



FUTURE OF



LABS

Primer Report

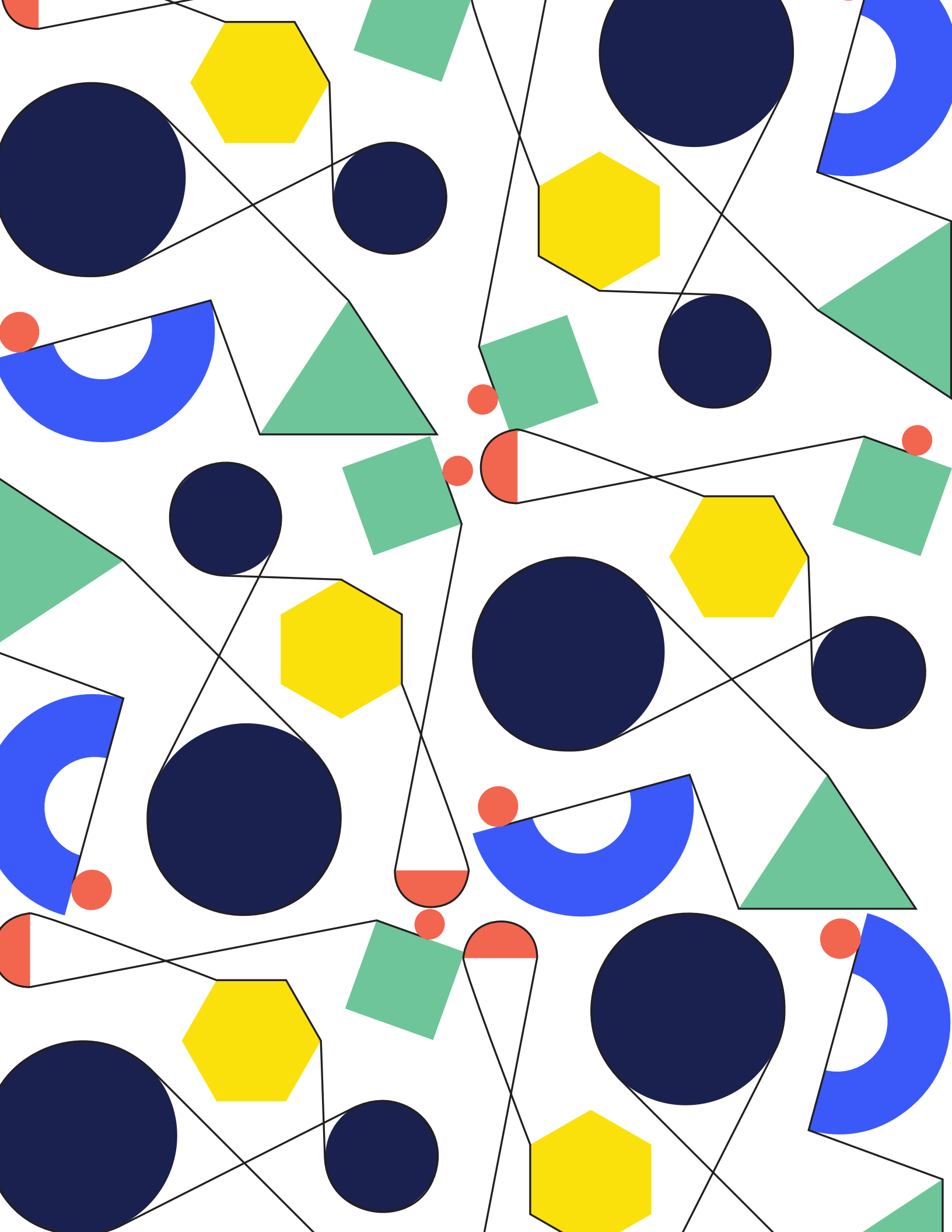


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WELCOME TO THE BEGINNING OF FUTURE OF LABS

Convened and sponsored by [Action Lab](#) and [Social Innovation Canada](#)



Sponsored and supported by Suncor Energy Foundation.



Research and Process Design for Future of Labs Stewarded by:

Ben Weinlick, Anthony Bourque, Paige Reeves, and Rebecca Rubuliak of Action Lab, Diane Roussin of Winnipeg Boldness Project,

Geraldine Cahill of Social Innovation Canada, Mark Cabaj of Here2There Consulting, Patrick Dubé of Transition Bridges Project and Rhizome group.

About Action Lab

[Action Lab](#) is a social enterprise of [Skills Society](#), a not-for-profit disability rights and service organisation in Edmonton that has always been committed to innovation in supporting marginalised community members to find belonging and lead rich, inclusive lives.

Action Lab is part of a social innovation ecosystem in Canada that is engaging in fresh ways of tackling some of the most complex challenges we're all facing in society today. The Action Lab space was designed for hosting diverse collectives who need to tap into the deep knowledge in their community, look at issues from unique perspectives and generate strategic possibilities. The Action Lab experience promotes creativity, offers tools to help tap into collective wisdom and helps people and systems to prototype proposed solutions.

About Social Innovation Canada

[Social Innovation Canada](#) (SI Canada) is working to address complex challenges of national relevance and create transformational change.

We support social innovators and ecosystem builders, connecting them to resources, opportunities, and each other. We lead national interventions with place and identity-based communities to address complex issues. We work to reduce systemic barriers and unlock resources to enable the implementation and scaling of solutions.

FUTURE OF LABS

Future of Labs will bring together an impressive group of trailblazers and experienced innovators who steward and design collective problem solving processes and share a common goal of creating more impactful practices. **The gathering will be a catalyst for shaping the next ten years of lab approaches - looking deeply at what's been working, not working, and collectively visioning next practices for the field.** The resulting work will support more people and systems to get better at understanding, connecting and working with some of the most wicked challenges our world is facing today.

