



## Speaker Summary Note

**Session:** Africa

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**Title:** **Rethinking How We Each Do Business:  
Regional and actor perspectives—Africa<sup>1</sup>**

### Introduction

Food and nutrition insecurity is a ‘wicked problem’<sup>2</sup> (Rittel & Webber, 1973) which requires rethinking how we frame the problem and what we consider appropriate approaches to addressing it. While no one would minimize the seriousness of the situation and the human tragedies associated with it, we may also see in it the seeds of opportunity for innovation and redesign, not only of the food system itself, but also of knowledge production in support of that system. Inevitably, this challenges our existing sectoral and disciplinary demarcations, and will have implications for how the intersections of agriculture, nutrition and health are conceptualized and navigated. This rethinking is already happening in many places all over the world, involving a wide range of actors, including rural communities and city neighbourhoods, researchers from a wide range of disciplines, government officials and activist NGOs, start up entrepreneurs and established corporations. In this brief paper I introduce the Southern Africa FoodLab as an example of an initiative to bring new thinking and action to the challenges of food security, and highlight what we have learnt in the process of getting it established.

### Background

Addressing the food crisis in South and Southern Africa requires appreciating the ecological underpinnings of livelihood systems and untangling the knot of ‘multiple stressors’ which lies at the root of regional food insecurity, compounded by the AIDS epidemic (Drimie & Casale, 2009), and increasingly by climate change (Ericksen, 2008; Ziervogel & Taylor, 2008). In South Africa, widespread food insecurity and hunger persist in both urban and rural areas (Frayne et al, 2009). While the country is food secure at a national level in terms of aggregate food availability, research suggests that one out of two households (52 %) are at risk of hunger; 16% consume less than adequate energy; about 22% of children under nine years of age are stunted; and almost 4% of children under nine years of age show signs of wasting (Rose & Charlton, 2002; Labadarios, 2008; Chopra *et al.*, 2009). At the same time, over 50% of young women and

<sup>1</sup> Prepared in collaboration with Scott Drimie, IFPRI, Julia Harper and Candice Kelly, SU, Ralph Hamann, UCT and Vanessa Sayers, Reos Partners.

<sup>2</sup> Wicked problems are characterized by ambiguity in problem definition, multiple needs, preferences and values, different perspectives on what needs to be done and what role should be played by different parties, and inadequate understandings of the immediate and long term impact of actions taken by different groups (see also Carley & Christie 2001).

30% of young men are overweight or obese (Kruger, et al, 2007, Department of Health, 2007). In response, several agencies within the state, civil society and private sectors have embarked on efforts to document and find solutions to this multifaceted problem. Thus, food insecurity was high on the agenda in the discourse leading up to the national elections of 2008. This emphasis on food security in policy dialogue was supported by research initiatives at institutions such as the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) (see McLachlan and Thorne, 2009) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), which focused explicitly on the challenges of measuring and monitoring food security (see Altman et al, 2010). Several universities, including Cape Town, KwaZulu-Natal, Stellenbosch, and Pretoria have developed focused research programmes on food security. A wide array of civil society and private sector initiatives, ranging from food fortification and micronutrient supplementation programmes, school-based nutrition and health education and support programmes for emerging farmers, food gardening initiatives, and food distribution programmes, to efforts to introduce environmentally sustainable practices in food production, processing, logistics and waste management continue to be implemented (Faber & Laubscher, 2008; Food & Trees for Africa, 2010; Jacobs, 2010; Lekganyane, 2008).

While this renewed emphasis on food and nutrition security is laudable, progress is elusive. Given the rapidly changing context, which involves both 'long wave stresses' such as climate change, and short wave shocks like food price volatility, solutions that may have worked a decade ago are no longer adequate. Initiatives are often fragmented, piecemeal and difficult to bring to scale (Benson, 2008). Different stakeholders in the food system have widely different perspectives and interests and challenging structural issues such as power differentials among them remain largely unexamined (Vogel et al, 2007). Furthermore, the conceptual underpinning and empirical evidence base for perspectives and approaches vary widely, and are often more implicit than explicit. This makes rational discourse among stakeholders from different disciplines, sectors and levels difficult, and prevents them from working together effectively to find innovative ways to respond to food security challenges (Ramalingam et al 2008; Regeer & Bunders, 2009).

The Southern African FoodLab (SAFL) ([www.SouthernAfricafoodlab](http://www.SouthernAfricafoodlab)) is a recent multi-stakeholder response to these systemic challenges. Having started with a focus on the South African food system, its aim is to bring together diverse role-players with passion and influence in the regional food system, to identify and pilot innovative means to achieve long-term, sustainable food security. Its origins lie in the DBSA Food Security research initiative mentioned above. Participants representing multiple sectors and disciplines who attended a report-back meeting in February 2009 agreed that better collaboration was essential within and between sectors on food security matters. The workshop led to a year-long 'Change Lab' process, modelled on similar international initiatives, notably the Sustainable Food Lab ([www.sustainablefoodlab.org](http://www.sustainablefoodlab.org)).

The three-phase Change Lab involved a range of different modes of learning, starting with problem framing based on a review of the scientific knowledge on the state of food security in South Africa and in-depth interviews with stakeholders representing different interests in the food system. Learning journeys to urban and rural settings provided a first-hand experience of aspects of the food system that seemed, from the prior analysis, to be particularly 'stuck'. These journeys also provided opportunity for participants to reflect on their own assumptions regarding the situation and what to do about it, and to begin to think together about possible leverage points to bring about change. The final phase of the change lab focused on identifying and implementing promising innovations in a collaborative manner. It included a two-day innovation workshop, which was designed to enable the SAFL to move from one mode of learning (through observation and reflection) to another mode (learning by doing), to harness the energy for change that had built up in the system, and to prototype innovations that could have a ripple effect throughout the food system. Teams have now started working on a number of initiatives to strengthen primary production through innovations in support mechanisms, and to strengthen existing initiatives to increase access to affordable, safe and nutritious food. There is also an initiative to start a national conversation on food security, and to improve the 'food security literacy' of journalist in the country. After the first year of operation, lab participants strongly supported continuation of the initiative, now known as the SAFL, as a platform to convene and support innovation efforts for change in the food system, and to document and disseminate lessons from these experiences to a broader audience.

The SAFL is just beginning. But we are inspired by other change initiatives, such as the international Sustainable Food Lab that have grown rapidly over the last decade. A particular challenge for the SAFL is to develop tools and skills to draw on different knowledge systems, including academic research, indigenous knowledge and operational experience, to leverage shifts in the system. In addition, we have found it challenging to engage the leadership of activist NGOs and community groups and to have sustained participation from the public sector. We fully expect that issues of unequal power, constrained resources and different perspectives on the balance between talking, listening and acting will continue to surface as we learn our way forward. In this way, our initiative is indeed a laboratory taking part in the grand experiment of creating a food system that works for all.

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