'SLOW PROTOTYPING' FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE: TECHNIQUES, TOOLS AND TIME IN SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS

Claudia Marcelloni

MSt, Social Innovation, Cambridge 2018

Edited by **Dr Michelle Fava**

Research supervised by
Professor Paul Tracey

Cambridge
Centre for
Social
Innovation

UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE
Judge Business School

Contents

"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 Resources and Development of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

Key findings

By examining the collaborative methodologies of social innovation labs, this study highlights the importance of allowing time for innovation to develop when innovating for systemic change.

'Social innovation labs' constitute an emerging field. Their activities are comparable to other innovation labs, and similar terminology can be used to describe the innovation process in each, but it is important to recognise how they differ. Like other innovation labs, social labs problem- solve through collaboration; however, their outcomes are often processes rather than products or services. Social innovation labs seek systems-level change, for which collaborative processes are essential. Addressing systemic social problems requires deep engagement from many organisations, stakeholders and beneficiaries. This research proposes that these labs create the conditions for collaboration by applying a 'three T's framework' composed of techniques, tools and time.

Today's innovation labs often seek to 'accelerate' innovation through lean or agile methodologies, making use of quick prototyping cycles. Social innovation labs can also accelerate change, but this research highlights the necessity of a slower pace, if these collaborations are to yield lasting results.

Background

Labs have existed in the academic and for-profit sectors since the 1800s. However, in the early 2000s, innovation labs with human-centred design methodologies aimed at studying social impact started to appear in all sectors, including governments, universities and international organisations.

'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 (The Bridgespan Group, cited in Bliss and Sahni, 2014).

The field has an unorthodox typology. Labs are variously referred to as 'social innovation labs', 'civic labs', 'system innovation labs', 'incubators', 'i-teams', 'hubs', and 'accelerators'. This study uses Gryszkiewicz, Lykourentzou and Toivonen's (2016) definition: 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'. Most of these labs are trying to address complex or "wicked" systemic problems such as energy consumption and poverty.

ESADE business school, in collaboration with Robert Bosch Stiftung Foundation, published a review of the social innovation lab landscape, adding new members to the growing list as well as describing more than eighty different methodologies used by them. Roughly summarised, lab methodologies are based on ethnographic-inspired user research, creative ideation processes, and visualisation and modelling of service prototypes (Papageorgiou, 2017).

This research looked into one of the oldest labs of this kind still active in the field. It addresses a diverse range of themes and maintains offices around the world. Ten interviews were conducted with conveners, facilitators and participants across three projects based in South America, Africa and Europe. Additionally, internal documents and external communications were analysed, and peer-debriefing support was used. The topics addressed were sustainable food production, equity in the fashion industry and oceans preservation.

Emerging themes

Techniques, tools and time: a collaborative approach to systemic change

These labs adapt collaborative practices for the goal of innovating for systemic change. Immersive and emergent collaborative processes have been developed, which provide capacity building for individuals to learn, experiment and innovate together. These collaborative processes can themselves be considered part of the 'innovation' these labs produce. They apply techniques, tools and time to the process of innovation in distinctive ways.

Techniques to listen and lean

Social innovation labs often bring stakeholders of high and low decision-making power together: for example, an independent seamstress and a buyer for a large clothing brand; a small farmer and a buyer from a national supermarket brand. This juxtaposition is effective because it enables very different worldviews to be considered simultaneously, including those of potential beneficiaries, who would rarely be included in conventional innovation processes. Especially important in the framing of the problem itself, this pluralistic approach - which includes the views of those at many levels of different organisational hierarchies - can enable solutions that match the realities across the system.

This practise helps avoid interventions that address only symptoms or that may lead to unintended and adverse effects. However, it also creates the need for techniques that will bring people to a shared understanding.

Techniques that facilitate the immersion of the group in the 'problem space' are employed throughout the process. Extensive dialogue and an 'even playing field', in which people of different status feel they can speak freely, are crucial. Any perceived disparities in power relations would act as obstacles to genuine collaboration, inhibiting open exchange. For example, the technique 'democracy of time' is employed for this reason – meaning that everyone has the same opportunity to talk, and that their views and experiences are equally valid regardless of their position in the production chain.

