**Learning from the Future –**

**Preparing a Rural Development Innovation Journey**

Not long ago Development Cooperation was strongly shaped by the assumption of a ‘developed’ and

a ‘developing’ world - donors on one side and recipients of aid on the other side. Since the last decade we are witnessing complex systemic changes and the emergence of a new kind of International Cooperation. Rather than a donor-recipient relationship, we are faced with new and complex adaptive systems that include multiple Stakeholders and require new forms of leadership and facilitation. As articulated by an aboriginal woman: “If you coming here to help me you waste your time – but if your liberation is linked to mine, let us begin”[[1]](#footnote-1).

Farmers in rural areas know that the soil where they plant their seeds has to be nurtured and cared for. The MIT-professor Otto Scharmer uses an agricultural metaphor to describe communication and innovation processes: the earth, in this context, stands for the interior condition of an individual (specifically, a facilitator or change agent), while the air above signifies the visible space where we act and speak. Between the two is the thin top layer of the soil, whose state is likened to the psychological state or ‘structure of attention’ of those involved in the process at hand. In this paper I want to focus on this “soil”[[2]](#footnote-2). How can new forms of leadership and process facilitation tools support the field structure of attention to let innovativerural enterprise development emerge?

**A. The Challenges – Complex Adaptive Systems and Innovation in Rural Development**

Over the past century the terms of development cooperation have been framed largely by the donor countries. Only recently have the principles of participation, ownership and empowerment emerged. Nevertheless, leadership has often been understood as a top-down process that is focused primarily on the role of individual leaders. Leaders in the old way were heroic and charismatic figures at the top of a hierarchical structure. This included the concept of “followers“ who needed to be controlled, rewarded, motivated and sometimes punished. More and more this understanding of leadership is questioned and is becoming obsolete. So what does leadership mean? The Indo-European root of the words “lead” and “leadership”, *leith*, means to go forth, to cross the threshold, or to die.[[3]](#footnote-3) Evoking this notion of change and transformation, Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czechoslovak republic, once remarked: “It is as if something was crumbling, decaying and exhausting itself – while something else, still indistinct, was rising from the rubble.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Today the dynamic changes and decaying of systems can be seen in a lot of different fields, at the same time, something still indistinct is rising from the rubble in rural development. This means that leaders and facilitators,[[5]](#footnote-5) in general and particularly in rural development, are confronted with:

1. a series of urgent, global and systemic problems that threaten the stability of vital ecological, social and economic systems and increase the challenges within rural enterprise development. The ongoing structural and cultural transformation, as well as the global shift towards more sustainable and equal economies and societies have created a situation where the ‘business as usual’ approach that relies on the routines and mental frames of the past is not sufficient anymore. Innovation – a change of mindsets - is necessary.
2. highly complex adaptive systems that no single person, organization, or even country is capable of navigating on their own. Due to the complexity of the global economy which includes global markets, value chains and/or international stakeholders, rural development in a specific area and country requires a broad array of people and organizations from a multiplicity of countries and cultures a to make a project successful.
3. the necessity to go beyond the tolerant, but largely eclectic and fragmented blend of diverse perspectives, and move towards a more integrated approach of rural enterprise development that includes and embraces international diversity and is capable of transforming collective intention into collaborative action.

**B. Innovation in Rural Development from a 4 Quadrant Perspective**

While the focus of this article is on how to support change though an awareness of the inner condition and mindset/competency of leaders and facilitators, I would like to emphasize the 4-Quadrant model[[6]](#footnote-6) of innovation. This model is based on an interior-individual perspective, the inner condition of people, and an individual-exterior condition, the mindsets of people – as well as an interior-collective perspective that refers to culture, and an exterior-collective perspective, which reflects the system perspective.