There are several unique ways knowledge will be gathered and mobilised before, during, and after Future of Labs. Diverse lab practitioners from across Canada and beyond will be invited to participate in pre-gathering interviews, focus groups, and surveys that contribute to this Primer, the design of workshops, and the production of pre-gathering learning reports from the field. Thoughtfully designed workshops will support rich dialogue. Post gathering, three podcasts to make knowledge sharing more inclusive, and a final after-gathering report with pathways, signals, and principles lab explorers and funders of labs might consider when designing and enabling robust, equitable and impactful lab processes will be produced. These knowledge artefacts will help local and national practitioners and innovators around the world strengthen their practices as well as help funders and enablers of labs to better evaluate lab proposals.

SHOUT OUTS AND THANK YOU!

→ Firstly, many thanks to the lab leaders who participated in surveys to share their experience, wisdom and insights. To Alex Ryan, Geraldine Cahill, Jeska Slater, Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse, Mark Cabaj, and Marlieke Kieboom, who participated in focus groups, our gratitude for your willingness to share your time, stories, and wisdom with us.

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→ Thank you to the contributors to this Primer who helped research, synthesize and write:

Alex Ryan

Anthony Bourque

Ben Weinlick

Geraldine Cahill

Mark Cabaj

Paige Reeves

Rebecca Rubuliak

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Convenors, Research and Process Design

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Anthony has a diverse background in infrastructure, public health, child-centred design, and play. After working abroad in South-East Asia, Anthony completed graduate research focused on risk and adventure play, while working on a 4 year public health social innovation project in Calgary, AB. Anthony has been quietly introducing innovation, design, and technology into rural schools and building other SI projects focused on Early Learning Educators in Alberta. Anthony consults, designs, facilitates, and leads workshops & innovation labs around Alberta.

BEN WEINLICK, ACTION LAB

Ben is the Executive Director of Skills Society and was instrumental in developing their social enterprise systems change consultancy called Action Lab. Skills Society is one of the largest and longest serving disability rights and service organisations in Edmonton, Alberta within Treaty 6 territory. Skills Society has a long history of treating innovative social service culture that support marginalised communities to thrive. Ben has been deeply involved in systems change work through stewarding think tanks and social innovation for the last 15 years. He is also the founder of a creativity and innovation consultancy network called Think Jar Collective, and co-founder of a tangible social innovation called MyCompass Planning that is scaling across North America. Ben is passionate about helping people, organisations and systems to get better at navigating complex challenges together.

DIANE ROUSSIN, WINNIPEG BOLDNESS PROJECT

A proud member of Skownan First Nation, Diane Roussin is an Anishinaabe leader passionately committed to the pursuit of *mino bimaadiziwin* (the good life) for all families and children. Working tirelessly at the local, regional and national levels to promote Indigenous People's values and ways of knowing, being, doing and feeling, she has led many avant-garde initiatives. Currently heading the Winnipeg Boldness Project, Diane is a driving force in establishing the first and longest-serving Indigenous Social Innovation Lab in Canada that seeks large-scale systems of change for children and families. Diane serves on numerous Boards of Directors including the University of Manitoba, The Winnipeg Foundation, the Winnipeg Art Gallery and Animikii. Diane

is a TEDx speaker and is a recipient of the Governor General's Meritorious Service Medal for Outstanding Indigenous Leadership and of the Manitoba Women Trailblazers Award by the Nellie McClung Foundation.

GERALDINE CAHILL, SOCIAL INNOVATION CANADA

Geraldine Cahill joined Social Innovation Canada (SI Canada) in early 2023 as Director of Engagement. At SI Canada she leads Social Innovation Labs involving multi-stakeholder facilitation, stewardship and project design in areas of complex need. She is also guiding the strategic communication and engagement direction for SI Canada, building on her past experience with Social Innovation Generation (SiG). She is the founding director of UpSocial Canada, inspired and informed by UpSocial Global in Barcelona. Geraldine has also designed a social innovation curriculum for undergraduate university students and non-profit professionals. In 2017, she co-authored Social Innovation Generation: Fostering a Canadian Ecosystem for Systems Change, with SiG colleague, Kelsey Spitz.

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Mark is President of the consulting company From Here to There and an Associate of Tamarack - An Institute for Community Engagement. Mark has first-hand knowledge of using evaluation as a policy maker, philanthropist, and activist, and has played a big role in promoting the merging practice of developmental evaluation in Canada. Back in Canada, Mark was the Coordinator of the Waterloo Region's Opportunities 2000 project (1997-2000), an initiative that won provincial, national and international awards for its multi-sector approach to poverty reduction. He served briefly as the Executive Director of the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) in 2001. From 2002 to 2011, he was Vice President of the Tamarack Institute and the Executive Director of Vibrant Communities Canada.

PAIGE REEVES, ACTION LAB

Paige is the Director of Research and Social Innovation of Action Lab, a social innovation consultancy and social enterprise of Skills Society. Paige consults, designs, facilitates and leads workshops & innovation labs around complex challenges. She brings deep knowledge of participatory research methodologies, and has diverse experiences with facilitating human-centred design approaches. Paige has a unique perspective in being in both the academy and

grounded in community based research for systems change. Her graduate research centers around ways of fostering communities of belonging. Paige has also been mentored by some of the best in the world (Mark Cabaj) in developmental evaluation and applies this in longer term labs she stewards to help collectives ensure learning and outcomes are helpful and relevant for our clients. Paige is passionate about making real systems change happen for people and communities that need it.

