each other, but each has its own role within the partnership. To make the process run smoothly, the roles of each of the partners must be discussed in advance and reviewed during the project.**

## **5.6 Legitimacy**

Within the project, the participating partners were chosen. While this on the one hand made interaction between the partners easy, choosing some partners also automatically excluded others. This challenged the perceived legitimacy of the project.

The legitimacy of the project was also challenged because of *who* was included in the collaboration. The partners included were not always acknowledged as legitimate, either by the public or by the followers of the different organizations. For example, some actors in society did not see the retailer as a legitimate partner in the sustainability debate. Especially Rikolto was confronted with this, in questions by their followers on why they were collaborating so closely with a mainstream organization like Colruyt Group.

Moreover, external communication on the activities organized by and processes going on within the partnership were thought to be able to increase the visibility, credibility and legitimacy of the project. However, making information public was also thought to increase the vulnerability

of the partners, and some of the partners were therefore weary to publicize too much information, too quickly. It was therefore also important to find a balance between the different rhythms of the partners in making information public.

**Proposition 6: A small group makes interaction easier, but automatically excludes other players. Legitimacy must be created around who is around the table and how those players have been chosen.**

### **5.7 Organisation**

Any project requires to be managed: to organize the various processes, monitor progress, etc. In addition, a dedicated coordinator is required to foster project dynamics, as partners need to keep investing time and resources in the joint project. Ideally, such a coordinator has a neutral position, as he or she needs to mediate between the interests of the partners. Setting up a dedicated, temporary organization may assist in safeguarding neutrality. The disadvantage of such a temporary organization is that it requires additional formalities—and thus time and resources—from the partners.

**Proposition 7: In order to create equality between the partners, it can be an advantage to create a temporary organization, to manage resources and organize day-to-day management of the partnership.**

## **6 Conclusions**

There is no blueprint to carry out a multi-actor project, as was exemplified by the project described in this report. In theory, a set of steps needs to be taken, such as the setting of common goals, indicators and procedures, the development of an action plan, the implementation of that action plan, etc. In practice not all project boundaries and parameters may be known in advance in order to be able to take these steps in a linear way. There may be uncertainty related to the degree of involvement of partners. Openness and flexibility are thus essential partner capabilities to keep the project moving. However, the ability to be open and flexible may differ substantially between partners.

Every project has to find the right balance between structure and flexibility, between order and chaos. Deviating from the original plan may increase the possibility to take advantage of

opportunities or deal with uncertain events along the project timeline, but may also result in a different project altogether. Changing project boundaries and parameters may result in a more successful project, but can only be realized when there is enough trust between the partners and when a common set of values is shared.

Finally, sharing knowledge and experiences is not only important for partners to build up trust, but also to be able to reach a wider audience. We therefore hope that this learning history can be inspirational for companies, government organizations, NGOs, academic institutions and others.

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## 8 Annex 1

### DEFINITION OF TROPICAL PRODUCTS

**Tropical products** = Agricultural produce or commodities produced in tropical countries, which also find their origin in the South. Tropical products typically cannot be produced in the North, or have a significant advantage to be grown in the South.

### CHECKLIST FOR PRODUCTS

CRITERIA	Y/N
<b>1. Nutritious and healthy food</b> Protein-rich products, high in vitamins and minerals, ...	
<b>2. Tasty</b>	
<b>3. Ecologically sustainable and climate proof</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- minimizing/countering the adverse impacts of climate change (through agro-ecologically sound practices) (mitigation)</li> <li>- reducing climate related risks and vulnerability of small scale farmer (adaptation)</li> <li>- decreasing greenhouse gas emissions</li> <li>- increased resources use efficiency (incl. efficient water-use practices)</li> <li>- safeguarding or increasing biodiversity</li> <li>- minimizing or countering the effect on semi-arid lands/wetlands/forest/aquatic areas</li> <li>- non GM</li> <li>- transport by boat</li> <li>- crop rotation</li> <li>- future proof</li> <li>- ...</li> </ul>	
<b>4. Economically viable</b> Economically feasible, innovative and sustainable in terms of investing financial resources. Business case is present. Market-conform prices for both producer, retailer and consumer.	
<b>5. Relevant for the development of the local market in the South</b> Locally consumed or large potential for the local market	
<b>6. Providing a social, economic and/or ecological added value for the local producer</b> <i>(value in at least one aspect, being neutral regarding the other aspects)</i>	
<b>7. Of added value to consumers in Belgium</b>	

<p>Because of health related characteristics, existing demand (allergies),...</p> <p>Important in case of novel foods</p>	
<p><b>8. Complementary to products in Europe/Belgium</b></p> <p>A clear advantage to produce the product in the South</p>	
<p><b>9. The value chain symbolises ecological, economical and/or social innovation</b></p> <p>This innovation can take place as part of a new value chain or the improvement of an existing value chain and situated at different stages of the value chain (transport, post-harvest, processing, use of waste/biomass etc.)</p>	
<p><b>10. Improvement at different stages in the value chain</b></p> <p>e.g. byproducts, energy, resources, circular economy...</p>	
<p><b>11. Visibility</b></p> <p>The product allows to communicate a clear and good story (to consumers, larger public, youngsters in schools...)</p>	