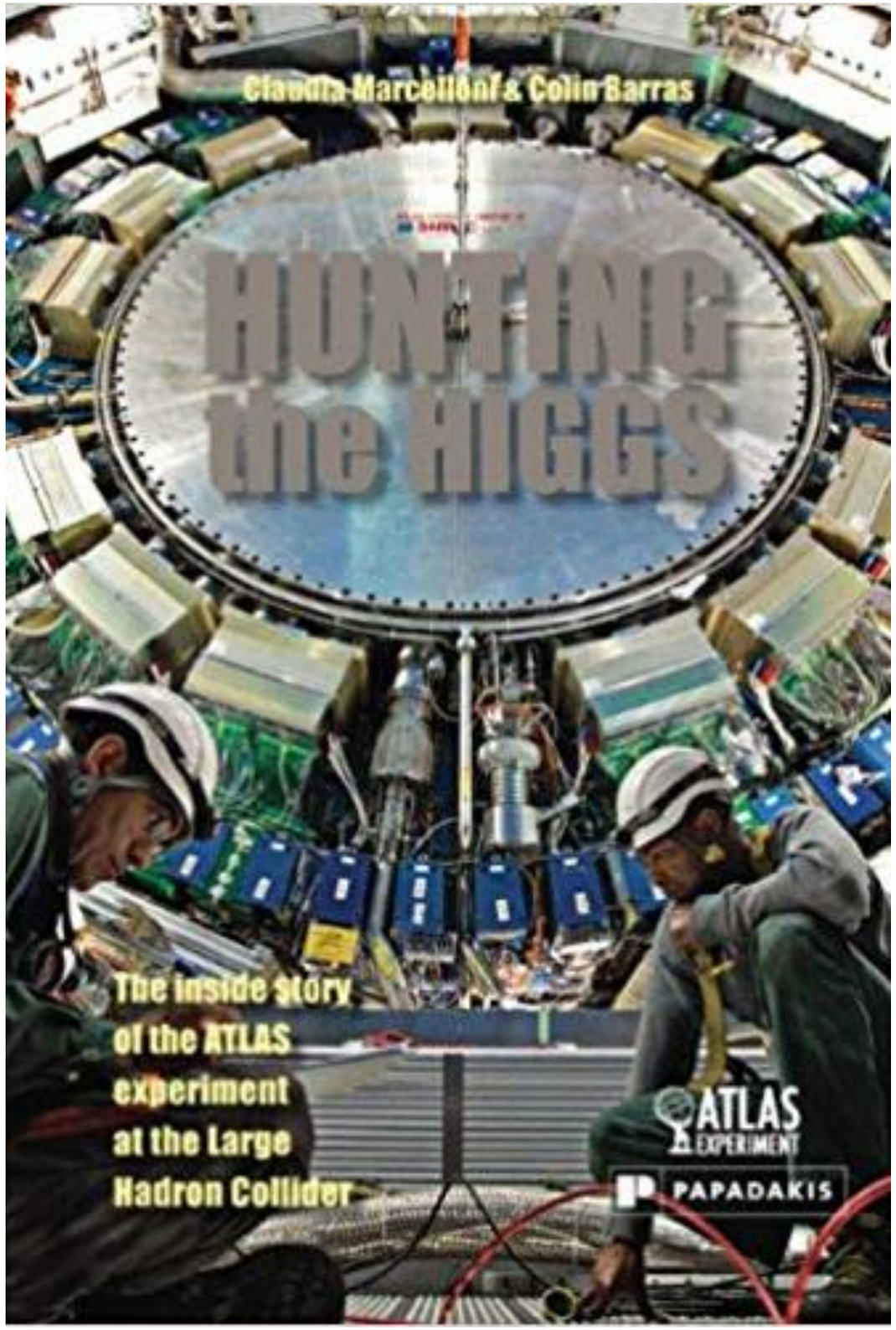
# *Is there a Lab for that?*

## *Collaborative practices in Social Innovation Labs*

***by Claudia.Marcelloni@cern.ch***