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| --- | --- |
| **Inner condition of innovation** | **Mindset of innovation** |
| **Culture of innovation** | **Systems of innovation** |

From an interior-individual perspective an **inner condition** that supports innovation is the result of the dynamic interplay of a range of elements: a person’s mental models and assumptions about the world, the level of awareness of the inner Self, attitudes towards other people and the quality of relationships with them, a person’s most precious values and deepest beliefs, his or her emotional condition and psychological imprints, and the conscious or unconscious purpose in his or her life. A person’s inner condition is not fixed or given, but can change and evolve to higher levels gradually in the course of a human life. This change requires the inner work of awareness, experience and practice which can support the development of a more conscious, balanced and beneficial inner condition.

The individual-exterior perspective can be described as **mindset,** the established way our brain works. Most of our thoughts follow certain standard paths. Our mindset is this ‘mental infrastructure’, this network of established pathways in our brain. It defines our way of thinking and doing things, the frames we use to make sense of experiences and events, what we find normal and what disturbs us. The mindset is a powerful conditioner of our individual and collective perception of reality. The mindset is continuously evolving and may be changed – but this is a difficult, transformative process.

The interior-collective perspective refers to culture. A **culture** of innovation would “ensemble values, patterns of understanding, habitual routines, norms and social imprints held by a person or group” that foster new ideas and innovation. This could “be linked to countries or ethnicity but also to other social groups and features such as gender, class, profession, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation or others.” One possibility to support a culture of innovation are Innovation Journeys as described later in detail. They can be a “*learning space and laboratory for exploring the potentials and challenges of international diversity”*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Systems of innovation** represent the exterior collective view and a perspective that became quite common on an international level in the field of rural development. Ever since it became clear that agricultural research alone cannot increase the capacity of the agricultural sector in developing countries, a new approach called the “Rural Innovation Systems (RIS)” has aimed for the *“systemic understanding and facilitation of the interaction among all factors and actors for generating, diffusing, and utilizing new knowledge for rural development.”[[8]](#footnote-8)* Today at UNIDO the process of agro value chain development is described as *“the entire range of activities undertaken to bring a product from the initial input-supply stage, through various phases of processing, to its final market destination, and it includes its disposal after use. For instance, agro-food value chains encompass activities that take place at the farm or rural level, including input supply, and continue through handling, processing, storage, packaging, and distribution. As products move successively through the various stages, transactions take place between multiple chain stakeholders, money changes hands, information is exchanged and value is progressively added. Macroeconomic conditions, policies, laws, standards, regulations and institutional support services (communications, research, innovation, finance, etc.) – which form the chain environment – are also important elements affecting the performance of value chains*.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

**C. Towards a Value and Competency Based Leadership/Facilitation in Rural Development**

If we view rural development as a complex adaptive system[[10]](#footnote-10), leadership is mainly a process of facilitation and this might be the key for the co-creation of truly innovative solutions. In order to turn this notion into reality, leaders have to ask questions, creating a generative dialogue about ways to accomplish rural development within a rapidly changing world. The quality of facilitation and leadership is becoming less dependent on power and charisma and requires more than ever the ability to communicate and co-create. To facilitate the emergence of a generative dialogue, leadership has to be value-oriented and competency based. Leaders and facilitators within CAS need to have:

• a holistic and systemic understanding of the causes and consequences of urgent and complex global problems and their relation to the specific rural developmental context;

• a development of individual and collective leadership competencies;

• the ability to initiate a reflection of values and a shift in mindsets;

• the motivation to develop innovative and viable solutions for leadership challenges that leaders face in their work context;

• the motivation and ability to overcome long lasting implementation difficulties and to take innovative action.

