

SPECIAL RESOURCE FOR

UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION, 5TH EDITION

**Discussion Paper for Transformative Evaluation Workshop
Case Study Example**

**Transformation-Focused Leadership for a Transformational Alliance:
Reflections on Infusing Systems Principles and Complexity Concepts
Through Evaluative Thinking**

by Michael Quinn Patton
January, 2021

Context: From Theory to Practice

Complexity theory, systems thinking, and transformational engagement consist of abstract concepts and theoretical propositions that have gained substantial attention and evaluation over the last two decades. But how do these ideas inform real world organizational decision-making and evaluation practice?

This chapter answers these questions through reflective practice by an executive director and evaluation consultant who have worked together for seven years. Other chapters in this volume elaborate the core concepts that make up the complex systems framework. Our task is to illustrate how those concepts translate into practice in the face of real-world challenges and decisions and how this unique leadership/evaluation partnership infused systems principles and complexity concepts into a dynamic systems transformation strategy.

The situational context in which this partnership is set is the Global Alliance for the Future of Food (the Global Alliance). The Global Alliance is a strategic alliance of philanthropic foundations working together and with others to transform global food systems now and for future generations. How the Global Alliance infused systems principles and complexity concepts into all aspects of its transformation strategy is evident in the history of the alliance since its inception through seven core complexity concepts: 1) emergence; 2) systems thinking; 3) boundaries; 4) developmental and evaluative thinking; 5) interrelationships; 6) adaptability; and 7) complex dynamics. Each of these will be illustrated below as told through the evolution of the Global Alliance highlighting the importance of collaborative leadership in the process.

Concept 1: Emergence

The complexity theory concept of emergence calls attention to self-organizing interactions among engaged agents. Each agent pursues its own path but as that path intersects with other paths, and the agent interacts with other agents, also pursuing their own paths, patterns of interaction emerge and cohere, becoming greater than the separate parts.

In June 2012, a group of approximately 25 philanthropic organizations from around the world, driven by a sense of urgency, assembled in the United Kingdom for the first time to explore shared visions for advancing sustainable global agriculture and food systems in the face of climate change, resource destruction, and food insecurity. Prior to this gathering, their interactions had been informal, ad hoc, and occasional. The meeting created a strong sense among the participating philanthropies that much could be achieved by catalyzing the emergence of an international collaborative network that could combine energies behind practical strategies for shifting the planet to agriculture and food systems that are more sustainable, equitable, and secure. The Global Alliance as a collaboration thus emerged from diversity and plurality as these foundations, despite differences in size, assets, culture, mission, history, staffing, and programming found common cause. The alliance was born from the vision and leadership of foundations from countries across the globe with diverse interests and expertise, and a shared belief in the urgency of advancing sustainable global agriculture and food systems, and in the power of working together and with others to effect positive change.

Concept 2: Holistic Perspective

A holistic perspective involves examining deep and complex interactions across the SDG domains. Focusing on siloed SDGs, both in designing interventions and evaluating them, risks missing synergies, interconnections, spillover and side effects, and reinforcing alignments, as well as undermining misalignments. A holistic perspective creates opportunities to accelerate and leverage the transformation towards sustainable food systems and development., This means, in particular, synthesizing economic, social, environmental, cultural, and political factors and dynamics to understand the big picture. A holistic perspective also means that the seven GA principles are not a pick-and-choose list, not a menu, but a comprehensive, integral set to be attended to and implemented together. Likewise the four overarching SETIG systems principles and corresponding operating principles are intended to be used and understood together in a mutually influential way.

The member foundations of the Global Alliance make grants to support projects, programs, and initiatives that have identifiable outcomes and concrete implementation strategies to achieve those outcomes. Evaluation, then, assesses goal attainment and fidelity of model implementation. This epitomizes the traditional and dominant approach to needs assessment, planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. A defining concept for the Global Alliance from the beginning was the focus on changing systems rather than funding projects and programs. Systems thinking was at the core of what brought these diverse foundations together.

When they first assembled in a facilitated session to determine how to work together, they began by agreeing on a definition of the problem – inadequate, dysfunctional, and even broken food systems. Together, they saw global food systems that increasingly: are too dependent on fossil fuels and nonrenewable inputs that result in pollution and environmental damage; erode human health, social cohesion, rural livelihoods, important social, cultural, and spiritual traditions; promote an economic system that privileges corporate culture, results in economic liabilities due to hidden costs, global trade vulnerabilities, and declining rural economies; and, are unresponsive to the knowledge and priorities of citizens in determining food policies and practices from the local to global level.