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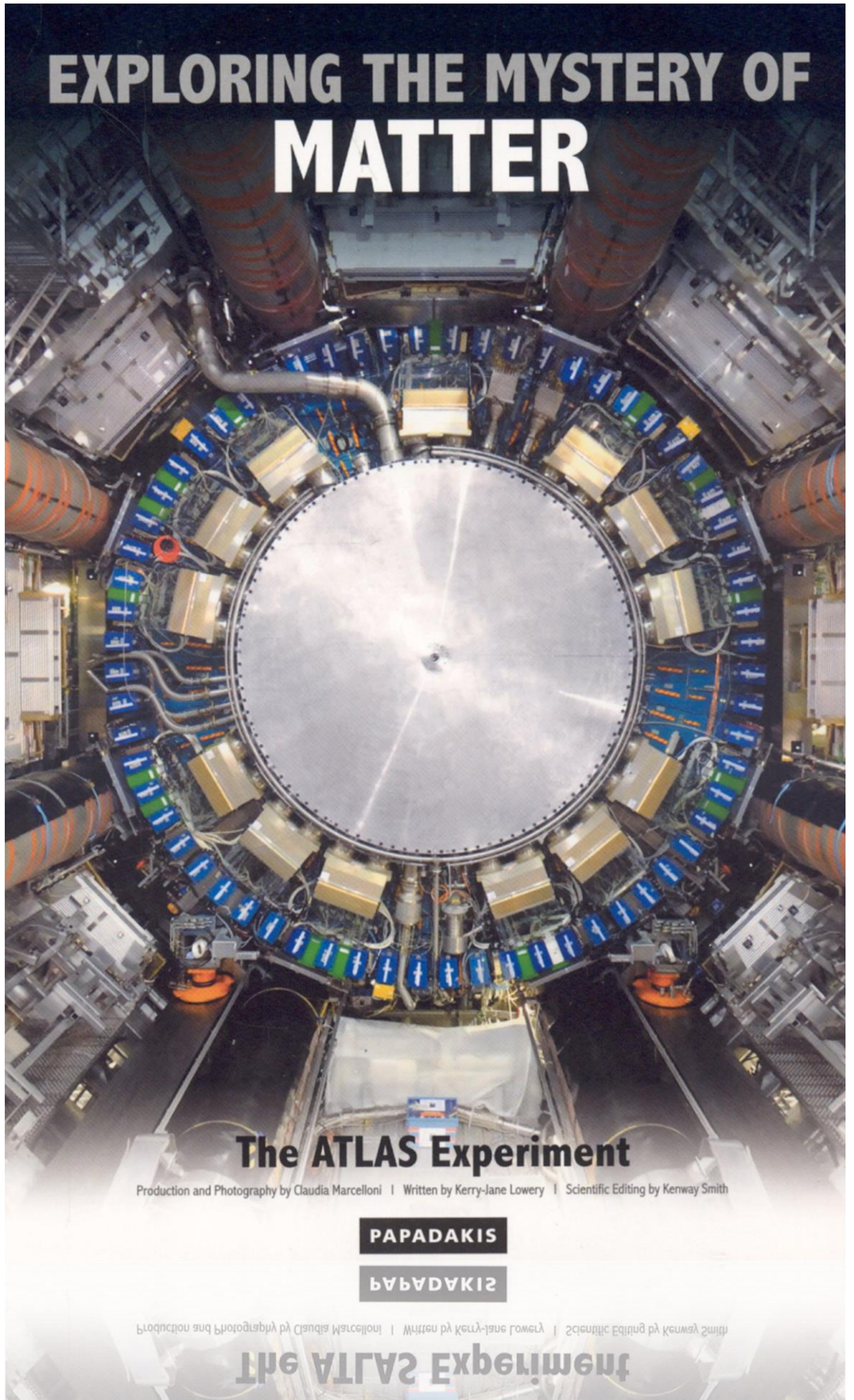
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# Introduction

