



**Session Two:** Food Systems Thinking

**Date:** 11/03/25

**Coach:** Lara Hanlon

**Session:** Food Systems Thinking

## Action items

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Recording: [https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/vn3bY-](https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/vn3bY-OZiZteQzXQ4XWLLgqFOKBx6UEiZ_gY7GJu61LLR2nrOer4s1NXQ4mdSsQ_.gi4y75jbPu0ymD0Y)

[OZiZteQzXQ4XWLLgqFOKBx6UEiZ\\_gY7GJu61LLR2nrOer4s1NXQ4mdSsQ\\_.gi4y75jbPu0ymD0Y](https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/vn3bY-OZiZteQzXQ4XWLLgqFOKBx6UEiZ_gY7GJu61LLR2nrOer4s1NXQ4mdSsQ_.gi4y75jbPu0ymD0Y)

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### Overview

The Food Systems Thinking masterclass, led by systems thinking expert Lara Hanlon, explored the application of systems thinking to foster healthy sustainable diets within food systems.

The session began by defining systems thinking as a framework for understanding complex networks, emphasising its elements, interconnections and purpose.

Participants learned about the advantages of adopting a systems thinking mindset, including enhanced innovation and strategic planning, through case studies of Patagonia and a brewery upcycling initiative.

Engaging discussions highlighted the challenges organisations face in implementing this approach, along with the importance of employee engagement and collaboration.

The meeting concluded with actionable recommendations for participants to map out their systems and empower stakeholders, underscoring the necessity of a holistic view to drive sustainability in the food sector.



## Key Learnings from Lara Hanlon's Session – 5 Key Themes

- 1. Systems Thinking in Food & Beyond**
  - a. Systems consist of elements, interconnections and purpose, forming complex networks that impact outcomes.
  - b. Applying systems thinking helps with understanding root causes rather than isolated symptoms of industry challenges.
  - c. The food system is interconnected with climate, biodiversity, policy and human health, requiring a holistic approach.
- 2. The Importance of a Connected Approach**
  - a. Businesses and stakeholders often work in silos, leading to inefficiencies, miscommunication and missed opportunities.
  - b. Collaboration across supply chains, government and consumers is essential to create meaningful, scalable change.
  - c. Building relationships and building knowledge-sharing supports resilience and innovation.
- 3. Linear vs. Nonlinear Thinking**
  - a. Traditional, step-by-step, analytical thinking often limits creative solutions.
  - b. Nonlinear, lateral thinking encourages emergent solutions, new innovations and unexpected partnerships.
  - c. Systems thinking identifies interdependencies, leading to more effective decision-making and problem-solving.
- 4. Emerging Trends & Business Implications**
  - a. Sustainable businesses are redefining their purpose beyond profit, aligning with climate and health goals.
  - b. Case studies like Patagonia, BiaSol and Brooklyn Grange show how embracing circularity, sustainability and purpose-led business can drive success.
  - c. Organisations should map their ecosystem to identify pain points, opportunities and collaborative solutions.
- 5. Tangible Actions for Businesses**
  - a. Adopt a systems-thinking mindset – zoom in on details but also zoom out to see the bigger picture.
  - b. Map your system – visualise the elements, actors and interconnections to identify gaps and opportunities.
  - c. Foster collaboration – connect key stakeholders to create shared goals and holistic solutions.
  - d. Shift from short-term to long-term strategies, treating sustainability as an investment rather than a cost.
  - e. Encourage bottom-up innovation, allowing new ideas and partnerships to emerge organically.



## Guest Questions and Answers

### 1. Is it easier for smaller businesses to integrate systems thinking compared to large corporations?

- Yes, generally, smaller businesses have more agility and can adapt quickly to change.
- Larger organisations often operate in deep silos, making cross-functional collaboration and systemic change harder.
- However, large businesses can still adopt a systems approach by focusing on key departments or initiatives first, rather than overhauling everything at once.

**Solution:** Start small - identify one area where systems thinking can improve efficiency, reduce waste, or enhance collaboration and scale from there.

### 2. Many teams work in silos. How do we break down these barriers and encourage collaboration?

- Create more intentional cross-departmental interactions e.g. set up regular discussions between sustainability, procurement and product development teams.
- Visualizing the system can help - mapping out processes, interconnections, and missing links makes silos more obvious.
- Focus on shared goals—help teams see that collaboration can unlock efficiencies and reduce risks, rather than just being an extra task.

