



# TRAINING AND REFLECTION MODULE FOR PROFESSIONALS AND STAKEHOLDERS

## DYNAMIC LEARNING AGENDA



### In a nutshell

The Dynamic Learning Agenda (DLA) is a method to facilitate reflection and learning in action to overcome complex and difficult change processes through the analysis of barriers and opportunities and the formulation of learning questions for food system transformation

#### What for?

- To explore and understand the food system
- To work with my community on transforming the food system
- To improve R&I policy coherence and alignment
- To train or educate people on food system transformation

#### How long?

Flexible, 1-hour sessions can be repeated regularly throughout a change process.

#### For whom?

Facilitators and Lab coordinators

#### Created by

OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University

### Something to share?

Leave us a comment about this tool on [the platform](#).

This tool was developed as part of FIT4FOOD2030 project. See this tool and others on the [FIT4FOOD2030 Knowledge Hub](#).

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## What will you gain from this?

This document has the form of a manual giving a brief presentation of the Dynamic Learning Agenda (DLA) method.

By using the DLA methods, facilitators and Lab coordinators will reflect and learn in action to overcome complex and difficult change processes through the analysis of barriers and opportunities and the formulation of learning questions for food system transformation.



## DYNAMIC LEARNING AGENDA

The “Dynamic Learning Agenda” (DLA) is a method for reflection and learning in action. It is particularly relevant for organizations seeking to facilitate complex and difficult change processes. It focusses on challenges arising in such processes, and suggests how the organization may work with them through a systems analysis identifying barriers and resources. Central in the DLA method stands the formulation of learning questions, and the continuous reflection on and revision of such questions, giving DLA its dynamic character. Adding to this dynamic character is the constant forming of new questions, while others may recede more into the background. Essential is also the embracing of an active agent perspective and the ambition to “make a difference”.



Figure 1. Graphic representation of a DLA-process

*“The DLA-method is especially appropriate when development follows no linear pathway, has no central steering, requires an emergent design, has multiple stakeholders, involves changes at multiple levels, and includes co-innovation.”*

In the FIT4FOOD2030 project, the DLA method was used as a tool for learning in the context of “Policy Labs” and “City Labs” – stakeholder arenas intended to work towards the transformation of research and innovation (R&I) around Food and Nutrition Security (FNS). Coordinators of these formed a community of practice (CoP), where a shared domain of interest helped generate innovative, creative solutions and practices. Activities in this CoP involved common learning sessions and group dialogue sessions, facilitated by one or more members of the FIT4FOOD2030 consortium. Among other things, these sessions were used to support the labs’ practices, by maintaining learning agendas for the labs’ and coordinators’ development.

To the extent that the CoP-members identify common learning questions, they can also use the DLA-method in a common reflection of these questions.

## Thematic area

Food system transformation, R&I transformation, reflection and learning in action

## Target audience

Facilitators and Lab coordinators

# GETTING PREPARED

## Set the scene

### Background

According to the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, 1905-1980, being human means to set aims for oneself and what one wants to achieve. A condition for doing this is the capacity for imagining that which does not yet exist, but that we want to exist. The contents of these imaginations are what we may call 'visions'. Groups– like the Policy Labs or the City Labs of FIT4FOOD2030 – may also have visions, typically co-created in collaboration between lab members. We assume that you have set up visions for your project before you start the DLA-process. However, during the DLA-process, it may well happen that you find that you need to revise or change part of these visions. In this sense, your DLA-process may also have relevance for your visions.

### Be specific about your aims

A DLA process focusses not at visions as such, but on more specific aims derived from these visions. Assume you set up this as your vision: "We aspire to a future with reduced waste in the food chain." A more specific aim derived from this vision is: "To engage our local municipal government to work for reduced waste in the food chain." Please notice how important it is – within DLAs – to avoid aims that are too general. The aims you set up as the starting point of a DLA-process should be specific in the sense that they indicate where and in relation to whom you may direct your energy in attempting to realize them. In this respect, the above aim is a good example. It identifies with a high degree of specificity who you want to engage in the change that you want to achieve, and what the change should involve. Being able to specify the "who" and the "what" as in this example, is a good indication that you have been successful in setting up an aim that will produce an interesting and useful DLA-process.