Social innovation labs have unorthodox typology with one common denominator **to create inter-organizational collaborations in order to tackle “wicked” and complex problems.**

# Definition

Labs can be referred to as social innovation labs, civic labs, system innovation labs, Incubators, i-teams, hubs, and accelerators, among other terminologies. For the purpose of this study, we will consider that **social innovation lab is:**

**“A semi-autonomous organisation that engages diverse participants - on a long-term basis - in open collaboration for the purpose of creating, elaborating, and prototyping radical solutions to open-ended systemic challenges”** (Gryszkiewicz, Lykourentzou and Toivonen 2016, p.17).

# Definition

Living labs, innovation hubs, corporate R&D labs, communities of practice (CoP), innovation networks, and innovation task forces are not included in this description.

*These initiatives do not foresee a long-term engagement with complex social problems through the continuing interaction and collaboration of diverse stakeholders looking at a specific theme in the system* *(Gryszkiewicz, Lykourentzou and Toivonen, 2016).*

| Innovation labs | Living Labs |
|---|---|
| Focus on ideation & 'quick & dirty' experimentation | Focus on innovation development & real-life experimentation |
| Multi-disciplinary team | Multi-stakeholder organization |
| Potentially citizen-centric | A priori user-centric |
| Public sector innovation projects | Public as well as private sector innovation projects |
| More agile and volatile due to their smallness and relative independence | More formal at the organizational level due to multi-stakeholder partnerships |
| Focus on problem and idea definition | Focus on methodology and knowledge generation |
| Initiators | Executors |

Source: Authors.

*Both can be seen as operating on a continuum, where one might see Living Labs as the ideal structures to pick up the raw ideas or prototype solutions, delivered by innovation labs, and focus on the actual implementation and execution stage, including real-life testing. However, in practice both concepts seem to be part of different literature streams and (academic) debates.*

Source: Innovation in the Public Sector: Exploring the Characteristics and Potential of Living Labs and Innovation Labs by Dimitri Schuurman (iMinds – MICT – Ghent University) & Piret Tõnurist (Tallinn University of Technology)

# Sector

- (1) “relatively **small**—approximately $150 million per year—and **fragmented**, with a majority of the labs in the global north. While still early in its development, the sector is growing quickly in response to increasing demand—about 70 percent of the labs were founded in the last **five** years” (Bliss and Sahni, 2014).

- (2) somewhat a high **fluctuation** with many short life span, ex: *MindLab* in Denmark)

| Name | Location | Theme | Years |
|---|---|---|---|
| GOVERMENT | | | |
| Nesta | UK | Education, Government and Health | 10+ (since 1998) |
| The Social Innovation Lab Kent (SILK) | Kent, UK | families, housing, reducing re-offending, young people, dementia, and migration | 10+ |
| Digital National Mexico | Mexico | Digital economy, Education, Health | 10+ |
| PRIVATE SECTOR WITH PUBLIC FOCUS | | | |
| Deloitte GovLab | US | Government policy and partnership | 5-10 |
| IDEO.org | US | Lower poverty through health and finance | 5-10 |
| NOT FOR PROFIT | | | |
| Reos Partner | Sao Paulo, Geneva, Amsterdam, Melbourne, Cambridge, Montreal, Johannessburg | energy, oceans, food, fashion, education, violence | 10+ |
| la 27eRegion | France | Improve public adminstration | 5-10 |
| MaRS Solutions Lab | Toronto, Canada | Energy, funding and education | 5-10 |
| Non-for-profit THEMATIC LABS | | | |
| Finance Innovation Lab, | USA | Finance | 5-10 |
| eLab | USA | Energy | 5-10 |
| InCompass | Cambodia | Sanitation,water and Agriculture | 10+ |
| UNIVERSITIES | | | |
| Parsons DESIS Lab at The New School | New York | | 5-10 |

