

Collaborative practices in Social Innovation Labs

Author & affiliations

“This report provides a wide and thoughtful analysis of – and background to - the field of social innovation labs in the context of collaborative behaviour. It represents an important contribution to the understanding and practice of the use of space for successful social innovation, and how collaboration can contribute to the set goals in a meaningful and effective manner.”

Markus Nordberg, Head of Idea Square at CERN, Switzerland.

Key Findings (100 words)

The emergent field of Social Innovation Labs has an unorthodox typology but one common denominator among labs is the goal to create inter-organizational collaborations in order to tackle complex problems. The output of social innovation labs is usually a *process that leads to systemic change* rather than just a *product or service*. The research suggests that these labs create safe spaces to collaborate by applying the three T's framework: time, techniques and tools based on human-centred design approaches. Time is a fundamental element in the equation. The process requires time because of the diversity of stakeholders, the complexity of the issues and the need to define a strong foundation based on mutual understanding of the problem. By looking into the collaborative methodologies of social innovation labs, this study addresses an important question in social innovation: How do the tools and techniques of innovation apply when considering a process rather than a product and how much time is needed for systemic change to take place.

Emerging Themes (1000 words MAX)

Definition of Social Innovation Labs

Labs have existed in the academic and for-profit sectors since the 1800's. However, in the early 2000's innovation labs with human-centred design methodologies aimed at studying social impact started to appear in all sectors, including governments, universities and international organisations. "According to The Bridgespan Group, preliminary estimates indicate that the [Social Innovation Lab] sector is 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).

The field has an unorthodox typology and labs can be referred to as social innovation labs, civic labs, system innovation labs, Incubators, i-teams, hubs, and accelerators, among other terminologies. The definition used in this study is that a 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, Lykourantzou and Toivonen, 2016, p.17).

Most of these labs are trying to address complex or wicked problems around themes such as food, water, poverty, and energy. While there are a growing number of initiatives trying to address such problems, innovation labs propose a new framework to do so through inter-organisational collaborations, using innovative collaboration methodologies.

Innovative collaborative processes for systemic change

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 which this study names "innovative collaboration".

Labs bring stakeholders of high and low decision-making power in the system together for a period of time in which they look eye to eye (for example, an independent seamstress and the buyer of a large clothing brand).

These labs use the best knowledge acquired in collaboration theory, adapting it to the goal of innovating. However, it is the focus on an emergent and immersive process that is the most defining characteristic of the innovative collaboration. In fact, the process can be considered part of the outcome of these labs, which differs from the creation of a product or service in more traditional labs.

These processes require immersion of the group in the problem for sensitisation and learning to take place. Results appear in an emergent manner guided by the participants instead of being prescribed by a predetermined plan. To pursue this endeavour, labs create a safe space for collaborating.

Social Innovation Labs as safe spaces for collaborating

A 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.

In order to collaborate, individuals are required to drop their organizational voice and participate in the creation of a common future. Social innovation lab spaces provide capacity building for the individuals to learn, experiment and innovate by applying the three T's framework.

The three T's framework: Tools, Techniques and Time

The elements of tools, techniques and time compose the three T's framework used by social innovation labs for the innovative collaborative process to take place.

Firstly, social innovation labs are known for their unique experimentation **tools** designed to create and test new ideas. In order to make ideas more tangible and test them, labs use a set of tools based on human-centred design techniques such as rapid prototyping. However before testing, labs offer an array of tools to help generate new ideas. One example is the technique of transformative scenarios. This approach invites participants to imagine the possible scenarios for a given system in the future, from the continuum of extremely negative to extremely positive, and what needs to happen for each one of these scenarios to take place.

Secondly, social innovation labs offer a diverse set of **techniques** to build the individual's capacity to listen and learn from others on an eye-to-eye level and take full advantage of stakeholder diversity. The process starts with facilitators approaching participants before they are even part of the lab. Once at the lab, participants then have a chance to listen to each other and learn from their experiences by providing individual, pair and group time. In addition to listening, learning from one another is another important element of the lab. Techniques discussed in this research, such as democracy of time, paired walks and learning journeys are good examples, out of a virtually endless list of concrete methods to create opportunities for dialogue used by social innovation labs.