Conventional / modern Management often focuses on getting things done: Managers deal with short-term and mid-term goals within organizations. By contrast, leaders in a modern sense deal with the long-term strategy and vision and mission of an organization or project. This can involve tough decisions and payoffs. While management can be useful in well-known areas that require effectiveness and efficiency, leadership is integral in the art of navigating in an unknown territory and exploring unexpected problem dimensions, often outside the comfort zone of individuals and organizations. Therefore, modern leaders have to *facilitate*, i.e. create and sustain spaces in which deep exchange and dialogue becomes possible. For this to happen, the significance of one’s own inner condition increases dramatically: “the same person in the same situation doing the same thing can have a completely different outcome depending on the inner place from where that action is coming”.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It is most likely that positive result in leadership and facilitation for rural development is based on an inner condition that expresses itself through:

1. empathy with the other and respect for a diversity of perspectives, identities and world views;
2. conscientiousness of the bigger systemic interconnectedness of human beings, societies and the planet;
3. an endeavor to serve the common good and a commitment to personal and collective responsibility;
4. the ability to bear ambiguity that may arise from differences in values, cultural norms and world views;
5. mindfulness of the present moment and openness of all senses.[[12]](#footnote-12)

But not only does the leader and/or facilitator need to be able to hold and express these inner conditions, he/she might also need three areas of expertise to support the undertaking of rural development projects within complex adaptive systems:

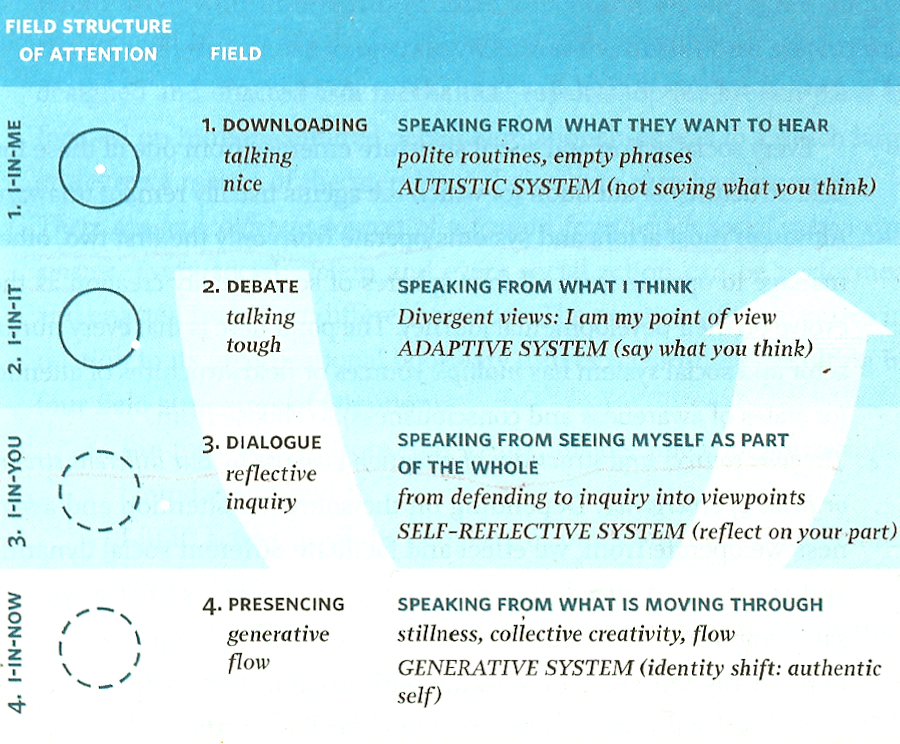
**a. Cooperation:** To address the global dimension of today’s challenges in a multi-polar and interdependent world, leaders must be able to develop solutions collaboratively in international, cross-sectoral and non-hierarchical networks. The competency of cooperative leadership includes the ability to speak and listen with openness, appreciation and a desire to learn and to initiate and facilitate dialogue and change within multi-polar, cross-sectoral and culturally diverse international networks. It also requires leaders to lead teams and groups in a manner that unfolds the potential of everyone involved, and to identify shared values, new narratives and ethical norms that support the global shift towards sustainability and equality. Leaders/Facilitators are expected to make use of cultural diversity and intentionality as a valuable source of mutual learning, creativity and innovation.