# Research Question

Despite the focus on collaboration, academics have not examined the emergent field of social innovation labs, which presents an **opportunity for research**. The study aimed to answer the following question:

**To what extent does the theoretical understanding of collaboration apply to innovation labs?**

# Research Goal

The goal of the study was to unveil and compare **collaborative methodologies of labs with that of theoretical context:**

- Deductively - looking into what is similar and what is different from the theoretical context

- Inductively - observing new elements emerged from the data that had not yet been academically discussed

# Literature Review

- Most of the literature has been **produced by those involved**. They seem to agree on three main characteristics (Zaid Hassan, 2014):
  - 1) **experimental,** continuing to interact and look for emergent solutions versus applying traditional “project-based” approaches; and
  - 2) **social,** aiming to innovate with those who are part of the system
  - 3) **systemic,** aiming to have a holistic view of the problem and often engaging stakeholders across sectors
- Some authors discuss that in fact that has been an **evolution** and labs rely more now on the collaborative aspect that in earlier period (Carstensen and Bason, 2012):

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# Labs for social innovation

AUTHOR

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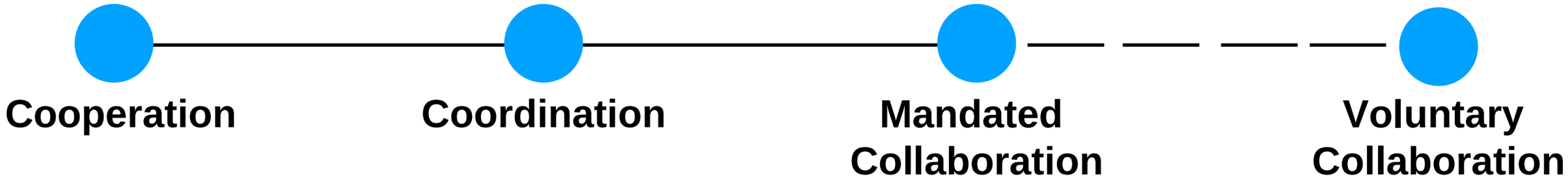
# Collaboration

- Collaboration theory is **fragmented**, emphasizes different aspects of its structure and process and sometimes presents contradictory concepts (Alter and Hage, 1993).
  - We focus on i**nter-organizational and cross-sector collaboration theory** since that seems to be the focus of labs.

"A process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (Gray, 1989, p.5).

# Collaboration




McNamara (2012)

# Collaboration

Collaboration differs from **cooperation and coordination.**

- Cooperation can be observed when participants choose to work together using existing structures and policies. (Jennings and Ewalt, 1998; Agranoff, 2006);

- Coordination is similar, but involves some formal structure following a defined hierarchy (Caruson and MacManus, 2006; Robinson, 2006);

- Collaboration requires “much closer relationships, connections, and resources and even a blurring of the boundaries between organisations” (Keast, Brown and Mandell, 2007, p 19);