However, perhaps **time** is the most important element of the three T's framework. The process requires time because of the diversity of stakeholders involved, the complexity of the issues addressed, and the need to define a strong foundation based on mutual understanding of the problem. Time is necessary to widen participants understanding of the system and the problem, to gain trust and to allow innovative solutions to emerge. As discussed before, besides emergent the process is also immersive, with each lab meeting

lasting 2 or 3 days and taking place on a continuing basis, sometimes repeating itself over years.

Conclusion

The main goal of social innovation labs is to create systemic change. Rather than only a *product or service*, the **process** itself is part of the lab's outcome. The process uses the three T's framework composed of tools, techniques and time. Most **tools** are based on human centered-design, such as rapid prototyping, and are used for ideation. However, the strength of these labs lies in the **techniques** they employ to bring stakeholders of high and low decision-making power in the system together for a period of time in which they can interact on an even playing field, become sensitized to the problem and learn from one another. Above all, the process requires **time** because of the diversity of stakeholders, the complexity of the issues and the need to define a strong foundation based on mutual understanding of the problem.

On this note, Social Innovation Labs raise the important question of how the tools and techniques of innovation apply when considering a process rather than a product. A product is easier to think of as self-contained, whereas systemic change is necessarily deeply rooted and far more complex. Nevertheless, it may be useful to consider how the same language can be used to refer to these different but analogous situations.

Social innovation Labs can learn from labs that focus on prototyping, which sits at the other end of the continuum of innovation labs, and vice versa. However, it is imperative that the systemic change and process output of a social innovation lab not be confused with a conventional "product", and that the time needed is respected. The study of the continuum of social innovation labs and their relationship to time and output leads to a potential future research on the topic.

Background (200 words)

Mapping the field of social innovation labs presents many complications. Firstly, it is an emergent field with very little published academic material. Secondly, it has an unorthodox typology with new labs and new methodologies constantly appearing (Westley and Laban, 2014). In addition, it presents a relatively high fluctuation, as some original labs are dying quickly. The author collected the names of labs mentioned at least twice in the literature review, categorizing them according to (1) longevity, (2) thematic diversity and (3) geographical distribution. After careful analysis, the author decided that Reos Partners

would provide a rich data set for the study, since it is one of the oldest labs active in the field, addresses a diverse range of themes, and maintains offices around the world.

In order to increase validity, the research used within-case design to explore three different projects within Reos Partners and collect data from members with different roles within the labs, such as conveners, facilitators and participants. In total, ten interviews of sixty minutes were conducted.

The author used data triangulation between interviews and documents; as well as audit trail and peer debriefing support. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews in person and via skype and through content analyses of documents (Neuendorf, 2016) provided by interviewees, such as reports of findings of each of the labs and other publications such as presentations and blogs.

Implications & future research (100 words)

The author speculates that there is a continuum in the Social Innovation Lab landscape. Labs linked to governments, in which the collaborative process is a key part of the outcome, would fall into one extreme, while Labs linked to schools and universities, in which prototyping represents the key outcome, lie at the other extreme.

An interesting topic for future research would be to extend the findings proposed in this paper across the landscape of social innovation labs. The author believes that labs from one extreme can learn from the practices of labs from the other. Above all, exchanging the lessons learned on collaborating and producing innovative prototyping from both ends of the spectrum could strengthen the field of innovation labs as a whole.

References

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About the project (100 words)

This study of the methodologies used by social innovation labs aims to expand the knowledge of academics and practitioners on collaboration by providing and comparing empirical material to the theoretical framework and analysing other elements that emerged from the data collection that have not yet been previously discussed. The study aimed to answer the following question: ***To what extent does the theoretical understanding of collaboration apply to innovation labs?***

Reos Partners was selected as a critical case study due to its longevity, as well as thematic and geographic diversity, which provides a strong and varied dataset.

As society's problems grow in size and complexity, the more important it becomes to study and analyse the initiatives and forms that deal with complex inter-organizational and cross-sectorial collaborations. In the future, these types of initiatives may represent one of the best ways to address the wicked problems facing us, and perhaps one of the few realistic ways to move society forward.

The research was carried out with the support of The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. This research is available upon request.

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For Further information contact:

cmarcelloni@gmail.com

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