To foster a shared understanding, the 'paired walk' technique, in which participants walk together outdoors making open-ended conversation, is often used. Pairings that place unfamiliar people with very different experiences together may be suggested. Another technique is the 'learning journey' in which the group goes to a place where they would usually not have access, e.g. supermarket buyers go to fisherman's markets. In these scenarios, the lower level workers become the 'experts'. This range of techniques enables dialogue and builds individuals' capacities to listen and learn from others at an eye-to-eye level and to take full advantage of stakeholder diversity.

Tools to generate and test ideas

Once the group is established, and stakeholders have reached a shared understanding of the problem, it is important to create the conditions for ideation, so that meaningful solutions can be explored.

One example of a tool used during this phase is the 'transformative scenario'. 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. This enables an imaginative engagement with possible scenarios, which taps the rich resource of stakeholders' understanding of the systems involved.

In order to create a more tangible concept of the idea or potential solutions, prototyping tools for testing ideas are also used. It is important to differentiate the use of prototyping for products or services and for social innovation. When innovating a product, physical prototypes, often using 'rapid prototyping' technologies, are applied in order to quickly demonstrate ideas and gain feedback for further iterations. When innovating a service, a role-play could be used as an expedient prototype. The concept of a prototype is still useful when considering systemic change, but the format must enable the concept to be demonstrated in a way that accounts for the complexity of the problem. The challenge is to demonstrate a proposed systemic change in a way that enables the possible ramifications to be explored, which can be through modelling, role-play and storytelling narratives.

In addition to techniques to listen and learn and tools to generate and test ideas, time is the third essential element in the social innovation process. In the case studies observed, each lab meeting lasted 2 or 3 days and took place on a continuing basis, sometimes repeating over years. These long sessions were considered necessary, and the advantage of an even longer-term engagement in these labs was also acknowledged for three principal reasons.

Firstly, social problems are inseparably intertwined with economic, cultural, historical, geographic, and environmental factors, and this complexity must be understood through multiple perspectives, which takes time to understand. Diverse stakeholders must understand the problems from each other's' perspectives, as well as their own.

Secondly, taking adequate time to build a strong foundation of mutual understanding and trust, with a plurality of perspectives, enables the collaborative problem-solving to go beyond superficial solutions.

Thirdly, because the solutions are likely to be processual in nature, any 'prototype' will have a temporal element. Each iteration of a process-based prototype will require time to play out, before feedback from multiple actors can be considered. The complexity and processual nature of these tools and techniques, and the need for human interaction and understanding, mean that such prototyping requires additional time. Ignoring this need for a different pace of innovation might compromise the results of the whole process and the impact on those involved.

Implications and future research

Cross-sector and inter-organisational collaboration are widely considered crucial elements of social innovation, but best practices in facilitation can still be better understood. This study emphasises the role social innovation labs can play in fostering deep engagement for systemic change. Although the broader processes used by social innovation labs can be seen as similar to existing collaborative models, this research highlights the need for new methodologies to be developed, and for adequate time and space to be made, above and beyond what would normally be expected when innovating for products or services.

Trying to innovate in short timeframes would lead to collaborations remaining superficial, leading to insufficient solutions. This might, in turn, reflect poorly on the capacity of social innovation labs to affect systemic change. The cases studied in this research indicate that this emerging field has great potential to create positive change, providing these lessons are heeded. We suggest that further research into the specific tools and techniques of collaboration within social innovation labs, in order to share models of best practice, could strengthen the field as a whole.

References

Bliss, A. and Sahni, N. (2014). 'Four Social-Change Results That Innovation Labs Deliver', *Stanford Social Innovation Review* Nov. 10, 2014.

Gryszkiewicz, L., Lykourentzou, I., Toivonen, T. (2016). 'Innovation Labs: Leveraging Openness for Radical Innovation?', *Journal of Innovation Management*, p.68-97.

Papageorgiou, K. (2017). 'Lab for Social Innovation'. *ESADE Institute for Social Innovation and the Robert Bosch Stiftung,* November 2017.

About the project

This research is carried out by the Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation. It was designed and conducted by a graduate of the MSt Social Innovation, with the support of faculty and fellows of the programme. The Centre is committed to ensuring wide access to our research findings. We welcome your feedback and ongoing support. The views of the author do not represent those of their employers or CJBS. If you wish to discuss this research or access the full report, please contact the Centre at: socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk.

The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation builds best practices across business, civil society, policy and academia for a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable world.