## The Golden Rule

In order for the DLA to work, participants must avoid over-confidence, and be willing to admit both to themselves and others that challenges exist, and that they don't yet know enough to handle them. Developing a culture where this is not merely tolerated, but actually celebrated, as the obvious starting point for all learning, is here essential. Thus, the golden rule of DLAs:

Admitting what you don't know or cannot handle yet is a strength!

## Materials

- DLA-log sheet (Appendix)
- Post-its notes with different colours

# FLOW

STEP 1: System analysis I: searching for barriers

STEP 2: Developing learning questions

STEP 3: System analysis II: searching for opportunities/resources

STEP 4: Filling in the DLA-log sheet

STEP 5 (facilitators only): Facilitating DLA discussions

Repeat at regular intervals throughout a project.

## FACILITATOR TIPS

This tool can be carried out together with participants. During multi-stakeholder dialogues you as a facilitator (or moderator) have an important role to play to ensure the active participation of all the participants in the given time frame while also reaching the session goals.

As a facilitator you need several skills and competences, such as verbal and non-verbal 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 give their perspective on issues being discussed. This means that you may have to stimulate some participants to speak more often, while you may have to prevent other participants to speak too often or too long. It also means that you will need to avoid discussions on issues that are not directly relevant.

A brief guide with facilitation tips are provided in this address:  
<https://knowledgehub.fit4food2030.eu/facilitatorstips>

### TIPS & TRICKS

Constructive questioning that affirms participants' statements is a key skill for a DLA session facilitator. To help the conversation along, ask others in the group to comment on what was good or what they liked about what someone else just said.



Please note that the DLA-process is useful for project coordinators and for participants in a CoP. If your choice is to facilitate it, you have the choice of carrying most of it out in workshops where all lab members are invited to join, or only parts of the process. For instance, you may decide to take responsibility for formulating learning questions and keeping track of them yourself, and only involve the others in the systems analyses.

## STEP 1: SYSTEM ANALYSIS: SEARCHING FOR BARRIERS

### 1. System analysis and brainstorming of possible barriers that hinder the progress

The first step is to conduct a system analysis. Find below a suggested introduction that can be used by facilitators to introduce system analysis to participants.

*'Assume now, that you try to realize your aim without success. Or, perhaps even before starting to act, you feel hesitant, as the upcoming task feels too challenging. This may be frustrating. Instead of just giving up however, you decide to try to understand the nature of the challenge, and to find a way to overcome it.'*

*In trying to understand the nature of such a challenge, a systems analysis is valuable. So that is what you do next. Performing a systems analysis involves, initially, to observe and to analyse one's environment, or the "system" forming the context of one's actions, looking for the barriers preventing goal attainment.'*

#### 1. If at this point you involve your lab members in a DLA workshop, ask participants to write their propositions in Post-its notes, one barrier on each note (all the barrier notes should have the same colour).

Find below some inspiring questions to use:

- Why are we unable to reach this aim?
- What specific factors are preventing us?
- Why has this aim not been realized already?

#### 2. Are there any barriers at any of the following levels that are relevant to your challenge?

To ensure that when identifying barriers you do not become too narrow-sighted, it is desirable to use a checklist to see whether significant barriers may have been left out intentionally.

Barriers can be structured according to the following categories:

- *The knowledge infrastructure*: facilitates or obstructs access to and development of research and knowledge.
- *The physical infrastructure*: facilitates or obstructs physical or virtual accessibility and the way actors operate.
- *Legislation and regulation*: refers to the formal rules that can promote or hinder goal attainment, such as technical standards, employment legislation or the legal framework.
- *Values, norms and symbols*: refers to the political and economic climate and the culture of a country, region or sector, and to social norms and values.
- *Interactions*: can be too intensive, meaning that the actors' relationships become so tightly intertwined that nobody can take the first step, and their view of reality will be distorted; it can also be too loose and too narrow in scope, so that people are unaware of each other's visions.
- *The market structure*: refers to the system barriers and opportunities that arise due to a range of market phenomena such as monopoly, oligopoly, supply and demand.



This list may be extended with other areas that may be of particular significance to your/their specific aims and the challenges arising in trying to realize them.

## 2. Prioritization of barriers

### 1. Prioritize the barriers

If the list of barriers emerging from this first step of the systems analysis gets very long, it may be useful to try to identify the more significant of them, and to give priority to these in the further process. The criterion for significance is here that the barrier is basic in the sense that, if you manage to overcome it, you will be significantly closer to realizing your aim. An additional criterion is pragmatic; that it is in your power to influence the barrier and to achieve a positive outcome. In other words, barriers should be things you can have a meaningful influence over, not things that are completely outside your control.