PATRICK DUBÉ, TRANSITION BRIDGES PROJECT AND RHIZOME GROUP

Patrick is a passionate advocate for social and environmental innovation, a father of two, a musical explorer, a learning horseback archer, and a lifelong entrepreneur with a rich background in research and technology. Holding a master's degree in anthropology and having pursued Ph.D. studies in complexity science at the University of Montreal/CNRS Strasbourg, he co-founded an A.I. startup (1999-2004) aimed at reducing hospital misdiagnoses. His career has since spanned various roles, leveraging open innovation to support a diverse array of initiatives from 2006 to 2012. Between 2010 and 2016, Patrick served as co-director of research and innovation at the Society for Arts and Technology [SAT], later co-founding a service design studio that has been instrumental in fostering innovation practices within institutions, organizations, and communities. As the executive director of the Social Innovation House in Montreal until 2023, he co-designed and supported various open and social innovation labs, focusing on social justice, community resilience, regenerative practices, and systemic change through regulatory and financial innovation. Since 2023, Patrick has contributed as a costeward of the Transition Bridges project and joined the Rhizome Creative Capital group, furthering his commitment to social and environmental innovation. He also serves on the board of the Quebec Network for Social Innovation, demonstrating his unwavering dedication to advancing the practice.

REBECCA RUBULIAK, ACTION LAB

Rebecca is the Director of Continuous Improvement and Innovation at Skills Society, a large disability rights and services organization, where she co-stewards innovative projects, organizational development, and learning practices to affect change towards supporting equity and inclusion in community. Part of her role

is co-stewarding workshops and social innovation processes out of Action Lab, a social enterprise of Skills Society. Rebecca is motivated by a curiosity about how we cultivate communities where everyone is valued and belongs. Rebecca's graduate research engaged participatory methods to explore alongside children experiencing disability how we might better support inclusion and deeper belonging.

Facilitators and Advisors

ALEEYA VELJI, CANADIAN MORTGAGE HOUSING CORPORATION

Aleeya was a co-steward of the Edmonton Shift Lab, and built a public sector innovation lab within the Ministry of Education in Alberta. Currently, in her role at CMHC she has supported, as a lead designer, several Solutions Labs focusing on finance and housing. Aleeya is also currently supporting an Indigenous Innovation Lab in Post Secondary Institutions originally as the lead designer and now as an Advisor to the design firm Coeuraj. She continues to support lab work through advisory roles in Montreal, and with design and facilitation roles for ongoing lab work with various organizations across Canada.

ALEX RYAN, SYNTHETIKOS

Alex is the co-founder and CEO of Synthetikos Inc. where he is currently consulting as the lead architect and facilitator for the Future of Hockey Lab. As the Senior Vice President of MaRS Partner Solutions Group he led partner solutions, helping government and corporate partners accelerate the adoption of innovation in their organizations, markets and cities. At MaRS Alex oversaw 150 innovation projects, labs, challenges and missions, including scaling MyStart and the Engineering Change Lab from ideation through to national programs impacting thousands of lives. His writing on smart cities, data governance, policy innovation, social innovation, systemic design, and complex systems science has been published by the World Economic Forum, Fast Company, Axios, Stanford Social Innovation Review, and Complexity. Alex is also co-founder of Alberta CoLab, the first provincial government innovation lab in Canada where he led over 100 lab projects across every ministry of government. He is an executive-in-residence at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

DARCY RIDDELL, CONSULTANT, RAD NETWORK (RESTORE, ASSERT, DEFEND)

Darcy has worked in cauldrons of social change for 25 years - on forest campaigns conserving the Great Bear Rainforest, leading strategic learning at McConnell Foundation, training leaders, designing and facilitating multi-sector change initiatives, funding First Nations stewardship at Makeway, advancing environmental policy change, and founding collaborative networks centring sustainability, justice, and systems innovation. She works with RAD Network on Indigenous-led conservation finance and nature-based solutions, and as a consultant. Darcy has a Ph.D. in Social Innovation from UWaterloo focused on leadership and impact in complex multi-scaled systems, and reads tarot cards in service of collective transformation. She sits on the board of Social Innovation Canada and Hollyhock. A fifth generation British Columbian, she lives with her two children in əsəlɪfwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh), Xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), & Skwxwú7meshi (Squamish) territories, where she's a grateful student of nature and wisdom traditions.

KEREN PERLA, ENERGY FUTURES LAB

Keren is President of Perla Inc. and strategic advisor and innovation architect with the Energy Futures Lab leading netzero research initiatives and innovation challenges that bring together government, investors, industry, entrepreneurs, Right and Title Holder and communities to collaborate on energy transitions. Keren's career spans over two decades focused on public sector innovation working in multiple policy domains, from energy development to circular economies to health innovation and everything in between. She is Co-founder of the Alberta CoLab – the first public sector Social Innovation Lab to launch at a provincial level - where she led and oversaw over 150 projects (in Alberta, Canada and with the UNDP) to successfully introduce new strategies and approaches to solve messy challenges through the use of disciplines such as systemic design, foresight, and design facilitation.

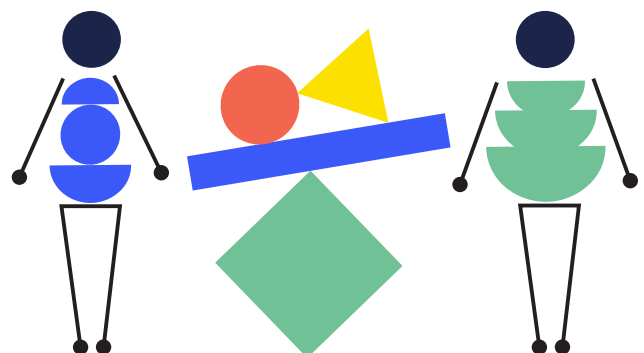
MARLIEKE KIEBOOM, BRITISH COLUMBIA PUBLIC SERVICE

Marlieke is a public sector leader, author, and speaker in social innovation, service design, and systemic strategy across academia, civil society organizations, and government. Her work reflects a deep commitment to developing service and systemic design processes and capabilities across silos and different world views.

Marlieke was at the forefront of the labs movement in Europe in the early 2010's, where she co-convened the first international social labs gathering (Lab of Labs). She developed various lab methodologies, designed and led social labs in collaboration with municipalities, philanthropist and community activists and encouraged critical thinking about labs by writing various publications (ie. Lab Matters, 2014, Lab Craft, 2015). Currently, Marlieke leads a service design chapter in the Ministry of Citizens' Services in the British Columbia Public Service. Her dedication to open, creative, and equitable futures drives her passion for meaningful collaboration.