They agreed that as an alliance of foundations, they would provide a collective space to amplify the work of their individual organizations and embrace “complexity and a global systems view, recognizing that food systems reform must be approached holistically built on diverse evidence to demonstrate the interconnectedness and intersectionality of local issues and their impact at the global scale and vice-versa, and to avoid unintended consequences and limited, narrow, short-term solutions.” The language of complexity and systems permeated the members’ interactions and helped them transcend the greatly diverse perspectives of their individual organizations. As well, these concepts infused decisions about the kind of staff leadership required and the nature of evaluation deemed appropriate for a systems-focused alliance.

Concept 3: Boundaries

The SETIG systems principle on boundaries calls for critically deliberating on, setting, and explaining the boundaries and boundary decisions that relate to the situation being evaluated and the evaluation itself. This includes identifying key boundaries that influence, and should influence, the situation being evaluated and the evaluation itself, the consequences of boundary decisions, and make transparent and warranted the boundaries used in an intervention and the evaluation while remaining open to revision.

For GA members this meant asking and examining but the parameters around what they would engage on together and how would they work together. What would guide their collaboration? What were they committing to? How would they place boundaries around the engagement of the Alliance? T

The Global Alliance members knew that they would need to articulate goals for the alliance, identify strategies, establish priorities, and create working groups to carry out specific initiatives and activities. But all of this could not be done at once. They had come together around a common understanding of the problems to be addressed, but the question was how to go about addressing those problems. Where should they begin?

A meeting was planned for all participating foundations during which they aimed to address how to focus (place boundaries around) their work. The original objective for the meeting was to map the global food system. However, the group struggled with the opening exercise because, as a collective, they had not yet defined their vision of food systems transformation, nor the definitions and boundaries that articulated that vision. Through a fast-acting, adaptive intervention, staff and member leadership, senior evaluation advisor, and the professional facilitator, shelved the original agenda and shifted the meeting to articulating shared principles as the guide, the boundaries, of all shared action within the alliance.

The practical utility of the commitment to the principles as an integrated whole was reinforced through a pilot test that involved applying the principles to analyze diverse food systems: Did the principles constitute a diagnostic framework for analyzing the baseline conditions of several diverse agricultural systems? In small groups, knowledgeable participants used the principles to describe the current system of beef production in South America, shrimp production Southeast Asia, smallholder farms in the highlands of Tanzania, and an organic farm in California. The principles proved a powerful diagnostic framework that was a breakthrough in bringing along those who were uncertain about either the value of identifying principles or their utility. The diagnostic exercise also identified areas where wording changes were needed to clarify shared meaning, ensure applicability, and spotlight the commitment to focusing on systems change.

Thus, over a period of two months through two face-to-face meetings, the Global Alliance members generated, reviewed, tested, revised, and agreed on six overarching *systems-focused principles*. Through this process, the six principles below were adopted as an interconnected and integrated whole rather than a list of separate and distinct items, or a pick-and-choose list – “the principles are an indivisible set, not a menu.”



RENEWABILITY

Address the integrity of natural and social resources that are the foundation of a healthy planet and future generations in the face of changing global and local demands



DIVERSITY

Value our rich and diverse agricultural, ecological, and cultural heritage



HEALTHFULNESS

Advance the health and well-being of people, animals, and the environment, and the societies that depend on all three

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOOD SYSTEMS PRINCIPLES

RESILIENCE

Support regenerative, durable, and economically adaptive systems in the face of a changing planet



EQUITY

Promote sustainable livelihoods and access to nutritious and just food systems



INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Understand the implications of the interdependence of food, people, and the planet in a transition to more sustainable food and agricultural systems



The importance of the developmental milestone of adopting a set of principles cannot be under-estimated. The representatives of the philanthropic organizations forming the GA came with different institutional perspectives on what constitutes a good goal statement, or strategy, or theory of change. These concepts can be divisive, not just because of substantive differences but because of strong institutionally different format preferences for what a goal statement should include and how it should be written. For example, do all goals have to be SMART goals? Organizations differ widely in what constitutes a strategy. But principles come with less baggage, both substantively and format-wise, so there is more freedom to focus on finding common ground and meaning without the burden of choosing among competing formats.

