DOING CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE DESIGN IN A SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB

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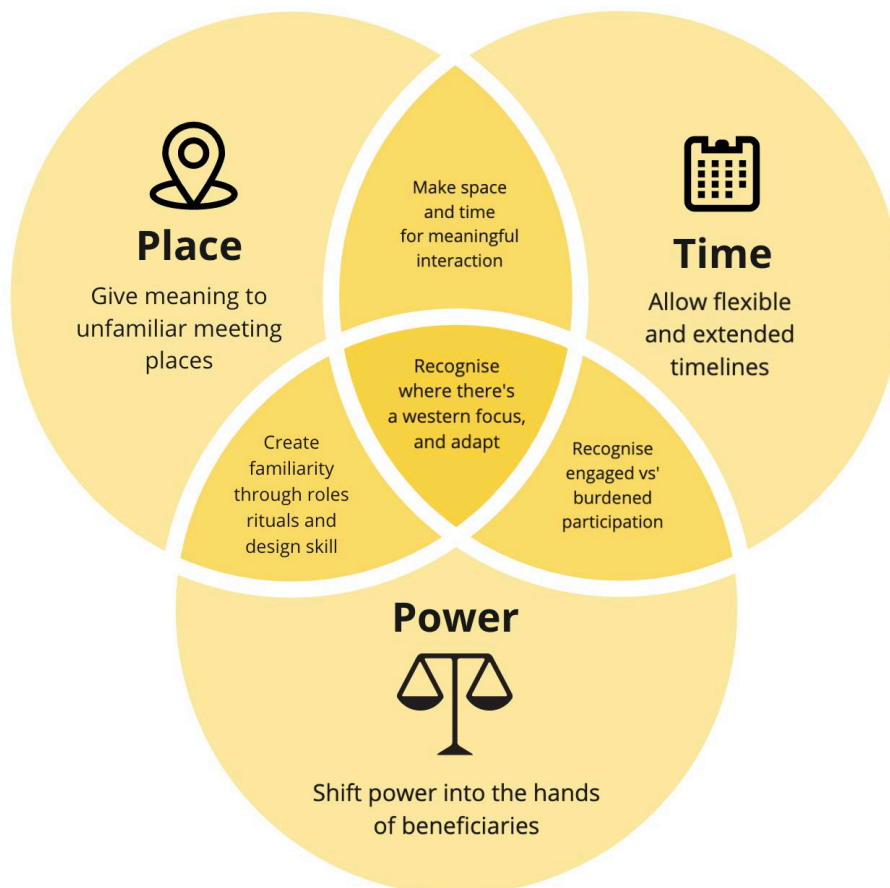Innovation**

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Contents

Key findings

Social Innovation processes commonly reflect dominant, Western approaches to problem solving and aren't always inclusive of diverse cultures and communities who might approach challenges differently. This research explored how a Canadian social innovation lab, the Alberta Bhutanese Employment Lab, in Edmonton, adapted its work to support interactions with the Bhutanese refugee community. The study showed how the lab could better serve beneficiaries through co-design. Three aspects of the lab's work were adapted to improve sensitivity to cultural dynamics and better involve the community in the innovation process:

- 'Place work', which gave meaning to unfamiliar meeting spaces;
- 'Power work', which shifted power to the beneficiaries;
- 'Temporal work', which adapted design processes to allow flexible timelines.

Combining these approaches meant identifying where ethical tensions and risks existed in the innovation process and how to better engage beneficiaries on their own terms by undertaking a culturally adapted social innovation approach. This included shifting leadership power into the hands of beneficiaries, recognising when participants felt engaged or burdened, and creating familiarity through roles, rituals, design craft and allowing time for meaningful interaction.

Place
Give meaning to unfamiliar meeting places

Make space and time for meaningful interaction

Time
Allow flexible and extended timelines

Create familiarity through roles rituals and design skill

Recognise where there's a western focus, and adapt

Recognise engaged vs' burdened participation

Power
Shift power into the hands of beneficiaries

Doing culturally inclusive co-design in social innovation labs

Background

In theory, social innovation labs can enable diverse people to collaboratively design solutions to profound challenges. Including marginalised people is critical because they are disproportionately affected by the social challenges and systemic injustices these labs seek to impact. In practice, this is difficult because of cultural differences, coupled with deeply embedded patterns of exclusion.

The premise of this research is that innovation labs are not inherently inclusive. This builds on the work of Westley et al. (2017) who assert that inclusion of diverse groups in social innovation labs often requires radical shifts in Western-oriented processes.

The case study followed a two-year social innovation project called 'Design by Doing 2.0 Bhutanese Employment Lab', conducted between 2018 and 2019 by the Bhutanese community in Edmonton and several community-focused organizations. The lab aimed to help members of this community secure local employment.

The people who participated have experienced complex socio-economic challenges since their resettlement in Edmonton between 2009-2015. For nearly two decades prior, they lived in UNHCR-run refugee camps in Nepal, after more than 100 thousand ethnic Lhotshampas people – Bhutanese people of Nepalese descent - were expelled by Bhutan and stripped of their citizenship. In the camps, they received interrupted formal education leading to low literacy rates. They also experienced conditions of malnourishment, controlled movement, limitations to engaging in work, and minimal access to legal support. This resulted in identity loss and marginalisation (Banki 2008).