TIM DRAIMIN, SOCIAL INNOVATION CANADA

Tim Draimin is chair and a founding board member of SIC. He is senior fellow at Community Foundations of Canada (CFC). From 2008-2017, Tim was the Executive Director of Social Innovation Generation (SiG), a partnership founded by McConnell Family Foundation, MaRS, Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN), and the University of Waterloo. SiG focused on strengthening Canada's enabling ecosystem and public policies for deploying social innovation for system change. Tim is a frequent advisor to government, non-profits and business. He is a board member of Trico Foundation and past board member of Social Innovation Exchange (SIX), Centre for Social Innovation (CSI), Green Economy Canada, and Partnership Brokers Association (PBA). He was a member of Grand Challenges Canada's scientific advisory board. Tim convened the Canadian Task Force on Social Finance, which proposed a seven-point agenda for mobilizing private capital for public good.



THE PRIMER

We (Future of Lab Convenors), are calling this document the Future of Labs Primer. The Primer is a synthesis of some Lab history we know of, trends, data from a survey and focus groups with diverse Lab practitioners, a collection of inspiring examples of Lab practice, and some provocations to consider. We also have attempted, in a scrappy way, to trace the essence of some of the lineages of thought, philosophy, and practice underlying Labs, because it appears that many don't know the roots of why Labs emerged and where they came from. This history is important for building impactful future practices and dispelling some common myths.

In writing this Primer, the convening team aimed to consider diverse perspectives on Labs and their approaches. We are passionate and deeply interested in the subject matter- the good and the bad of Labs. Our hope as convenors is that this Primer be viewed as a **decently robust and yet scrappy, practitioner-oriented look into where Labs are at present, in a mostly Canadian context** - recognizing it has limitations and that others might hold different perspectives.

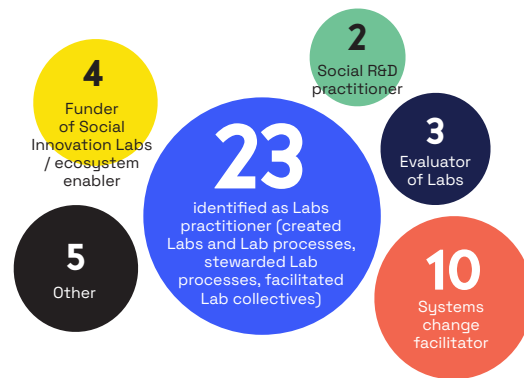
This Primer will serve as grounding knowledge and context for when the Future of Labs gathering takes place in May 2024. We also hope this Primer will support wider knowledge sharing and better coherence around what Labs are, when they might be helpful, and what principles of good Lab practices look like in action. At Future of Labs we want every participant to have this Primer with them as a provocation, and also a source of shared knowledge we can start to collectively build from. While we strove to incorporate multiple and diverse perspectives, we recognize that lots of perspectives, histories, and stories might be missing from this document - we look forward to hearing where you might see gaps and learning more from each of you at the gathering!

Future of Labs Pre-Gathering Engagement

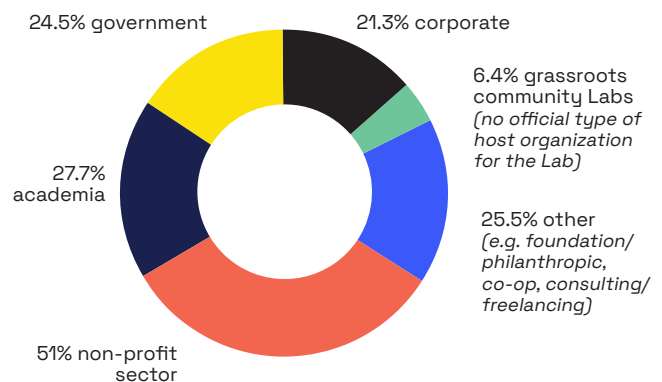
To help inform the Future of Labs design, Primer, and learning reports, we invited Labs practitioners from the field to complete a short survey and conducted focus group interviews with **6** Labs trailblazers and leaders with diverse experiences.

47 people completed the survey.

Of the people that participated:



Respondents identified the sector(s) their Labs are housed within:



21 respondents have been working in this 'role/space' for **10+ years**; **22** for **5-10 years**; **4** for **0-5 years**.

THE FUTURE OF LABS ORIGIN STORY

The seeds for Future of Labs came from a community-based non-profit Lab in western Canada called Action Lab. For the last 15 years Action Lab has led community think tanks and Labs around complex social challenges related to intellectual disability inclusion, behaviour change science in anti-racism interventions, and humanizing social service case management systems.

Like how most system change efforts begin, the idea for Future of Labs began when leaders at Action Lab noticed a signal emerging in the Lab space. Questions were bubbling up as to whether Lab practices were a thing of the past or an approach worth evolving. The Action Lab leaders started to talk amongst themselves and then reached out to see if other colleagues were seeing the same signal. Overwhelmingly, experienced colleagues in public, private, and community Lab spaces were noticing the same signals, and that sparked a desire to come together to explore and make some offerings to the field. A diverse and experienced Canadian convener team then came together to steward Future of Labs.

We recognize the Future of Labs is one type of Lab practitioner gathering and there are other important gatherings and research explorations happening in tandem that focus on nuanced aspects of Lab and systems change practice. Our unique offering is to gather a diverse cross-section of experienced Lab leaders and tap into honest and generative wisdom around what could be better. We hope this will complement the work of emerging leaders and support greater coherence on the roots of Lab ideas, philosophies, and practices.

So Why Now?