**b. Transformation:** Incremental change management and reactive quick fixes often fail to sufficiently address the fundamental challenges of rural development. Leaders must be able to initiate and facilitate deep structural and cultural changes at the level of individuals, organizations and systems. As a precondition, they must be able and willing to engage in a process of self-transformation. The competency of transformational leadershipis the ability to question, widen and modify one’s own mindset, mental and emotional patterns, values, cultural frames and worldviews. One has to be able to leave one’s comfort zone and encounter situations of insecurity, uncertainty and not-knowing. This includes the capacity to reflect on personal blind spots, fears and other limiting mental and emotional patterns. One needs to have an understanding of the dynamics of transformational processes in order to facilitate deep change within individuals, groups and organizations. Only then can leaders and facilitators engage in a process of deep personal reflection that combines the search of one’s highest potential and motivations for the future with their leadership role on the forefront of rural agricultural development. Though an innovation journey leaders/facilitators might be able to develop those capacities.

**c. Innovation:** Responses to transformational challenges cannot be derived from the routines, management books and mental frameworks of the past. Leaders need the ability to develop profound innovation and the sensitivity, determination and perseverance to engage in innovative action in environments of inertia, blockades and a lack of support. This competency of leadership for innovative action is the ability to build innovative, attractive and shared visions of the future, which would move groups and organizations from intention to collaborative action. This includes the possibility to create open and unstructured spaces in which the truly new and unexpected can emerge, as well as to develop meaningful prototypes for work-related change projects that are implemented in organizations, networks and larger systems. Often this means to learn from errors and past failures, and to understand these as important elements of the innovation process.[[13]](#footnote-13) One of the most well known leadership and facilitation tools for innovation is the U-Process by Dr. Otto Scharmer.

**D. Preparing the Soil: Theory U - Engaging with the Future**

As mentioned above, the importance to ask questions for leaders needs to be emphasized. As described in the work of Otto Scharmer’s Theory U approach, a generative dialog requires a specific set of conditions and competencies. In order to attain a collective shift – from ‘politeness’ to ‘conflict’ to ‘inquiry’ to the ‘generative flow’ that will lead to innovation within rural development, the field of attention needs to be addressed. If you ask experienced facilitators how they do this, they usually say “practice”. More than any other tool that can be described, the person of the facilitator is the most important ‘tool’ - a powerful source of intervention for generating change. While this can make working as a facilitator a most rewarding endeavor at times, it also comes with a big responsibility to serve individuals and groups with truthfulness, sensitivity, respect and humility. Even more, it implies that a facilitator does not stand ‘outside’ of the very processes that he or she intends to facilitate and serve. Just as an Innovation Journey can involve the participants as a whole person and biography, including both professional and private life, so does facilitation involve a whole person. The following chart describes the four field structures of attention and how they relate to leadership:



In order to dive into the field structure of attention and to nurture the “social soil”, one has to engage in the adventure of an Innovation Journey. Innovation Journeys offer leaders, facilitators, donors and clients within a rural development setting a learning space to develop these key leadership competencies in a self-directed and empowering way, whether they are working at the local, national, and/or the global level.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The U-process can be a powerful tool to design an Innovation Journey within rural development. Through this movement, stakeholder experience the above mentioned levels of dialogue and are able to enter into what Scharmer calls presencing – the possibility to act out of the highest future potential:

Though contacting to ones own source, sense of self and open will, new ideas emerge and can be established though prototyping. Such an Innovation Journey for rural development within the concept of agro value chain development might look like this:

**1. Before the Journey – Downloading/Observing**

Still at home, participants, with guidance from the journey’s facilitators, should individually reflect upon their value chain challenges and desire to learn and lead interviews with team members, colleagues and superiors to identify challenges within their organization, systemic field or project location. This would involve team members, colleagues and superiors to look for areas of potential in their organization.