The members of the Global Alliance could readily agree that they wanted to be a principles-driven alliance without knowing exactly what that might look like. Principles were general enough to provide common ground while specific enough to provide shared direction, and they did not conflict with any such statements by their individual foundations. Articulation of and agreement on the GA principles constituted a major breakthrough for the Alliance. They had

come together with a sense that collective action was urgently needed, but they were struggling to get to action without some way of framing their shared commitments. Through this process highly facilitated by the Executive Director and senior evaluation advisor, systems-focused principles became the “beating heart” of the Global Alliance by establishing what members were committing to and providing boundaries for identifying goals, strategies, priorities, and specific activities.

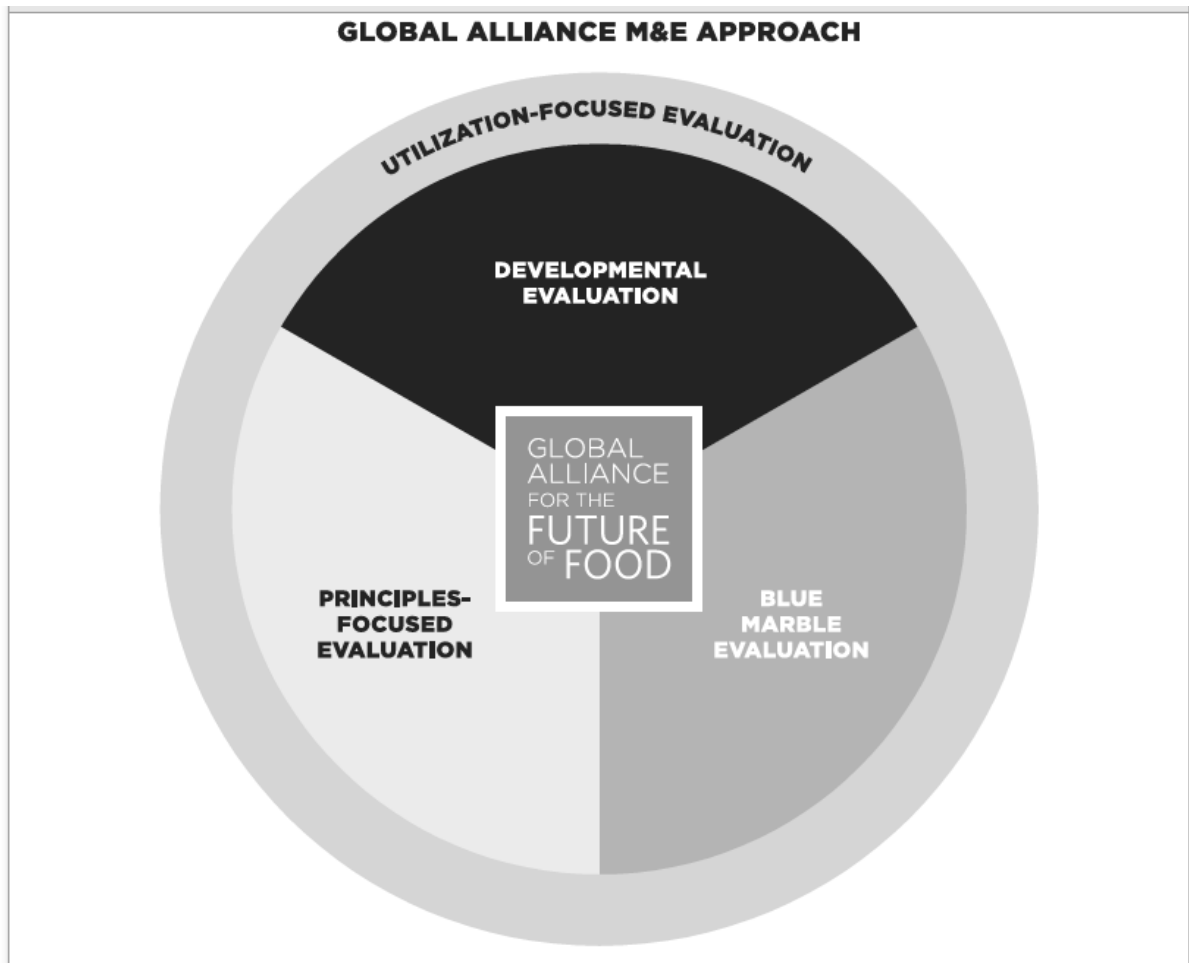
Concept 4: Developmental and Evaluative Thinking