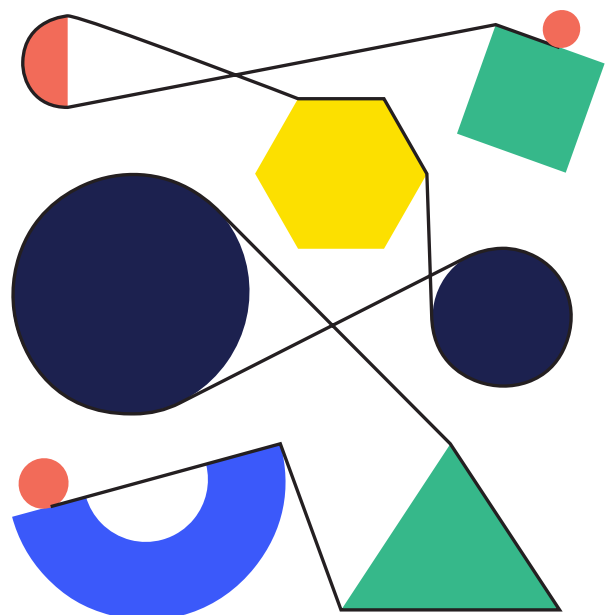
All sectors are under immense stress - more leaders are recognizing the significant challenges society is facing due to transition, polarisation, and the current trend of a snapback to solutionism in tackling complex challenges. This approach of oversimplified solutionism leads to short-sighted, quick fixes that overshadow the need for real systemic change.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, Social Innovation Labs, Innovation Labs, Impact Labs, Social Labs, and Living Labs were launched by many trailblazing change-makers in the Canadian landscape. These included federal and provincial-led Labs, as well as many

community-based social Labs. In discussions with Lab practitioners across Canada, we are finding that **many mature Labs and Lab practitioners are finding themselves in a period of reflection**. While Lab approaches have shown promise in some ways for helping collectives to tackle tough challenges, there are gaps and inconsistencies in methods, practices, and impact.

Lastly, we also noticed a signal that funders, enablers, and supporters of Labs and Lab-like processes need better sense-making tools and evaluation of criteria to assess Lab proposals and their potential impact.

In light of these signals, the conveners of the Future of Labs identified five key conversations we felt were important for the Lab field to have and (try to) converge on to help inform and build a next generation of more effective Labs practice. These serve as an entry point to learn from Lab practitioners through Future of Labs - **the purpose not being to reach consensus, but rather to establish coherence**.



FIVE CONVERSATIONS FOR THE NEXT-GENERATION OF LABS PRACTICE

The Future of Labs - Primer, gathering, and outputs - is loosely organised around these five core streams of inquiry:

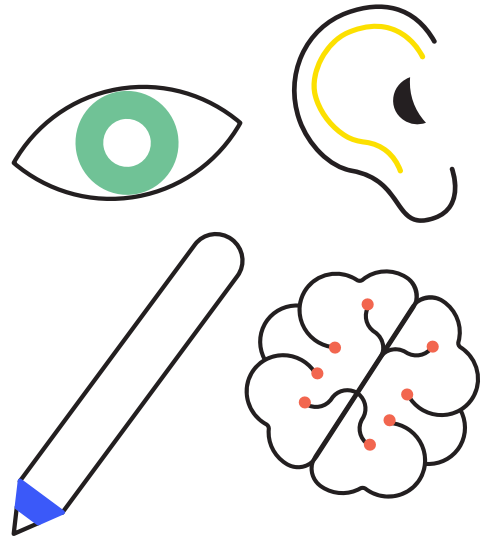
| CONVERSATION | Why it matters |
|--|--|
| <p>1: DEFINING LABS</p> <p>What do we mean by Social Innovation Labs?</p> | <p>Social Innovation Labs can't be everything and there can't be 'one version'. What is our working definition of Labs? What are the core attributes? What are Lab types and contexts? The purpose of converging on a working definition of Social Innovation Labs is not to establish a rigid, set standard but rather to try and understand the unique and shared attributes of this specific approach to change making, inclusive of its many variations.</p> |
| <p>2: EXPLORING OUR 'NICHE', SITUATING LABS AMONGST OTHER CHANGE APPROACHES</p> <p>What are Labs' unique contributions to social change?</p> | <p>Social change, innovation, and transformation require multiple types of change strategies, such as advocacy and activism, community organising, and social entrepreneurship, to name a few. With a variety of social change approaches, each with its own unique strengths, limitations, and contributions, we think it can be helpful to explore the 'niche' for Labs amongst them. How do Labs distinguish themselves from other social change approaches? Under what conditions is a Lab approach appropriate and when might other social change approaches be better?</p> |
| <p>3: WHAT'S REASONABLE TO EXPECT FROM LABS?</p> <p>What's reasonable to expect about the scale, pace, and durability of Lab results?</p> | <p>When asking what is reasonable to expect from Labs, the reality is, we really don't know. Unsurprisingly, our expectations often surpass the reality of what it truly takes to make progress on complex challenges. Let's see if we can do this better so as to better manage expectations by everyone involved and design better Labs.</p> |
| <p>4: HELPFUL LAB PRACTICES</p> <p>What are the capabilities, mindsets, methods, and skills needed to design, manage, and evaluate high quality Social Innovation Labs?</p> | <p>As we look to collectively vision and offer possible next practices for the field, we feel it's important to reflect on and name the practices and processes that support meaningful and impactful Labs. What capabilities are 'core' to Labs, what are important and relational, and what are deeply situational/context specific? What do Labs and Lab practitioners need to get substantially better at in the next 5-10 years?</p> |
| <p>5: WHAT ARE THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS AND SUPPORTING ECOSYSTEM FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS TO THRIVE IN CANADA?</p> <p>What kind of ecosystem do we need to ensure that the Lab movement – and individual Labs – thrive?</p> | <p>As practitioners we understand that Labs have a place in a larger ecosystem of systems change. How might we articulate a pathway to better resource and deepen the Lab field; and identify synergies and pathways through policy, finance, culture, supports, markets and skills development, to how our collective efforts can contribute to positive system change? Where are we now with this type of ecosystem? What are the things we need to do next?</p> |

AN INVITATION

Before you dive into the Primer...