### 2. Reformulate the prioritized barriers

This requires that the barriers that you give priority to, should be formulated (again) with a certain specificity, concerning the «where», «who» or “what” of the barrier. Ask yourself/ to the participants:

- Where is the barrier situated in the system?
- Who is involved (specific persons, organizations or institutions)?
- What is the nature of the barrier?



#### TIPS & TRICKS

It is important to know what kind of barriers should be identified.

For instance, to point at “the current economic crisis” as a barrier, is not very helpful, both because the notion of a crisis is here very general, and because it is not very probable that the actions of a limited project may help to overcome the crisis.

If you formulate as a barrier, however, that “our municipal government lacks knowledge of how to reduce waste in the food chain”, then you have found a barrier that, probably, you have a chance of overcoming. Therefore, this is the type of barriers that should have prominence in your work.

## STEP 2: DEVELOPING LEARNING QUESTIONS

**Learning questions** form a significant part of a DLA. A typical learning question in a DLA addresses how one may design actions to realize a specific aim, conceived on the background of the barriers identified during the systems analysis, while retaining a strong sense of agency. At a general level, such a learning question has the following form:

“(1) What can we do to achieve (2) this aim while (3) this barrier exists?”

The question may be analysed into three parts, each associated with the methodological steps described above: (1) is based on the agent perspective that needs to permeate the whole process, (2) is based on the specific aim chosen as the starting point for a particular DLA-process, while (3) refers to a barrier identified in the systems analysis.

### 1. Formulating learning questions

Find below an example of a learning question from the example suggested above.

Aim: “to engage our local municipal government to work for reduced waste in the food chain,”

Significant barrier for achieving it: “our municipal government lacks knowledge of this”.  
The ensuing learning question then could be formulated:

- (1) What can we do (2) to engage our local municipal government to work for reduced waste in the food chain, while (3) our municipal government lacks knowledge of this?
2. If you have identified several significant barriers that are likely to prevent the realization of one aim, **you should for this aim design as many learning questions as there are barriers, i.e., one for each barrier**. In a DLA, thus, one aim may generate a number of different learning questions.

## STEP 3: SYSTEM ANALYSIS II: SEARCHING FOR OPPORTUNITIES/RESOURCES

### 1. Answering the learning questions

After having formulated your learning questions, it is time to begin the process of answering them. The relevant step is to do a **new systems analysis**, but now with an emphasis on the resources or opportunities that exist within the system, which may help overcome the barriers that the learning questions have pointed at.

1. **Take one learning question (and one barrier) at a time and seek for the resources or opportunities that may contribute to overcoming the barrier.**

Again, you may begin with an open brainstorming process, and then continue by examining the areas mentioned in the above checklist searching for further resources or opportunities for each of the areas involved.

If you do this in a DLA workshop, you may ask the participants to write each potential resource or opportunity on a Post-it note (now with a different colour for all the propositions), and then at a later point, match the resource-Post-its with their related barrier-Post-its.

2. **Design of a plan to initiate the process where the resources/opportunities are mobilized to overcome the barriers.**

Merely finding resources and opportunities in the system that may help overcome a barrier, does not alone answer a learning question. In order to arrive at a more complete or final answer, you need also to answer the first part of the question; “What can we do to....” After having identified and assessed the relevant barriers and resources/opportunities, you need to start designing a plan for how you may initiate a process where the resources/opportunities are mobilized to overcome the barriers, so that the aim that served as the starting point, may be realized.

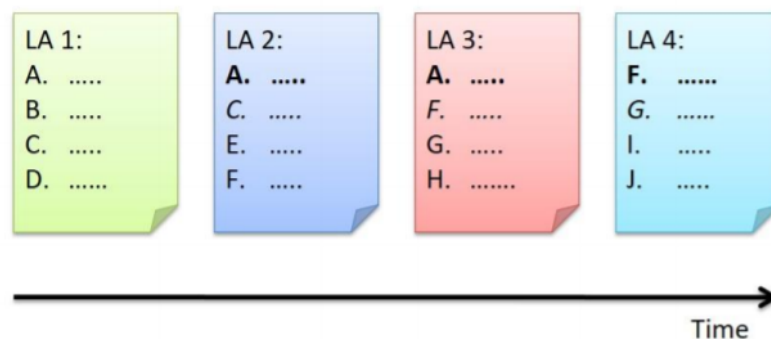
To achieve this, it is essential that you define yourself as an actor who is willing and able to “make a difference”, and to contribute to real change. This does not mean that you must solve all challenges yourself. Probably, most of the barriers and challenges that you will focus on in the DLA will have to be addressed in collaboration with others. However, it is still essential that you look at yourself as an active initiator or agent in this process. In this sense, a DLA is not just a method; it is just as much a mind-set or an attitude.