This encompasses *mapping the value chain to understand the characteristics of the chain’s actors and the relationships among them, including the study of all actors in the chain, of the flow of goods through the chain, of employment features, and of the destination and volumes of domestic and foreign sales.[[15]](#footnote-15)* Another possibility for this step is to use the SAM 5 Level (SAM) Model[[16]](#footnote-16).

**2. Starting the Journey – Observing**

In the first stage of the journey, participants will learn about the broader context of 21st century rural development challenges, through inputs and dialogue sessions with experts. They will also explore the concepts of rural development and agro value chain innovation, reflect upon rural development challenges that they as individuals, their organization and their project area currently face. Through observation, participants will be able to define specific personal learning and competence development goals that will assist them in the innovative development of the agro value chain.

**3. Exploring the Outside World – Sensing**

In the second stage of the journey, participants explore the specific focus topic of the journey within the value chain development (such as increasing the quantity and improving the regularity and continuity of production, improving the quality and safety of products, reducing the time needed to reach the customer, minimizing transactional costs, improving chain actors’ capacity to follow/assimilate technology and market developments[[17]](#footnote-17)). This also includes input from and dialogue sessions with experts, in addition to the practice of communicative, reflective and empathic leadership techniques through active listening, asking powerful questions, feedback, peer coaching and dialogue. Emphasis should be given to the exploration of a systemic field (a sensing journey around the focus topic). In practice, this means that participants should visit people, institutions and places that carry a high learning potential. In conclusion, participants will evaluate the sensing journey and exploration of the focus topic, in order to develop a deeper and more complete understanding of the systems as a whole. The goal is to learn to see the world through the eyes of relevant stakeholders, and appreciate and respect the diversity of perspectives. The hope/idea/goal is that through these sensing journeys, leaders, facilitators and participants be enabled to *identify “the distribution of actors’ benefits in the chain. This involves analyzing the margins and profits within the chain and therefore determining who benefits from participating in the chain and who would need support to improve performance and gains. In the prevailing context of market liberalization, this step is particularly important, since the poor involved in value chain promotion projects are the most vulnerable.”[[18]](#footnote-18)*

**4. Exploring the Inner World - Presencing[[19]](#footnote-19)**

This stage is both significant for the design of a U-Process and novel within agro value chain development. Through this process, new ideas and innovation can take place. Oftentimes, a focus on an exterior-systemic approach is not enough to generate and trigger innovation. Since value chains seem in reality to *“be more complex, to involve numerous interlinked activities”*[[20]](#footnote-20) and include different actors with different mindsets and inner conditions, it is important that participants be able to reflect upon their own values before attempting to implement development projects. In the third stage of the journey, participants will go on an innovation retreat in a remote, natural environment. The task is to reflect upon their own personal and cultural values, and how they shape their biographies, world views and aspirations for the future. Part of such an inner journey are non-cognitive approaches that include awareness practices (yoga, meditation), work with sculptures, painting, creative writing and music combined with moments of solitude, silence and emptiness (such as a solo walk in nature or a guided inner journey) that allow for a connection to the inner Self, future potentials and the emergence of new qualities, insights and inspiration. This allows participants to slow down and to search collectively for shared values and new cultural narratives that can support a profound shift in societies towards principles of sustainability, equality, shared responsibility and rural innovation.

**5. Rapid Prototyping**

Prototypesaddressaspects of urgent challenges within an agro value chain development process (such as increasing the quantity and improving the regularity and continuity of production, improving the quality and safety of products, reducing the time needed to reach the customer, minimizing transactional costs, improving chain actors’ capacity to follow/assimilate technology and market developments).They allow an organization (or even an industry) to trigger meaningful and visionary changesand to go beyond business as usual.