Reflect back to when you first were intrigued by Labs. What about Labs seemed promising or excited you? What is an intention you want to bring with you to help make collective problem solving better into the future?

Write your responses here:

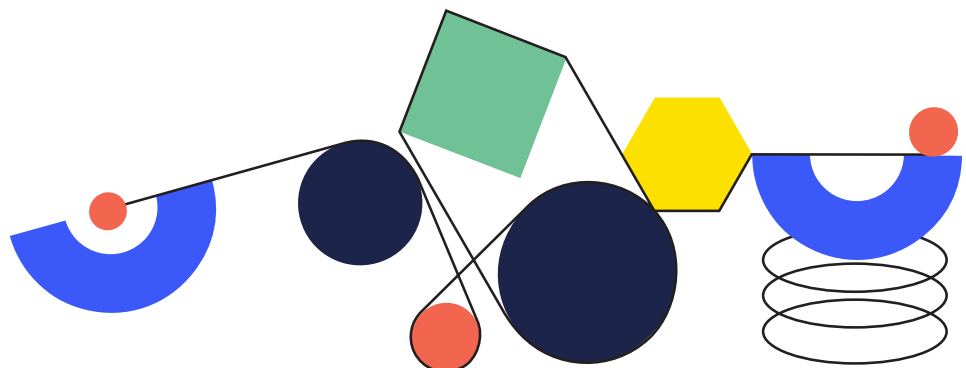


ORIENTING OURSELVES: A SCRAPPY EXPLORATION OF HISTORIES AND THOUGHT LINEAGES SHAPING LABS TODAY

“If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe” - Carl Sagan

Where did Labs come from? How about we start with... oof... it's a lot to attempt to trace all the intersecting origins of Labs and the story that unfolds of course depends on perspective - who's telling the story and what lenses they are looking through. So here's your reminder that this is not meant to be a PhD thesis, but instead a decently coherent, practitioner-oriented synthesis. We hope you'll be generous with us as we strive to scrappily trace some histories and thought lineages that have shaped the field of Labs. We'll also share a framework for understanding the types of challenges we come up against as humans. Lastly, we'll rewind to the early 2000's, with the '*emergence*' of the formal Lab to trace some of the movements, events, and inflection points that have led us to today, as a way of signalling the possibilities of where we might collectively go. A key motivation in wanting to write this section in particular was to help dispel some myths about Labs that seem to continue to appear, particularly in the last decade.

Let's dive in.



IS TIME LINEAR? ARE HISTORIES LINEAR? NO ONE CAN LIKELY PINPOINT EXACT ORIGINS. AND WHOSE HISTORY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT AND ACCORDING TO WHOM?

It may seem like the history of Labs began around 25 years ago when Social Innovation Labs started to get talked about more within Canada. But there are even older intersecting stories, ideas, theories, and worldviews that underlie Labs. It's likely no one can pinpoint exact origins of Labs. We can, however, trace several different thought lineages that have shaped Lab practice (see a further exploration of this in Conversation 4). The diverse representations of Labs we see in Canada and around the world illuminate the many unique ways different schools of thought have influenced Lab practices.

History is slippery. How it is told and retold depends on the lenses you are looking through. For example, Labs anchored in a human centred design approach can be perceived as having origins in business innovation. You could argue that these design thinking business innovation origins have tandem histories with even older Osborn Parnes Creative Problem Solving processes that emerged from Buffalo State University in the 1960s/70s, and the collaborative, cross-disciplinary design seminar that would eventually become the Helsinki Design Lab, pioneered by a group of designers, with the support of Sitra (Finland) in the late 1960s¹. Bruce Mau and Tim Brown (IDEO) would later popularise a similar process as Design Thinking in the early 2000s².

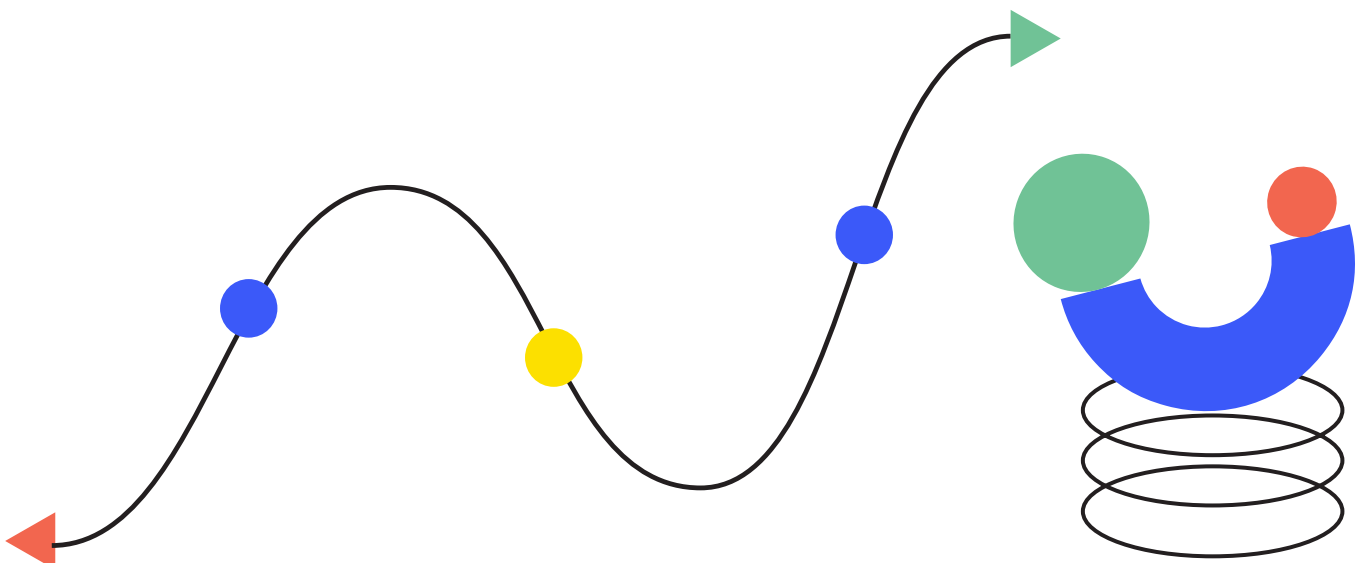
Told another way, Labs could be perceived as anchored in Western, or some may argue, colonial values.

