the unconference guide
In the early months of the program, Securing Water for Food offered a variety of options to engage innovators, provide business-oriented educational opportunities, and stimulate networking and conversations. Over time, the feedback received from SWFF innovators about what worked and what didn’t work guided the program to try something different.

As a result, SWFF organized an “UnConference” as a pilot event in 2016. An “UnConference” is a loosely-structured conference emphasizing the informal exchange of information and ideas between participants, rather than following a conventionally-structured program of events. SWFF innovators could either lead or participate in talks around topics related to their experiences. These talks help to build confidence by creating a space where innovators can share stories of failure or success and advise their fellow peers on how to approach various entrepreneurial processes.

The initial UnConference was so successful that every innovator indicated in their 2016 post-event survey that they would be interested in participating in future UnConference events, and it has been a tradition of the SWFF annual convenings ever since. When asked to describe the UnConference in three words, feedback was very positive. Multiple innovators characterized it as interactive, informative, educational, informal, valuable, and useful, with the remainder of descriptions unique to particular innovators: “Energizing” “best SWFF conference yet” “interactive” and “collaborative.”

The Unconferences are always filled with lively discussions, sparking continuous conversations and connections throughout the convening. The unstructured event reinforces a Community of Practice approach allowing innovators and SWFF to be a part of a wider network, with the goal of strengthening the bonds between SWFF innovators so they can continue to share their lessons learned, challenges, and best practices long after the event is over.

context
In an effort to give as many SWFF innovators the opportunity to lead an UnConference session, participate in a conversation hub, or provide ideas for topics, we sent an email to all potential participants using the template below.

The email immediately generated a variety of responses from the innovators, including the confirmation of their interest in previously suggested topics and suggestions for new topics (e.g., the role of women in agriculture, benefits and challenges of standardizing operations, etc.).

Some innovators volunteered to lead a conversation hub. Other innovators nominated their peers to lead a discussion or join them in a discussion. The group email also allowed for peer brainstorming and resulted in numerous inputs into the day’s agenda.

The template email shown on the next page can be easily copied and modified to meet your needs for conducting outreach for UnConference agenda ideas and topics.

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Dear <Name>,

We are currently looking for innovators that would like to lead a discussion around a specific topic of experience at the Unconference.

At the event, participants will have the opportunity to participate in conversation hubs and network with peers. We will program three concurrent sessions, each led by a fellow innovator or a staff member.

**The Conversation Hub Format** – Lead facilitators would start their hubs with a brief introduction, share their experience in the topic, and then open it up for discussions or questions from their hub.

To keep the conversations dynamic within the group, facilitators were not allowed to have any presentation decks in print or on screen at the time of their sessions.

**Topics in the past have included:**
- How to Get the Most Out of Interactions with Partners
- How to Convert Investor Connections Into Actual Investments
- Getting Your Name Out in the Media
- How to Better Understand Your Target Customer
- How to Use M&E for Long-Term Sustainability
- If you have any suggestions for a topic you would like to lead or you are interested in learning more about, please send us an email by <date>.

Feel free to reach out if you have any questions or comments about the UnConference or on a potential topic of conversation.

Sincerely,

<Name>
how does the UnConference work?

DURING THE EVENT
The half-day event is divided into three sessions running for 30–45 mins each. Each session has three concurrent discussion hubs running at the same time, and participants can freely choose which hubs to attend. An innovator or staff member facilitates discussions, and participants are encouraged to contribute to the discussions. Participants can also move between discussion hubs, or leave for a one-on-one conversation with a staff member. More often than not, participants choose to stay with their selected hubs.

PREPARATION FOR FACILITATORS
Facilitators lead the discussions by sharing their experience on the selected topic(s) and encouraging a fruitful discussion and participation from the attendees in their hub. Formal presentations and PowerPoints are not required as it takes away from participants having dynamic discussions and sharing their experiences with each other.

RAINSTORMING TOPICS
Prior to the event, the SWFF team brainstormed a few topic ideas and sent the list to all participants asking who would be interested in facilitating a session, in addition to requesting from participants additional topic ideas that they would be interested in facilitating and/or attending.

HUB TOPICS HAVE INCLUDED:
- How to Get the Most Out of Interactions with Partners
- How to Convert Investor Connections Into Actual Investments
- Lessons Learned on Entering a New Regulatory Market
- Getting Your Name Out in the Media
- How to Better Understand Your Target Customer
- How to Use M&E for Long-Term Sustainability
lessons learned & tips

1 Timing - Often, the conversation hubs are very dynamic and participants want to continue discussions even after the time is up. To keep the event running smoothly, give participants a 10 minute and a three minute warning to wrap up the discussions.

2 Session Length - We have discussed allowing the sessions to run for longer times but ultimately found that the brief 30–40 minute sessions encourage participants to continue the dynamic discussions with their peers after the event. This is often how connections are made.

3 Labeling - Label the rooms or tables with the name of the topics for ease of movement between discussion hubs and sessions.

4 Notetaking - UnConferences have resulted in many fruitful discussions and key insights for attendees. To capture the lessons and knowledge shared during the discussion hubs, it is highly recommended to have a note taker.

5 Preparation - During the pilot UnConference, it was not made clear to participants that presentations were not required/allowed. As a result, several hubs were led entirely by the facilitators/presenter, some of whom had PowerPoint presentations. Discussions in these hubs were limited because the session was more like a presenter giving a speech, instead of facilitating a conversation or dialogue.

6 Successful Facilitators - In previous UnConferences, successful facilitators were prepared to share their stories and experiences on the given topic for a limited time. Others:

   • Had pre-determined questions for the participants in their hub.
   • Encouraged participation from everyone in the hub.
   • Asked direct questions to attendees who perhaps did not have the opportunity to share.
sample program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00 a.m.-10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Welcome and Icebreaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:35 a.m.-11:10 a.m.</td>
<td>UnConference Session 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:10 a.m.-11:20 a.m.</td>
<td>Break/Moving Between Sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:20 a.m.-11:55 a.m.</td>
<td>UnConference Session 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:55 a.m.-12:05 a.m.</td>
<td>Break/Time to Move to the Next Session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:05 p.m.-12:40 a.m.</td>
<td>UnConference Session 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:40 p.m.-1:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Lessons Learned from Graduates &amp; Closing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION HUBS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Room</th>
<th>Session</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakthroughs in Branding: Using Design to Tell Your Business Story</td>
<td>IMKI/CUT</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing Your Company to Sustainable Operations</td>
<td>John Kohler/Project Alba</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Use M&amp;E for Long Term Sustainability</td>
<td>ICU - Peru</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Women by Integrating Them in Various Roles (as both employees and customers)</td>
<td>WGI/Practical Action</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Environmental and Regulatory Compliance Into Your Business</td>
<td>IIAC/SkyFox</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits and Challenges of Standardizing Operations</td>
<td>World Hope/Green Heat</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from Failure: Pivoting Your Organization Towards Sales Growth</td>
<td>MimosaTEK/Hydroponics Africa</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Building Lean &amp; Efficient Teams to Scale SWPF Innovator’s Efforts</td>
<td>Ignitia/AST</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Relationship Management Techniques</td>
<td>Reel Gardening/aQysta</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SWFF Innovators Share Lessons Learned, Successes, and Failures in “UnConference”

Securing Water for Food Annual Convening and 5th Anniversary Celebration at SIWI World Water Week

SWFF Graduates Share Lessons Learned at “UnConference”

SWFF UnConference Published Blog Posts