

Build together not only the answer, but the way you build the question

Telling the story: City Lab Milan

It is well known that Italians love food. Here in Milan, at MUST, the biggest science museum in Italy, we make no exception. Here food is taken very seriously: we are not only interested in food itself, but also in what's behind the food, what's inside the food, what's around it and what happens after.



*Inside the exhibition dedicated to food systems.
Photograph courtesy of Museo Scienza.*

How can we prove it? Well, with a dedicated exhibition on the food system, from farm to fork (actually, from fork to farm, as the common experience of the public starts from what everybody has in a dish during a meal), and also with an interactive educational laboratory, where everyone can experiment with the science of food and nutrition. We can say that we are fit for food.

But even when everything seems perfect, things can get complex when you deal with the food system...

Indeed, things got interesting when we started to work on the FIT4FOOD2030 project - an EU-funded project with the objective to foster the sustainable transformation of the food system - as we saw it as a great chance to dig more deeply into the topic of sustainability, a central aspect of a responsible relation with food.

Our role in this project? To contribute with educational resources, our daily bread.

The peculiarity? To adopt a systemic approach in the process, and develop the activities in collaboration with the stakeholders of the local food system.

These two appeared to us as very intriguing approaches to science engagement and education: the systemic approach implies that a singular topic can be treated in connection with several levels of meaning and discussion (i.e. scientific but also cultural, political and economic), and the stakeholder engagement approach implies the acquisition of methodologies for co-design. Since our staff can rely on experience in European projects, and professional expertise in interactive activities with different audiences, everything was in place for a great start, to make things concrete...

The experts who study the food system know well that it is a very complex concept to be represented in an abstract way. It is made of thousands and thousands of relations and levels of articulation. We, as MUST staff, discovered that things are not easier when you try to deal with the food system in a concrete way, since you have to find specific stakeholders and specific agendas, moving in a concept that is general in its nature.

Furthermore, the core of the process was to set an open question to a group of stakeholders, making things even more difficult to be defined. 'Open question' means that the output of the

process was open to the influences of a heterogeneous group -the City Lab members -, and that the exploration of the food system and the definition of many aspects of the educational resources (such as the topic, target, format) were not pre-determined. A specific question with fewer “degrees of freedom” is easier to understand and leads more immediately to concrete actions.

The challenge gained its true form: to gather a variety of stakeholders (in a way that could have been representative of the local food system), in a process that could have appeared vague and not engaging for the protagonists of the ambitions of the project.

And then doubts arose: “Who could be the right target audience for the project’s workshops, and the right representatives ready to be engaged for collaboration?” and: “Which is the best way to present the food system?” Since the answers were not clear, we took the decision to start in an open way, without addressing a single specific sector of the food system but rather with an inclusive approach. If the territory is unknown, it is better to explore it as much as possible!

And every great exploration starts with a single step: for us, it has been the organization of the first stakeholders meeting, the first workshop, dedicated to present the project and to create a common vision for transformation.

But we chose to not to start completely from scratch: Milan has a story as a city in relation to food sustainability, a story which is represented by one of the main local players linked to the food system management: the Milan Food Policy Office. Organizing the workshops in collaboration with them has been a strategy to increase both accountability on the topic, and contacts with relevant stakeholders.

And the first workshop arrived. As we started to present the actions of the project and to discuss them, facts slowly confirmed our first impression: things are not easy when you deal (concretely) with the food system. A process that on the paper should have been linear, and accomplished in few steps, showed to be an intricate path: stakeholders represented different interests, from different levels. The process to design educational tools was perceived as time-consuming and the outcome appeared uncertain for some of them who were used other kinds of dynamics of the food system, closer to business.

For example, some members perceived the relevance of the topics presented (sustainability improved thanks to research, innovation and education), but weren’t able to provide concrete support to the process as they couldn’t relate their daily expertise to the educational perspective. A call to action was not enough in a process with an open educational outcome and with limited time availability of the stakeholders.



Workshops of City Lab Milan. Photographs courtesy of Museo Scienza.

In order to keep the Lab alive, we put effort in ‘listening work’, ready to adapt our line of action according to the scenario defined by our relation with the different stakeholders: their interests in relation of food topics, their availability, their existing practices to deal with citizens.

It would be very theatrical to say that it has been a single crucial action that changed our perspective. But, as informal educators, we trust that the sum of many little steps can bring wonderful results. And, in fact, it has been the continuous negotiation with the different actors of the process that lead us to reach our results.

Little by little, a concrete path and concrete outputs started to emerge: integrating the suggestions and selecting those cues and actors that revealed supportive in a constructive way, we defined a solid team that could collaborate to share topics and formats and identify the audiences, all for an authentic educational context.

Since the beginning, different stakeholders took different things from participating to the City Lab: for some of them, it was mainly the chance to discuss together relevant topics and to increase their network; for others, it happened to be the possibility to actively take part in the creation and implementation of educational actions.

With both the satisfaction from the fulfilment of the action and the awareness of the crises passed, we feel that we learned a specific lesson: when setting a bottom-up process within such large domain as the food system, it is probable that different interests and mindsets will be present at the same table and that creating a common and authentic agenda will not be immediate, with consequences on stakeholder engagement. Therefore, the steps foreseen for such process should take into account different moment of stasis: longer phases that include time and resources for “trial and error” steps, in order to really have the chance to integrate all the feedback (implicit and explicit) that emerge.

Furthermore, an institution that is going to set a Lab, can benefit from dedicating energies in the preliminary phases to set the levels of freedom and constraint of the process. For example, they could limit the variety of the participants, having members just from a selected sector, who want to work with a determined audience; and leave open the co-design phase, as regards the topic and the format of the activities.

Every context and every process dedicated to an issue or topic presents its peculiarities, but a final general thought and advice that concludes our story, can be: “build together not only the answer, but the way you build the question”.