Given the global climate crisis and related threats, the future of humanity depends on our capacity to think together, solve problems collectively, and make tomorrow more equitable and sustainable. From a big picture, global context perspective, evaluative thinking has life-and-death importance. In the last decade, evaluative thinking has emerged as useful in and of itself, beyond designing particular studies and interpreting findings. Evaluation involves applying values to interpret evidence and make judgments, deciding what is good and bad, what works and doesn't work, what can be improved, and what should be continued versus what should be ended. Evaluative thinking can inform these strategic program choices, deepen learning, support adaptation, and facilitate sense-making beyond what is involved in conducting a particular evaluation. Developmental thinking focuses on the adaptive function of evaluative thinking, that is, using evaluation processes and findings to adapt to changing conditions and new understandings.

The GA evaluation process was designed to include questions about how the principles are being addressed and followed in the activities and initiatives undertaken by the Global Alliance and its working groups to support developmental adaptations based on evaluative thinking

Although the perspective of principles-focused evaluation was new to the Executive Director and the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, they quickly grasped its relevance. Their ongoing collaboration with the senior evaluator and their principles-focused leadership became critical in helping Global Alliance members understand and apply principles-focused evaluative thinking to all aspects of the work of the alliance.

The evolution of evaluative thinking at the Global Alliance involved integrating the diverse frameworks of systems thinking and complexity theory. So too was this integrative process led by the Global Alliance Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, the Executive Director, and the senior evaluator who could support integrating diverse evaluation approaches into a meaningful strategic whole: utilization focused evaluation as an umbrella for principles-focused and developmental evaluation.



Concept 5: Interrelationships

Systems theory focuses on relationships and interdependence between elements and various subsystems of an organization. The SETIG principle on interrelationships calls for critically deliberating on, work to examine, understand and to appropriately address interrelationships regarding both the evaluand and the evaluation itself. This includes at an operational level identifying, capturing, mapping, and tracking key interrelationships that influence, could influence, and/or should influence the evaluand and the evaluation itself.

Throughout the development of the Global Alliance, the need to attend to the interrelationships within the system in order to engage together toward changing food systems was acknowledged and proactively nurtured. Here are two examples:

Firstly, alongside formal leadership structures and processes, *informal leadership interactions were made a priority.* As the Global Alliance developed formal governance processes, created

the position of Executive Director, established issue-focused working groups, and other formal institutional structures for decision-making and engagement, informal leadership teams were developed around specific projects (such as a research paper) and functions (such as annual meetings) to interact around issues of strategy, priorities, processes, conflict resolution, facilitation, and evaluation. This informal interrelationship required trust, mutual respect, honest communications, and, at the essential core, a shared understanding of and commitment to systems thinking, complexity theory, and evaluative thinking.

Secondly, conversations within one of the informal leadership teams about how to interconnect different kinds of engagement with the global alliance led to creation of an *impact matrix of interrelationships* that framed the ongoing principles-focused developmental evaluation. The impact matrix distinguished three sets of relationships: (a) the interests and commitments of individual foundation members and their interconnections both informal and formal, (b) the Global Alliance as an entity for collective action, and (c) external partners, networks, and organizations who could be allies for food systems change. These three entities had to be nurtured at the process level but also involve different kinds of outcomes and impacts. Importantly, none of these interrelationships took priority over the others; all had to be nurtured simultaneously in line with the concepts of emergence, systems perspective, and the complex nature of the Global Alliance itself and the systems it seeks to influence. Having members fill in the cells of the matrix has become a centerpiece of Global Alliance evaluation practice.

Concept 6: Adaptability

Adaptability is a central dimension of complexity theory. [MQP can you add a bit more here on adaptability as a critical concept.]