Over forty people participated in the lab, building three prototypes: Supplemental English Language Learning for Employment; Supported Micro-Enterprise; and (the most impactful prototype) - Community-Led Employment Brokering.

The study identified how this lab achieved more inclusive co-design by adapting its approaches to place, power and time.

Emerging themes

Place and Power

"The most fundamentally critical component to the lab is the feeling that [the Lhotshampas people] hosted us, so that they told us who they were... That was critical to them feeling comfortable and everybody taking the time to get to know each other and feel safe with each other". (Lab funder)

During the lab planning phase,two Bhutanese leaders visited the downtown open-concept design studio selectedfor the lab. They deemed it would be overwhelming for Bhutanese participants if left unchanged. Lab conveners had to acknowledge that the space selected was not neutral from the beneficiary's perspective.

To address this, community members decorated the studio with traditional fabrics, scrolls and other cultural artefacts such as dolls and pictures. The meeting also included traditional music, rituals, food and storytelling. This place-making activity not only made the participants feel more at home, it also shifted the power balance so that the Bhutanese were felt to be hosting the lab.

Building familiarity in this way also helped lab convenors to continue to advocate for the Bhutanese, ensuring their perspectives remained central to the entire lab process.

Place and time

"We achieved quite a bit in a short period of time in the two lab days, but of course, time is always a tension. Professionals don't have all that time to be able to provide, and time is just precious, right? It's something we were really grappling with." (Lab Convener)

From the Bhutanese perspective, two days was too short for the in-person lab. The first day strove to ground all participants in the 'unique context, realities, cultural values and experiences of the Bhutanese community while the second day focused on collectively prototyping solutions. Upon reflection, the Bhutanese and lab organizers described these two days as 'woefully inadequate' for proper solutioning. Bhutanese facilitators felt that 'direct translation without time to discuss and make meaning is not true inclusion'. Lab activities seemed 'all too rushed' and 'each component could have been two, three, or four times as long'. However, the non-Bhutanese participants felt that committing two days was already a 'big time commitment' (Action Lab, 2019), and some stakeholders left when the process took longer than expected.

Some Bhutanese participants responded negatively to others leaving early because they felt their contribution would be valuable. The lab's core team remained flexible with their deadlines, adding two evenings to complete the prototyping process. Extended discussions were vital, and flexibility was seen as critical to inclusion.

After building relationships with the Bhutanese community, lab members gained a deeper appreciation of their extreme circumstances and felt responsible for providing tangible outcomes. The endpoint of the partnership became blurred as additional workshops were scheduled to co-design prototypes that could be piloted. Reflecting on this, participants recommended that, in future projects, rather than allocating Bhutanese participation to a discrete phase of in-person lab workshops, they could be spread across the duration of the partnership, which includes pre-lab planning, and post-lab audit components. This would enable leadership teams to be more responsive to beneficiary perspectives.

Time and power

Time constraints also heightened tensions related to power dynamics between Westerners and the Bhutanese. For example, one western participant could not stay at the lab past 4:30 pm during a storyboarding exercise. She rushed the activity, overlooking contribution from the Bhutanese in her group. Such time constraints resulted in a sense of burdened participation, which led western participants to prioritise outputs over the full integration of Bhutanese perspectives.

To address this, a process of 'continual reflection' was undertaken (Action Lab, 2019). The aim was to keep one another accountable to the principle of valuing the knowledge of those with lived experience. Although this required additional time, it resulted in 'powerful learning' among stewardship members. It provided a caveat for them to get 'yanked out of [their] Western productivity perspective' to collaborate more intentionally.

The stewardship team recognised that the Bhutanese also had outside responsibilities, and often engaged in 'invisible labour' (Action Lab, 2019), meaning informal unpaid work. It was important to acknowledge the time they devoted to the lab (Action Lab, 2018). For this reason, community lab participants were paid for their time, all travel-related costs were covered, and the two Bhutanese leaders were further compensated for their involvement with the stewardship team.

By reconsidering place and time, it is possible to shift power into the hands of beneficiaries. It is essential to consider how power and privilege can impact a teams' ability to relate to the participants they are working with. It may be necessary to recalibrate the expectations of 'productivity-focused' Western participants. Power dynamics are also reflected in the places used for social innovation work, which can feel imposing. 'Place-making' can help to overcome this, particularly when led by representatives of the marginalised community. Extending standard lab timelines can also allow room for relationship building, leading to more authentic co-design.

Implications and future research

This research presents practical insights for social innovation practitioners who wish to adapt innovation processes to be more aware of unequal power dynamics. These insights support literature on inclusive innovation, which aims to develop and implement tools that provide more capacity and wellbeing among disenfranchised members of society (George et al., 2012).

The insights offered here are based on the specific case of a Bhutanese refugee community engaging with a social innovation lab in urban Alberta. While this case highlights some ways social innovation practitioners can adapt, it would be valuable to compare further examples of how labs have worked with marginalised communities in other parts of the world.

In this case, the collaboration was strengthened by the close-knit ties of the refugee community, which were present before the lab. Engaging less cohesive groups would likely present further challenges.

In addition, we can observe that for social innovation labs situated in poor regions, it is often the lab conveners or facilitators who are outsiders, either culturally or socio-economically, rather than the participants. Further research observing the power dynamics of those labs could help to ensure practitioners' critical self-awareness and cultural sensitivity.

References

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About the project

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