## 2. The dynamic aspect of a DLA

When you formulate a learning question, and start the process of answering it, the systems analysis carried out to assist your endeavour, is not necessarily done once and for all.

What can happen while working with the system to achieve your goals – you discover more about it, both its barriers and resources, which necessitates a **revision of your original learning question**. Moreover, after some time, as your initial aims are realized and new aims gain priority, **new learning questions will emerge to replace earlier ones**. However, it may also happen that **certain learning questions persist**. In that case, they may need to be addressed with increased energy. Alternatively, such long-lived learning questions, that you work with without success, may indicate that the aim that lies at its basis, should be given up or revised, or at least, this may be discussed as an option.

In all these cases, however, you should from time to time take stock of your learning questions, make some notes on how work with each question has developed, what insights working with them has produced, and whether they have been revised (see figure 2).



*Figure 2. Representation of a Dynamic Learning Agenda While working with DLA (LA1-LA4 here represents different points in time) some learning questions (A-D here represent learning questions) stay with you briefly, while other may be of interest over a longer period of time. In the course of the process, moreover, new learning questions arise.*

## STEP 4: FILL IN THE DLA-LOG SHEET

In order to keep track of these changes, a **template for a DLA-log has been developed, see Appendix**.

- Use one template sheet for one learning question.
- The different sections of the sheet allow you to register the outcome of the systems analysis and other essentials in dealing with this specific question.
- The sheet should be regarded a “living document”, meaning that you may use it to keep track of revisions or new insights that you gain in the process of working with the learning question. The DLA-log is constituted by all the individual log sheets that you set up throughout the project.
- This log will also enable others to keep track of your learning process, and to learn from it.
- As you proceed with your project, make sure to continuously update your DLA-log.
- There are no fixed rules as to how many log sheets you should establish. This should be adapted to the number of challenges that become salient in your project, however, somewhere between 5 and 20 open log sheets at any time could be an indication.



# STEP 5 (FACILITATORS ONLY): FACILITATING DLA DISCUSSIONS

The DLA can be a useful tool when facilitating discussions between CoP members. If members of your project are following the above steps and regularly assessing and developing their individual learning agendas, you can use regular dialogue sessions to support collective reflection, problem-solving, learning, and build group cohesion.



## TIPS & TRICKS

Keep your DLA sessions brief and to the point – one hour may be sufficient to address key issues without exhausting the participants.

## 1. Collect and synthesise

At regular intervals, ask participants to send their up-to-date DLA log sheets, together with any additional thoughts since they last met about what they have learnt so far, how and whether they have made progress on any of their barriers since the last meeting, and whether they have had particular surprises, new challenges, or successes they would like to share with their group colleagues in the context of the DLA session. Sessions should be frequent enough that participants still recall previous discussions, but not so frequent that they do not have time to digest or try out suggestions from previous sessions.

Synthesize all collected log sheets and identify 1-2 key shared challenges to devote attention to in the full group. Also look for examples of successes, strategies, and lessons, whenever these come up in the log sheet. Devoting time to these in the group promotes learning and can serve as reminders of the usefulness of the sessions.

Using the shared challenges and examples of successes or areas of progress, develop a brief agenda to share with participants in advance to allow them to prepare for the session. Consider asking particular group members in advance if they are willing to share or present their challenge/progress during the session.

## 2. DLA session

During the session itself, present the agenda and invite participants to suggest other or additional agenda points they think warrant the group's attention. It is important that group members feel able and invited to speak up and share their perspectives.

For each agenda item, invite the authors of the log sheets to present their challenges or successes. Make sure that the challenge or success is well-understood by group members. You can do this by prompting clarifying questions, asking participants if they understand what the challenge consists of, or whether they have questions to the presenter.