A major test of the adaptability of the Global Alliance occurred when the Global Alliance convened a group of important stakeholders to consider animal production and meat consumption within food systems. Some advocated opposing animal agriculture systems as a major source of pollution (methane) and unsustainable production practices. Others were focused on the humane treatment of animals. Still others were focused on alternative and sustainable approaches to animal agriculture systems, particularly in light of cultural traditions and food security around the globe. After two days there was agreement that consensus might emerge around some shared principles for animal agriculture systems. But was a new set of principles needed specific to animal agriculture? Could the Global Alliance principles, already agreed to, be adapted to animal agriculture? It turned out they could and were. At play again, was the collaborative and adaptive leadership of the Executive Director, senior evaluation advisor, professional facilitator, and key members all committed to working with, not constrained or thrown off by, the complex dynamic system that is the Global Alliance.

Concept 7: Complex Dynamics

Complex systems are dynamic and often show high levels of variability in both space and time [MQP can you add a bit more here on complex dynamics as a critical concept.]

As the Global Alliance continued to change in significant ways over time from the composition of membership to opportunities to engage key stakeholders to the need to update internal processes, it required leadership that was flexible, nimble, and adaptive. Here are three examples from many possibilities of complex systems dynamics that involved the Executive Director, the senior evaluator, and the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee working closely together: a) the addition of a seventh principle; b) adopting Blue Marble Evaluation; c) developing and adopting a theory of food systems transformation.

Blue Marble Evaluation: The Global Alliance became the first organization in the world to conceptualize a Blue Marble Evaluation function and create a position to carry out that function building on the developmental evaluation approach that has undergirded the work of the Global Alliance from its beginning. The hiring of Pablo Vidueira as the GA Blue Marble Evaluator was a pioneering contribution to seriously addressing food systems transformation at a global level through systematic evaluation. Exhibit 3 shows the framework developed by Pablo Vidueira to integrate and interrelate the perspectives and boundaries of the four evaluation approaches used by GA: utilization-focused evaluation, developmental evaluation, principles-focused evaluation, and Blue Marble Evaluation.

A new seventh principle of inclusion: In 2018 the Global Alliance initiated a call for “2050 Visions for Global Food Systems Transformation.” This open call, crowd-sourced from around the globe, sought to solicit a diverse array of innovative, inspiring, bold, transformative visions for food system change. Entries were received and then analyzed by the Executive Director through the lens of the Global Alliance’s six principles. A strong thread woven through the five 2050: Visions was the principle of public participation and democratic control. This principle did not fit neatly into any one of the Global Alliance’s principle, even though there were strong connections to the principle of equity. At the members meeting in 2019, during which this was discussed, the senior evaluation advisor and Blue Marble Evaluator , drafted proposed language for a new 7th principle and suggested an iterative process to test, refine, and socialize the proposed principle with the Global Alliance membership over time. The Executive Director in collaboration with the evaluation team and Monitoring and Evaluation Committee then shepherded an ongoing developmental process that culminated in the formal adoption of a 7th principle by the full membership in 2020.

Theory of Systems Transformation: For the last 25 years, design, planning and evaluation have been dominated by the mandate that interventions be based on a theory of change. In January, 2020, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food transcended theory of change by formally adopting an official theory of systems transformation. Distinguishing a theory of change from a theory of transformation has become a critical new direction for evaluation.

In 1995, Carol Weiss, a distinguished sociologist and founder of the evaluation profession, participated in an Aspen Institute conference focused on designing community-based anti-poverty interventions. Her commentary there became an article entitled “Nothing as practical as a good theory.” She criticized large-scale community initiatives that poured millions of dollars into community change efforts with no knowledge of the relevant social science research that should have been informing such efforts. Her article became one of the most influential, if not the most influential, article in the history of program evaluation. Today, we would say, it went viral.

To be credible, useful, relevant, and meaningful, a theory of change must be theoretically sound, empirically-based, and substantively relevant. Theories of change identify and hypothesize the causal linkages that will lead to desired results. The influence of Weiss continues today in that most funders require a theory of change be included in development proposals. The analysis of the global challenges in these initiatives tends to be well-informed and frightening, for the trends are dismal. But the proposed solutions are often the same old repackaged projects mired in ineffective and outdated project thinking.

Systems transformation involves a different order of magnitude and speed than project-bounded changes. The language of transformation suggests major systems change and rapid reform at a global level. A vision of transformation has become central to international dialogues about the future of the Earth and sustainable development.

A theory of change specifies how a project or program attains desired outcomes. Systems transformation is not a project. It is multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, and multilevel, cutting across national borders and intervention silos, across sectors and specialized interests, connecting local and global, and sustaining across time. A theory of systems transformation incorporates and integrates multiple theories of change operating at many levels that, knitted together, explain how major systems transformation occurs.