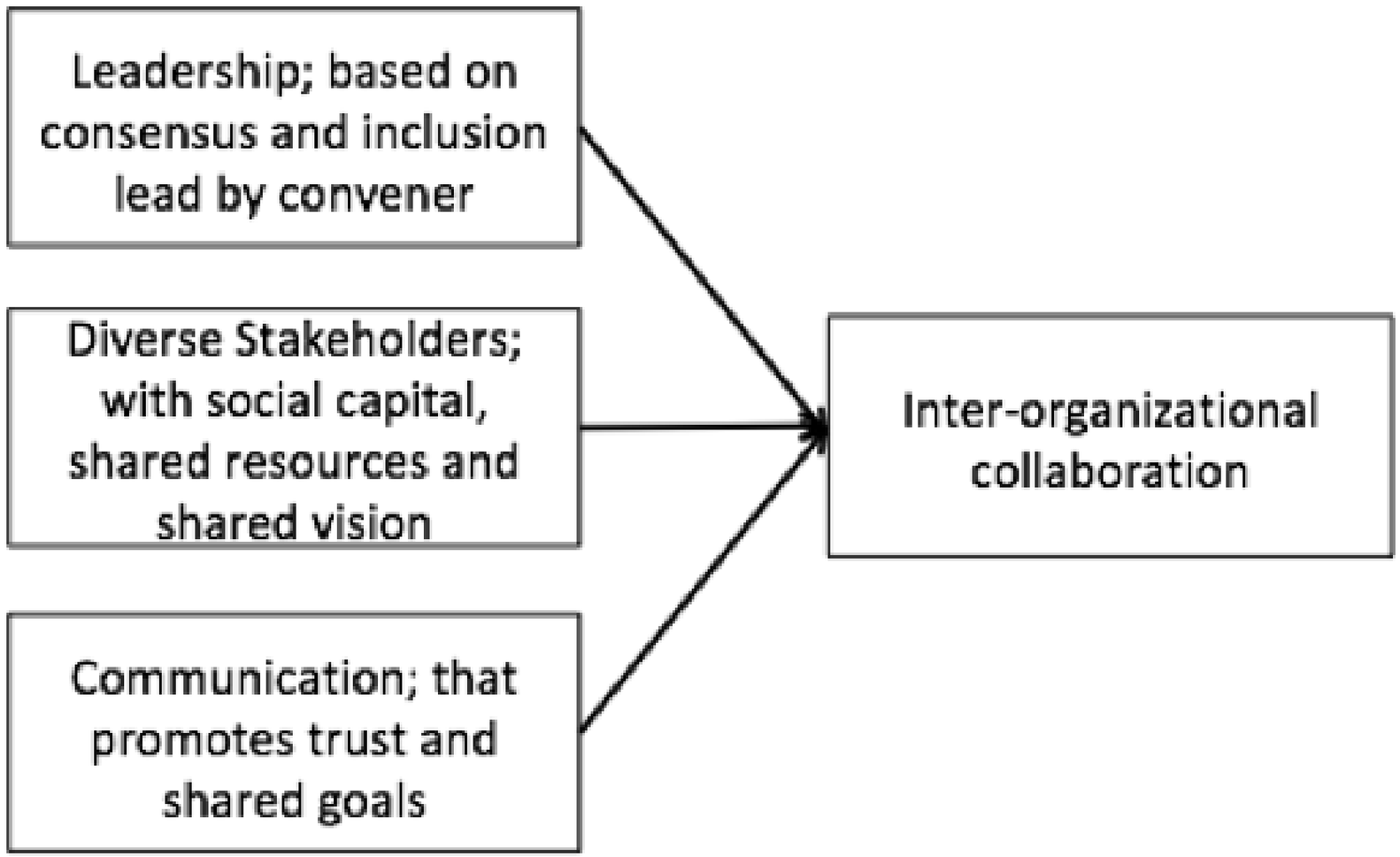
Collaboration is not necessarily **voluntary but can be mandated**:

- In mandated collaborations the convener holds the decision-making power.

- In voluntary collaboration, power is shared among participants and trust is gained through the process.

# Collaborating

Theoretical Frameworks that facilitate collaboration



# Leadership

- Leadership in an inter-organizational collaboration needs to rely less on hierarchical structure and more on **consensus decision-making** through **shared power** and the **inclusion of stakeholders' opinions**, creating an environment where everyone feels their voices are heard (Innes and Booher, 1999).

# Diverse stakeholders

- A high level of diversity in the stakeholder composition of collaboration adds **resources** and **social capital** to the collaborative effort (Majumdar, Moynihan and Pierce, 2009), which in turn contributes to the development of a **shared vision** (Gray, 1989).

