



DEVELOPING SYSTEMS THINKING

Originally developed by: [FIT4FOOD2030](#)

OBJECTIVE

Developing a shared conceptual understanding of the food system

TARGET AUDIENCE

All types of stakeholders, including the general public

LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

Active participation and reflection

TIME NEEDED

2.5 – 3 hours

LIST OF MATERIALS

Sticky notes, Colored pens/pencils, Flipchart paper, [Food system pictures](#), [Trends cards](#), Board or flipchart

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**FOOD
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QUICK OVERVIEW

Participants will engage in various activities that enhance self-awareness and stimulate discussion on the complexities of the food system and individual roles within it. The session includes reflective exercises on the journey of food from source to table and collaborative concept mapping to visualize and deepen understanding of food system dynamics.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Engage in reflective exercises to connect with the concept of food systems.
- Track the journey of food items from their source to your plate, identifying their impact on the environment and communities.
- Collaborate in small groups to create and present conceptual maps of the food system, identifying crucial leverage points for positive change.
- Develop awareness of individual and collective roles within the food system and discover pathways to make it more sustainable.

Developing Systems Thinking

This short workshop contains various reflective and co-creational exercises to increase self-awareness and generate discussion about the food system and the role and responsibility of each individual in it. As the facilitator, you will guide participants through the creative process of developing shared conceptual maps of the food system.

The learning journey of participants starts by establishing a relationship with the abstract concept of food systems through association and open discussion. They are then guided through a process of self-reflection regarding where the food they eat comes from and what journey it takes to land on their plate. Your role in guiding the process of exploration with questions is essential.

All this preparatory work enables participants to visualize their mental representations of the food system in small groups and develop various competences.

The workshop was created within the framework of the FIT4FOOD2030 project by incorporating the results and insights derived from individual stakeholder consultations and workshops with the members of the Budapest Food City Lab¹. It has already been tested as an open workshop for the general public and as part of a university course for students. When offering it as an open workshop, make sure that participants stay for the entire duration. In a university context, you can use it as an introductory lesson within a longer course on food systems or incorporate it into courses where gaining a basic understanding of the complexity and interconnectedness of food systems is desired. We consider the workshop appropriate for any stakeholder group, although minor changes might be necessary.

Getting Prepared

Before the activity starts, print and cut out the [food system pictures](#) and [trend cards](#), prepare all necessary materials, and organize the room. If possible, aim for a flexible setting. You can begin the workshop with chairs arranged in a circle to encourage sharing and dialogue, then create separate workspaces for each subgroup. Additionally, set up a space for all extra materials, such as pictures and trend cards, that participants can use for concept map creation. Preferably you have approximately 12 participants per facilitator and in one room. Of course it is possible to organise the workshop with different parallel groups, but then you need more facilitators, rooms and materials.

Tip: Schedule a bit of extra time before participants arrive so you can center yourself, take a couple of minutes to breathe, and mentally and emotionally prepare for holding the space during the workshop.



Image 1: Co-creation of concept maps in small groups (STEP 5)

¹ Special acknowledgment to Janka Horváth, Márta Fekete, the students of Semmelweis University, Valeriano Donzelli, and the members of the Inspiral Club for their support and cooperation in the two-stage piloting process.

Flow of the workshop

The workshop comprises 7 steps with one optional step:

1. Bridge-in (5–6 minutes)
2. Setting Expectations (25–30 minutes) - *Optional*
3. Creating Shared Understanding (15–20 minutes)
4. "The Journey of My Breakfast" (20–25 minutes)
- If you include STEP 2, also include a 10-minute break here.*
5. Co-Creating Concept Maps (45 minutes)
6. Presenting Concept Maps (20–25 minutes)
7. Closing Circle (10 minutes)

During collaborative processes, such as this workshop, you as a facilitator play an important role in guiding the process and continuously encouraging participants to engage in self-reflection by using appropriate guiding questions. As a facilitator, you need several skills and competences, such as verbal and non-verbal communication skills, negotiating skills, flexibility, and leadership. You will need to create an environment in which all participants feel secure, are able to speak up, and can share their perspectives on the issues being discussed. This may involve encouraging some participants to contribute more often while ensuring others do not dominate the discussion. Additionally, you will need to steer the conversation away from topics that are not directly relevant.

Beyond facilitation skills and group management, you should also have at least a general knowledge of the main dynamics, challenges, and opportunities of the food system to ask the appropriate guiding questions for this module.

Steps

Step 1 (5–6 minutes): Bridge-in

- Briefly introduce yourself and the aim of the session.

Step 2 (25–30 minutes): Setting Expectations (Optional)

- This optional step is recommended when participants are unfamiliar with each other, such as in a general audience setting outside a formal institutional context.
- Invite participants to sit in a circle and share their answers to one or both of the following questions:
 - Why did you choose to attend the workshop?



Image 2: Clustering associations (STEP 3). Searching for food system concept map components (STEP 5), Deliberation (STEP 5); Identifying own roles (STEP 5), Presenting concept maps (STEP 5).

- What is your connection to the topic of the workshop?
- If there are more than 12 participants, choose only one question to stay within the timeframe.

Step 3 (15–20 minutes): Creating Shared Understanding

- Provide each participant with three post-its (you can place them at each seat beforehand).
- Ask them to write one association per post-it for the phrase “food system.” Emphasize that there are no wrong answers.
- After five minutes, invite participants to share their associations, placing the post-its on a board/flipchart. Begin clustering them around emerging themes such as actors, system elements, processes, value chains, or values.

Tip: If the group seems shy, encourage participation by asking if anyone has similar ideas to those already mentioned or something completely new.

Step 4 (20–25 minutes): The Journey of My Breakfast

- Distribute pens and paper and ask participants to work individually.
- First, ask them to list what they ate for their most recent meal, detailing components. Then, choose one ingredient and trace its journey from the source to their plate. Allow 10 minutes for this task.
- Initiate a plenary discussion where participants share their journeys, focusing on environmental, community, and supply chain impacts.
- Introduce the concept of short supply chains and reflect on their effects, such as supporting local communities or reducing environmental footprints.

Tip: Notify participants halfway through and again 1–2 minutes before the exercise ends to stay on schedule.

Step 5 (45 minutes): Co-Creating Concept Maps

- Divide participants into subgroups of 3–5.
- Explain that they will collaboratively create a food system representation on flipchart paper using drawings, post-its, trend cards, and pictures.
- Share the time limit and ask each group to appoint a timekeeper.
- Near the end of the exercise, present these tasks:
 - Identify the most crucial change needed to make the food system healthier and more sustainable. Each participant writes down their individual ideas, then the group agrees on one.
 - Draw themselves on the map, representing their role in the system.

Tip: For a more open and artistic process, introduce materials like clay, paint, or collage supplies.

Step 6 (20–25 minutes): Presenting Concept Maps

- Ask each subgroup to present their map. Gather participants around the presenting team’s table to encourage attention and discussion.

- After each presentation, invite questions or comments from other groups.
- Use guiding questions to deepen reflection, explore system dynamics, and highlight relationships.

Tip: Be flexible. If discussions are particularly engaging, consider adjusting the schedule to allow more time while keeping the workshop's main objectives in focus.

Step 7 (10 minutes): Closing Circle

- Bring participants back into a circle and ask them to share:
 - One thing they learned or are taking away from the workshop.
 - One action they plan to do differently based on the workshop.

Tip: If time is short, limit answers to one sentence or one word.