**Solution:** Use systems mapping exercises to help you and your teams understand where gaps, redundancies or misalignments exist.

### 3. How Do You Encourage a Mindset Shift Rather Than Forcing Change? Regulations often dictate change, but how do we create genuine engagement rather than just compliance?

- Forced change leads to resistance - when businesses only follow regulations, employees often see it as a burden.
- Instead, encourage a mindset shift by showing tangible benefits of sustainability and collaboration, such as cost savings or risk reduction.
- Encourage bottom-up innovation. Allow employees at different levels to explore problems and propose creative solutions rather than waiting for top-down mandates.

**Solution:** Frame sustainability and collaboration as a business opportunity rather than an obligation.

### 4. How Do We Balance Sustainability with Profitability? Sustainable changes often come with additional costs. How do businesses justify the investment?

- View sustainability as a long-term investment, not just a cost.
- Many efficiency-driven sustainability measures (e.g., reducing waste, improving supply chain resilience) save money over time.
- Consumers are increasingly demanding transparency and sustainability, which strengthens brand loyalty and market competitiveness.
- Collaborate with partners to share the cost burden - some sustainability measures become more viable when companies work together.

**Solution:** Position sustainability as a driver of efficiency, risk reduction, and competitive advantage rather than just a cost.

### 5. How Do We Bridge the Gap Between Government Policies & Industry Needs?

- Governments often work in silos too, with departments on farming, health and climate not communicating effectively.
- Businesses need to be more proactive in shaping policies, engaging with government and sharing real-world insights.



- Industry alliances and working groups (e.g., farmer-led initiatives) can help bring stakeholders together for better alignment.

**Solution:** Actively participate in industry forums, policy discussions and cross-sector collaborations to drive policy alignment.

## 6. What's the Biggest Problem in Our Food System Today?

### Guest Responses:

- Food waste & inefficiencies in distribution
- Lack of nutritional integrity & food affordability
- Climate change impact on farming & supply chains
- Consumer education gaps on sustainable choices
- Government silos causing fragmented decision-making

### Lara's Synthesis:

- All these problems are interconnected solutions must be systemic rather than isolated fixes.
- The key is to zoom out and look at the full system, identifying root causes rather than just symptoms.
- Businesses must engage across the supply chain, work with policymakers, and educate consumers to create holistic change.

**Solution:** Instead of tackling issues in isolation, approach them holistically, leveraging cross-sector collaboration and consumer engagement.

### Summary of Lara's Key Solutions:

- **Start small** – Identify areas where systems thinking can bring immediate value.
- **Map your system** – Visualising connections helps identify gaps & inefficiencies.
- **Encourage cross-functional collaboration** – Reduce silos by fostering shared goals.
- **Frame sustainability as an investment** – Position it as cost-saving, risk-reducing and brand-enhancing.
- **Engage with policymakers proactively** – Align government policies with industry realities.
- **Empower a mindset shift** – Move beyond compliance to inspiration & innovation.

### Take Action: Tools to start system mapping

- The System Mapping Toolkit – Miro interactive: <https://miro.com/miroverse/system-mapping-toolkit/> (**Step 3 Map** is a good starting point to mapping.)
- System Map – Service Design Tools: <https://servicedesigntools.org/tools/system-map> (A short guide on creating a systems map)
- Systems Mapping article by WEF: <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/03/systems-mapping-can-facilitate-the-collective-and-shared-understanding-of-complex-problems/>

### Business Example - Greencore:

Find food systems mapping in action on page 8 of Future Food Movement member Greencore's Sustainability report, which was developed in collaboration with our [Veris Strategies](#) colleagues: <https://www.greencore.com/app/uploads/2024/12/Greencore-Group-plc-Sustainability-Report-2024.pdf>

- **Need advice?** For expert guidance on mapping your systems approach and collaborating with your stakeholders, contact [Veris Strategies hello@veris-strategies.co.uk](mailto:hello@veris-strategies.co.uk)

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- Learning Collab: [Food Waste and Systems Thinking](#)

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Net Zero Food Systems with Will Clare