Then, focus in on *what was good* about the presenter's explanation, or about their thoughts and actions in the situation they described. Maintaining a focus on what was good, helps build a constructive and supportive dialogue environment. Ask the presenter what they were happy about, in relation to the challenge or success they described. Then ask the same question to the other group members. Ask for clear reasons as to *why* something was good.

Moving on, focus on exploration into possibilities and alternatives, keeping in mind the challenge or barrier in question. Start with the presenter and invite them to reflect on what they themselves can or could do better in relation to the situation being discussed. After they have a chance to propose alternatives, ask the group to propose alternative strategies.

Repeat these steps for each agenda item, concluding each time by asking the presenter whether they feel that their challenge has been sufficiently addressed and what in particular they have found helpful about the discussion.

Keep in mind that your role as facilitator is to promote learning, strategy development, and group cohesion as part of these sessions. When moderating, therefore, keep the following topics in mind:

- What are **the types of barriers** that participants are facing? Are they structural or local? Specific or shared with other participants?
- **Overarching project objectives and resources** and how individual session participants may contribute to reach them. How central are challenges to overarching objectives, and are there resources elsewhere in the project that can help participants address barriers?
- Focus at developing **(common) strategies** for goal achievement. Capture and discuss **examples of suggested, tried, or shared/shareable strategies**
- Make room for **successes and achievements**, and for reflection on how DLA discussions influenced subsequent actions taken by participants

### 3. Evaluate

Continuous evaluation of session quality and usefulness is crucial to stimulate productive discussions, to ensure that useful strategies or solutions are developed and shared, and to keep participants interested and engaged. Consider regular follow-up surveys from participants and maintain your own notes about what went well or less well for each session.

Here are examples of the kinds of questions you can ask yourself and your participants:

- How focused is the dialogue?
- To which degree do the participants explore each other's contributions
- To which degree do the participants develop strategies for overcoming problems/barriers?
- To which degree do the participants collaborate in solving problems?
- How would you describe the general climate of the dialogue between egocentric behaviour or conflict (at the scale's lower end) to helpful/altruistic collaboration (at the higher end)?
- To which degree do the participants act trustfully against each other, for instance by "lowering the guard", being honest of what they don't know, or allowing themselves to be vulnerable?
- To which degree do the participants arrive at an enhanced understanding of the barriers and resources in the system of the case being discussed?
- To which degree do the participants demonstrate general system analysis skills?

Depending on your own answers or answers from group participants, consider changes to the discussion format, changes to what kinds of topics to focus on, or to how you run the sessions (asking people who do not generally contribute about their opinion, for example).

### 4. Repeat and share

Repeat the sessions, track progress and changes to participants learning needs and the barriers they face, and share insights that are developed or used along the way.

*I think such discussions and exchanges are very useful and very needed, because I think that all the coordinators had some struggles in the way. So yeah exchanging feedback*

*and views and successful examples should be core to such exchanges ... realizing all of us faced relevant struggles ... was also a first thing that was nice to think about.*  
(FIT4FOOD2030 lab coordinator reflecting on participating in DLA sessions)

## READ MORE

You may read more about DLA in the manual *Reflexive Monitoring in Action - A guide for monitoring system innovation projects*, by Barbara van Mierlo, Barbara Regeer, Mariëtte van Amstel et al. (Publisher: Athena Institute, VU). The manual may be downloaded from: <https://transitiepraktijk.nl/files/RMAengDEFcor.pdf>  
The present document has borrowed content and elements from this original manual.

# APPENDIX

## Dynamic Learning Agenda – Log sheet

Please, use one sheet per learning question.

State the aim that you find it difficult to achieve:	
Date for first setting up this aim:	
<i>Notice that one aim may generate several learning questions, each corresponding to <u>one</u> significant barrier. Thus, the aim just stated may serve as the starting point for setting up several log sheets, each corresponding to a separate barrier.</i>	
Mention <i>one</i> significant barrier making it difficult to achieve the above aim:	
State the learning question following from this:	
How can the barrier be overcome? Which resources exist for this in the system?	
How can you contribute to a positive outcome? Please, set up points for an action plan:	
Date when aim was realized:	
Please use the backside of the log sheet to make notes on what you are doing in following up the learning question and its associated action plan, and what you learn on the way. What worked, what didn't work, why, etc.? Also, if relevant, report any revisions of the learning question or of the systems analysis that is taking place.	



Coordinated by:



## Partners



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