Prototyping can include (but is not limited to) the following interventions that are common within agro value chain development*:*

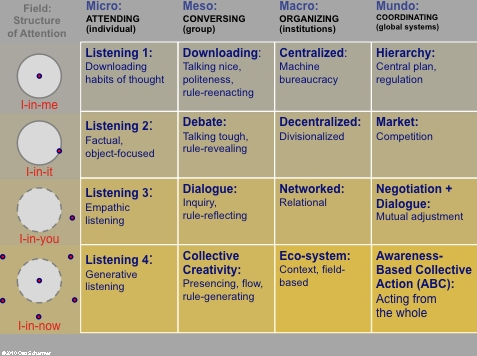
1. *improve product design and quality and move into more sophisticated product lines to gain higher value and/or diversify production;*
2. *reorganize the production system or invest in new technology to upgrade the process to enhance chain efficiencies;*
3. *introduce new functions in the chain to increase the overall skill content of activities, for instance, moving from OEM (original equipment manufacture) to ODM (own-design manufacture) and then to OBM (own-brand manufacture); and*
4. *adapt the knowledge gained in particular chain functions in order to redeploy it in other sectors.” [[21]](#footnote-21)*

In order to fulfill the criteria of a prototype, practitioners have to be realistic yet include new and “wild” ideas that have never been tried before. This constitutes an early version of what might later developinto a major project. Such innovative ideas can vary in size but must allow rapid testing or implementation within a few weeks or months.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Prototypes allow practitioners to start a process “*of learning-in-action, engaging relevant stakeholders and generating valuable feedback within an organization or system. Ideas for a prototype can already (but need not to) be developed before the journey by participants and their colleagues and superiors. Generally, prototypes are developed during the journey, building on the exploration of leadership challenges, the focus topic and the insights and inspirations that participants distil from their personal learning journey. In the prototyping process, we apply amongst others Theory U and Design Thinking methodology. Both approaches emphasis learning through observation, dialogue and systems understanding, encourage connecting to inner sources of inspiration and purpose, invite creativity and “wild ideas”, and centre on building early prototypes quickly in order to test them and learn from failure, errors and feedback. If several participants from an organization or learning system participate in a journey and develop and implement a joint prototype, the probability of deeper changes rises substantially*.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

**6. Integration – Including the Government for Up-scaling Innovation**

After prototyping innovation within rural development and particularly within the agro value chain, different stakeholders need to be taken into account. This involves engagement at the governmental level: *“Within the concept of value chain, governance defines the structure of relationships and coordination mechanisms that exist among chain actors”.* By including institutional actors that may offer support to improve capabilities in the value chain, increase value is added in the sector and distributional distortions can be corrected*. “Thus, governance constitutes a key factor in defining how the upgrading objectives can be achieved.”[[24]](#footnote-24)*

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**E. Conclusion**

As outlined above, in order to work within the complex adaptive system of rural enterprise development, the focus on values, mindsets and the overall inner condition of various stakeholders could be very beneficial for an innovative outcome. Like the soil of the earth that is a thin, fertile layer, the capacity to innovate could be seen as this layer within the social field. More then ever, it depends on the structure of attention the inner condition of awareness within individuals, groups, institutions and global systems to do so. If we manage to build bridges between the local community, district and national levels through generative dialogue, the possibility for awareness-based collective actions will increase dramatically. For rural development this would mean more innovation and a broader view to tackle value chain development with a more inclusive and integral framework. At the end I want to mention that an innovation journey is always research in action – the best thing to do it is to try it out.

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**Rural Innovation System:**

http://www.kit.nl/kit/Rural-innovation-systems-introduction

**Resources about Leadership and Facilitation:**

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Open Space: A short video on Open space: <http://vimeo.com/25251316>

World Cafe: Introduction video to world café, <http://youtu.be/YrTKD8NpApY>

World Cafe: Resources and further links, [www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)

Design thinking in action (20 Minutes), <http://youtu.be/taJOV-YCieI>

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