The Global Alliance has adopted a strategy aimed at stimulating local and global action and interaction for transformational change in collaboration with other committed stakeholders. Transformation means realizing healthy, equitable, renewable, resilient, inclusive, and culturally diverse food systems shared by people, communities, and their institutions. The

Global Alliance has developed and formally adopted a theory of systems transformation that informs its activities and provides a basis for evaluating its products, activities, and impacts through the lens of transformational engagement.

Global Alliance Theory of Systems Transformation

Genuine food system transformation takes place when diverse actions, networks, and individuals intersect across sector and issue silos, the global and local, the macro and the micro. These intersections facilitate convergence around shared visions and values and, ultimately, build critical mass and momentum behind tipping points that lead to healthy, equitable, renewable, resilient, and culturally diverse food systems that dynamically endure over time.

Summary and Conclusions

The Global Alliance is both working within the context of highly complex global food systems and is itself a complex dynamic system. As such, it has been infused since its inception with seven core concepts of systems thinking and complexity theory:

- (1) Emergence: How a diverse group of 25 foundations came together to form an alliance based on six principles that emerged through strategic and evaluative thinking that led to the Global Alliance adopting principles-focused evaluation. As the principles emerged, the Alliance became increasingly principles-driven, which required ongoing leadership keeping the principles at the core of everything the Global Alliance does.
- (2) Holistic perspective: The leadership challenges of maintaining alignment and commitment among now almost 30 very diverse philanthropic foundations have been met in part through a coherent evaluation approach that recognizes and supports diverse perspectives. Of particular importance is how the Global Alliance has been able to speak with one voice through this diversity.
- (3) Boundary issues: The Global Alliance has systems transformation as its overall focus with specific Impact Areas identified for global food systems action initiatives.
- (4) Developmental and evaluative thinking: The challenge here is to stay open to innovation and adaptation through evaluative thinking together aimed at ongoing development of GA Facilitating that evaluative thinking and openness to adaptation is a core leadership function.
- (5) Interrelationships: The Global Alliance essentially consists of interrelationships. The primary responsibility of leadership is to nurture and strengthen those interrelationships and the corresponding role of evaluation is to monitor and provide feedback about the nature and strength of interrelationships.
- (6) Adaptability: As the Alliance has grown and its influence has expanded, the application of principles to new and reframed issues has required adaptation, contextual

responsiveness, and situational agility based on strategic and evaluative thinking. A new, seventh principle was added in 2020.

- (7) Dynamics: Both complexity theory and systems thinking make engaging with dynamic processes a centerpiece of the connection between theory and practice. Responding to emergent issues like coronavirus requires agility, nimbleness, and adaptability by both the Global Alliance leadership and evaluation, working together.

At the core of Global Alliance effectiveness – which is intimately tied to the adoption of the concepts above - is transformational leadership supported by principles-focused developmental evaluation incorporating a Blue Marble perspective. The leadership/evaluation partnership grounded in systems thinking and complexity theory propelled the development and adoption of the GA theory of systems transformation.

Traditional forms of organizational leadership and dominant approaches to program evaluation have been based on linear models of command and control. The turbulence, uncertainties, unpredictability, and uncontrollability of engaging with complex dynamic systems requires a different kind of leadership and, correspondingly a different kind of evaluation. Thus, the Executive Director and Global Alliance members turned to and adopted developmental evaluation, which is based on complexity concepts, to support nonlinear, transformational engagement in the tumultuous arena of global food systems. This transformational engagement is not just rhetoric but is deeply embedded as the focus of ongoing work.

Exhibit 1



RENEWABILITY

Address the integrity of natural and social resources that are the foundation of a healthy planet and future generations in the face of changing global and local demands



DIVERSITY

Value our rich and diverse agricultural, ecological, and cultural heritage



HEALTHFULNESS

Advance the health and well-being of people, animals, and the environment, and the societies that depend on all three

GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOOD SYSTEMS PRINCIPLES

RESILIENCE

Support regenerative, durable, and economically adaptive systems in the face of a changing planet



EQUITY

Promote sustainable livelihoods and access to nutritious and just food systems



INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Understand the implications of the interdependence of food, people, and the planet in a transition to more sustainable food and agricultural systems