"*An articulated shared vision and the **buy-in that comes from a cultural fit**, allows for participants from a variety of backgrounds to quickly get up to speed and adapt to the collaborative structure" (Shaw, 2003, p.110).*

# Communication

- Beyond sharing information, the communication strategy for collaboration should be based on **true dialogue,** helping to promote **trust** and achieve **shared goals** among members (McNamara, 2012; Ansell and Gash, 2007).

*Frequent communication is most important in the beginning of the initiative (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2002), while over time, once trust has been developed, quality of communication becomes more important (Heikkila and Gerlak, 2014).*

# Case Selection

Critical case: Reos Partners

- (1) longevity: 20 years experience
- (2) thematic diversity: multiple topics of work such as food, energy, education and peace
- (3) geographical distribution: offices in 5 countries around the world

# Data Collection and Analysis

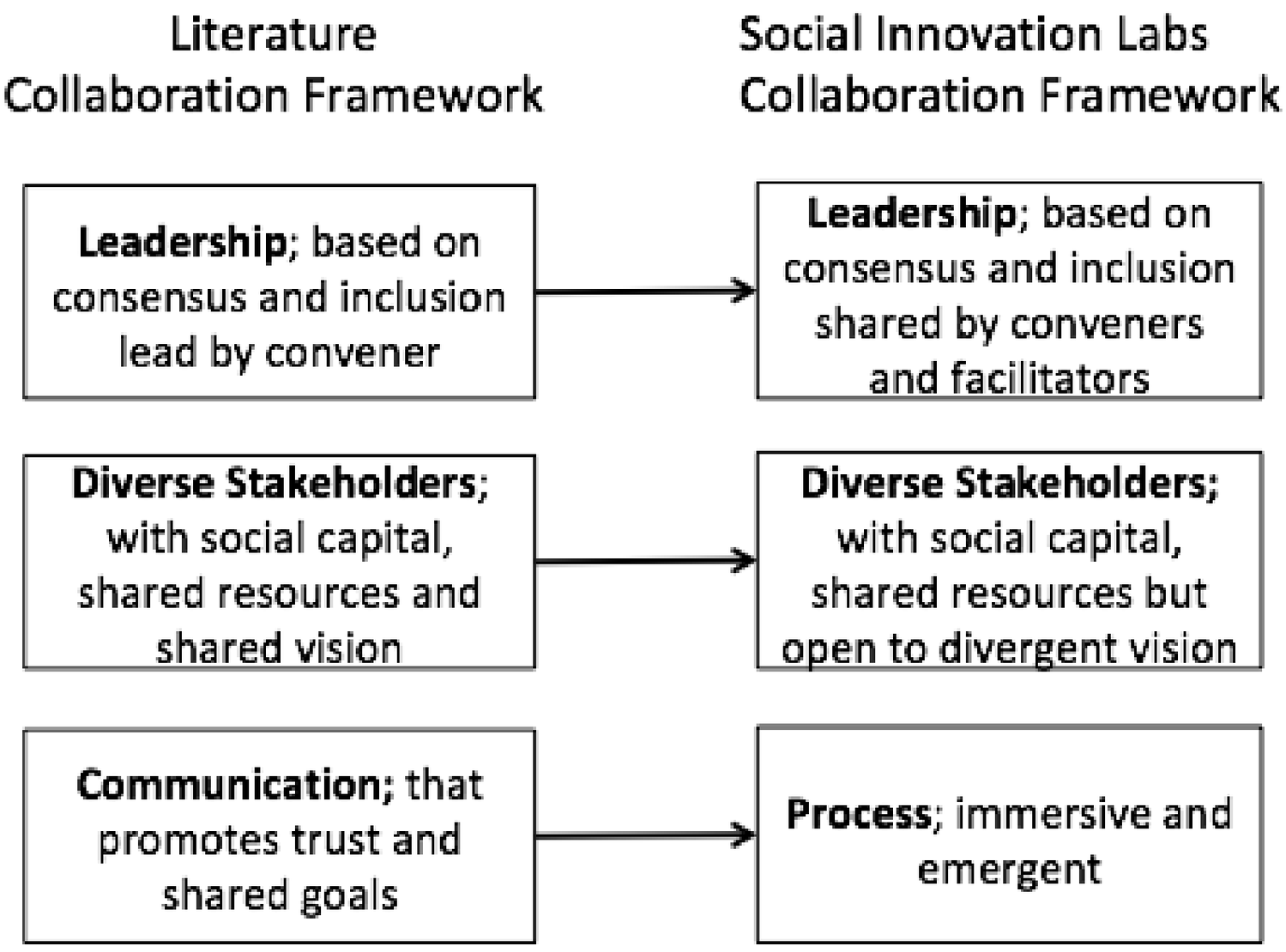
In order to increase validity the research used **within-case** design to explore **three different projects within Reos Partners** interviewing ten members with different roles within the labs, such as conveners, facilitators and participants. The Reos Partners' labs studied were:

- (1) **the Brazilian Sustainable Fashion Lab,** works towards a more fair and sustainable fashion industry in Brazil. It is a **multi-sector initiative at the national level**, composed of about 40 leaders.

- (2) **the South African Food Lab,** action oriented social lab aimed at enhancing food security in southern Africa. It is comprised of stakeholders from corporate, grassroots, NGO, academic, and government. Originally directed by academics, it **now runs as an independent organization**.

- (3) t**he Oceans Lab,** brings together **African biologists, European oil industry executives, Mexican fishermen,** and traditional leaders from small island states to discuss ocean preservation.

# Deductive Analyses



# Deductive Analyses

- Leadership: **Conveners** are part of the system, while **facilitators** are experts in creating a process of inclusion and neutral to the topic; together they select the members of the collaboration

- Diverse stakeholders: Innovation labs welcome **divergent points of view** and believe that participants don’t need to agree in order to collaborate since the goal is to innovate

- Process: more than communication, labs promote an **immersive** (meetings are days long) and **emergent process** (faithful to the agenda but the content is driven by the members of the collaboration)

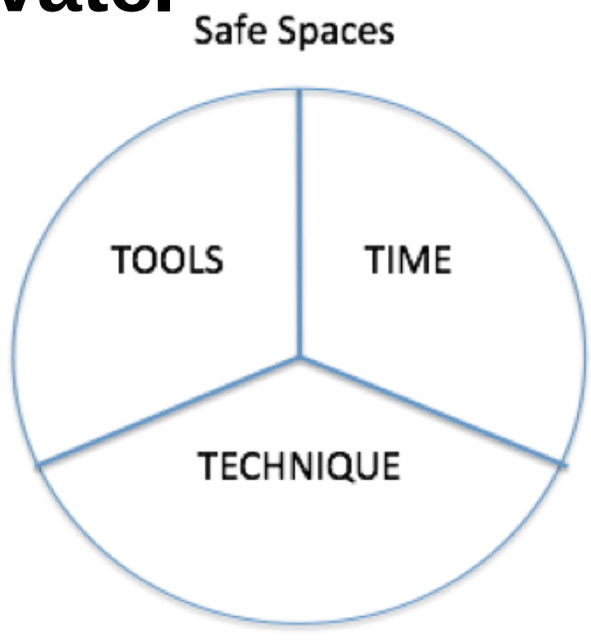
# Inductive Analyses

The data provide significant emphasis on the importance of harvesting the **individual's expertise and experience of being part of the system** it aims to innovate.

This paper suggests that in order to allow participants to take part in a lab as individuals, abandoning their organizational voice, **innovation labs create safe spaces to innovate.**

# Safe Space to Innovate

A social innovation lab does not require a specifically designed space to exist, but the space in which it is set up needs to give the **sense that it is not business-as-usual**. It should be a space that invites and train individuals to **learn, experiment and innovate.**



# 3T’s Framework

- (1) educating their stakeholders on the **TIME** necessary to widen their understanding of the system and the problem at hand, specially for complex social issues**.** Also understand the **right time,** when the problem is **urgent or important** enough so the collaboration becomes justifiable.