Another interpretation might perceive Labs as rooted in humanism, design, and post-positivism. In the mid-20th century, the Tavistock Institute (UK) and the National Training Labs (USA) were parallelly exploring the field of behavioural psychology. The two groups had a series of exchanges, combining and evolving their work in behaviour psychology with open systems thinking (socio-technical systems thinking). The combination of open systems theory with behavioural psychology formed a new theory of change that began to look at whole systems, both how we should act as agents of change and how change impacts whole systems. This resulted in The Future Search, “a principle-based planning meeting that helps people transform their capability for action very quickly,” and closely resembles Labs in their contemporary iteration.³

And yet another view is that Labs could be recognized as also rooted in participatory action research - exploring ways to re-balance power dynamics that centre lived experience perspectives when solution finding around a tough challenge.

All of these histories are true at the same time and depend on perspectives.

As the above examples illustrate, interpreting history is a matter of perspective and we urge everyone participating in Future of Labs to be mindful of this and reflective of the lenses being drawn upon.



¹ Torjman, L., Labs: Designing the Future, 2012

² Westley, F., Goebly, S., and Robinson, K., Change Lab/Design Lab for Social Innovation, 2012

³ Westley, Goebly, and Robinson, Change Lab/Design Lab for Social Innovation, 2012

⁴ Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind is a great read on the history of humans if you're interested in a deeper dive on this topic

So, like how far back should we go?

Humans Need Each Other for Solving Tough Things

If Labs have roots, in some ways, to humans having to work collectively to solve a complex problem, it may be valuable to reflect on a few ways humans have historically tackled challenges collectively. While we won't rewrite Yuval Harari's *Sapiens*⁴, a bit of consideration of these origins of human problem-solving in groups, may spark ideas for Future of Labs 'next practices'. Rather than recount all of human problem-solving history, we share some provocations related to how the origins of Labs are connected with the human need to work together to solve tough shared problems. Reflecting on these provocations might spark reflections on the origins, ideas, lineages, epistemologies, and worldviews that humans have experimented with to solve challenges in collectives. By following some of the threads, you may find some meaningful connections and stories between diverse traditions of human problem-solving.

Provocations for Further Reflection

- When did humans start working together as collectives to solve problems we couldn't solve as individuals or as individual communities?
- What did it look like when humans first came together to work on problems that may not have concerned only one group's personal interests, but concerned solving problems that mattered for many people and communities that had different values, ideas, beliefs and needed to work together in harmony in some way for a collective good?

→ What has decision making in collective human problem solving looked like throughout history and diverse cultures? Were there hierarchies of people who decided on strategies and pathways? Who and what determined who had power in decision making in early human problem solving? What worked and might not have worked and for whom?

→ How did people and groups that disagreed find common ground or solutions they could both agree on?

→ Were solutions typically found to a problem that worked for everyone and every system?

→ What human civilizations or communities have created systems that are truly balanced with no unintended negative consequences for any actor, environment or being in a system? How was harm and win/lose situations in problem solving navigated?

→ When humans started to move beyond local contexts into global interdependent relationships, where might it have been good? Where and how was it harmful? What agreements got created to help diverse people and nations to have autonomy but shared aims and goals?

→ What was the role of creativity, imagination and emergence within the ways humans solved problems together?

These are complex questions and we won't try to answer them here. Reflecting on these and other questions that emerge for you, it might remind us all that these messy things called Labs have roots in humans recognizing that big challenges most often can't be solved alone in pretend isolation. We need each other. And we often need practices, agreed upon principles, diverse perspectives, old and new ideas mixing, leadership, a spirit of goodwill and being in good relationships to navigate messily through tough interdependent challenges.

TYOLOGY OF PROBLEMS HUMANS TEND TO TACKLE

In the Canadian social innovation and Labs ecosystem, two frameworks for helping describe key differences between types of problems humans tackle have been referenced extensively over the last 15-ish years. These are the Cynefin Framework and the Simple, Complicated, Complex model Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Patton popularized through their book *Getting to Maybe*⁵. Frameworks are approximations and need to be taken with a grain of salt, however they have been helpful in the Canadian context for increasing coherence around what types of approaches are required for particular problem types. For example with simple and complicated problems, we likely don't need a Lab approach. But with complex and possibly chaotic problems, a Lab approach may be helpful due to Labs often helping diverse stakeholders to recognize that many see a complex problem in different ways.

The Power of Story in Navigating Chaos

Interestingly, one of our most ancient human inventions, storytelling, is often a promising approach for working with chaotic challenges. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic first began, experts from around the world got together online or over the phone and shared stories 'from the ground' - what they were noticing including patterns, symptoms, and behaviours of people and systems. Eventually stories turn into hypotheses, theories, and possible solutions that need rigorous testing and peer review. This process of moving from stories to solutions can help ensure personal stories are not improperly generalised to larger systems.