- (2) teaching them **TECHNIQUES** to listen and learn from one another in order to harvest the expertise and experience of the invidious. Ex: Dialogue interviews, democracy of time, paired walks and learning journeys.

- (3) showing them how to generate and test ideas through human-centred design **TOOLS.** Ex: transformative scenarios (instead of adapting, imagining new scenarios) and rapid prototyping.

“The prototyping process is also a learning too…requires capacity to learn how to let go, how to best receive feedback, the willingness to fail…”

# 3T's Framework Challenges

- (1) TIME: This concept can **conflict** with management theory about time being a **competitive advantage**. "Innovation means change and change is measured by innovation per unit of time" (Stalk and Hout, 1990, p.19).

- (2) TECHNIQUES: the list of techniques used by labs are **endless.** Generally they are based on ethnography; story-telling and story-boarding; character profiles; service journeys; experience maps; actors map; prototyping and modeling; interactive tables and whiteboards; headlines and postcards from the future; and foresight (Bellefontaine, 2012).

- (3) TOOLS: "one of the challenging dynamics the (innovation) sector faces is a **divide between traditional program approaches and a new generation of development professionals focused on the potential applications of new technology and tools**, said Kevin McAndrew, director of partnership innovation and strategy at Save the Children" (Cheney, 2017).

# Innovative Collaboration

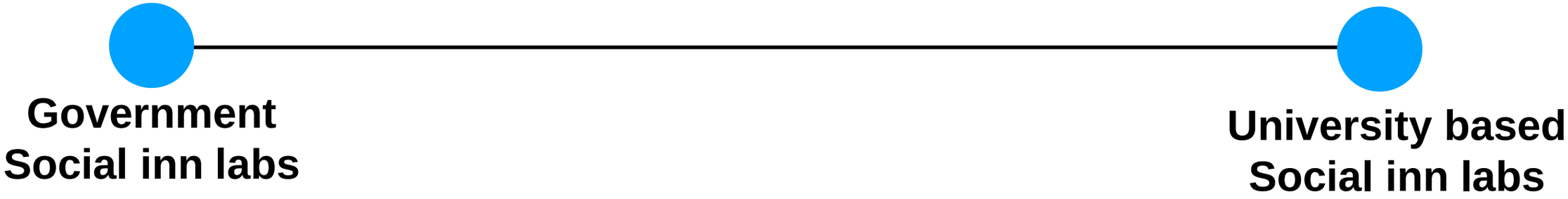
Previously described types (and/or stages) were (Barbara Gray, 1989):

- **Exploratory collaboration:** scoping the problem
- **Advisory collaboration:** identifying solutions
- **Confederative collaboration:** defining the implementation
- **Contractual collaboration:** formalising action

Social innovation labs seek to innovate solutions for complex problems by changing the system from within; a concept that doesn't seem to have been covered by the literature and that this study names **Innovative Collaboration.**

# Further Research

Further research on the **practices of labs throughout the continuum** would benefit the sector.



# Conclusions

- Social Innovation labs are an **emergent field** with scarce academic coverage.
- Labs tend to be **experimental, systemic and social,** focusing on creating inter-organizational collaborations seeking innovation for social good.
- Labs do acknowledge the key facilitating characteristics discussed by the collaboration theory (**Leadership, Diverse Stakeholders and Communication**) adapting them to the context of innovation.
- Labs create **safe spaces** where individuals can leave behind their organisational voices and collaborate through the **three T's framework**, referring to time, techniques and tools inspired by the human-centred design-thinking approach.
- Labs present a new type of collaboration, which could be referred to as **innovative collaboration**.
- Further studies into lab practices **across the spectrum of innovation labs**, would be beneficial to the sector.