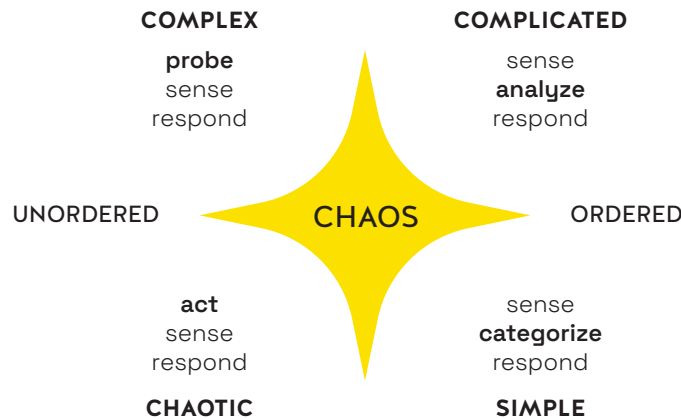






Figure 1. The Cynefin Framework⁶

⁵ Westley, F., Zimmerman, B., Patton, M., *Getting to Maybe*, (Vintage Canada, 2007)

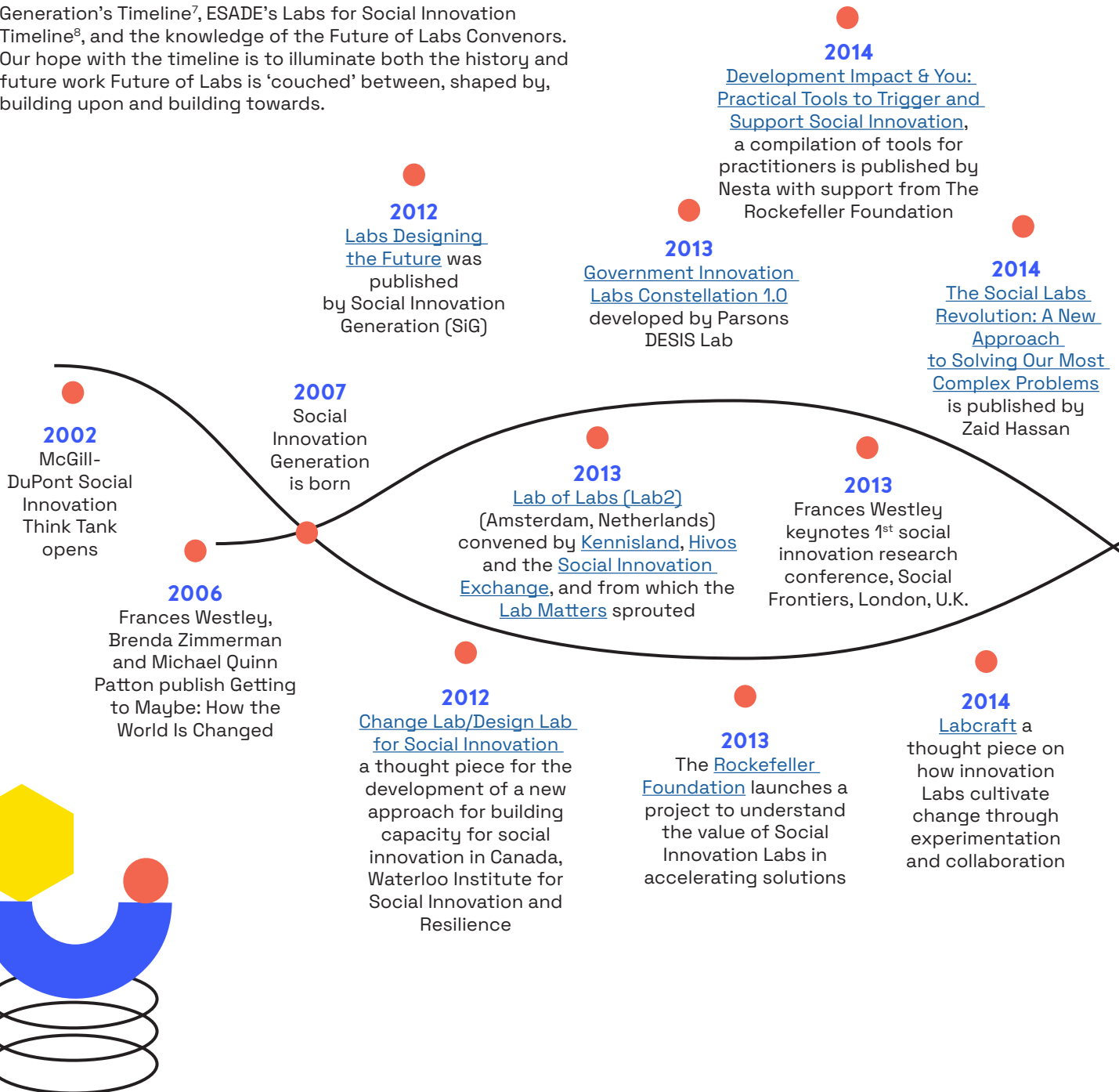
⁶ Snowden & Boone (2007) A Leader's Framework for Decision Making, Harvard Business Review

Table 1. Typology of problems for innovation adapted from Westley, Zimmerman & Patton (2006) and Dave Snowden's Cynefin Framework

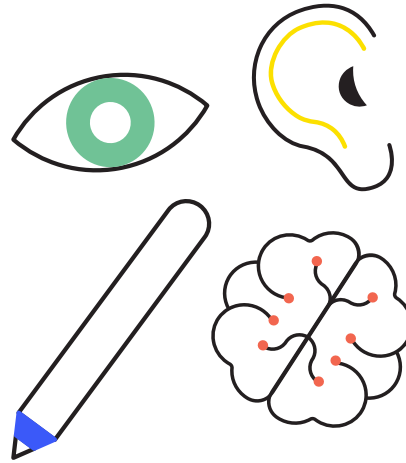
| SIMPLE | COMPLICATED | COMPLEX | CHAOTIC |
|---|---|---|--|
|  <p data-bbox="243 1024 354 1045">Baking a cake</p> |  <p data-bbox="552 1024 727 1066">Getting a rocket to the moon</p> |  <p data-bbox="915 1024 1045 1045">Raising a child</p> |  <p data-bbox="1256 1024 1403 1045">Natural disaster</p> |
| <p data-bbox="233 1134 363 1213">Sense Categorize Respond</p> <p data-bbox="168 1255 422 1310">Cause and effect are clear and predictable</p> <p data-bbox="191 1344 399 1365">Use best practice</p> | <p data-bbox="568 1134 678 1213">Sense Analyze Respond</p> <p data-bbox="500 1255 747 1339">Cause and effect are knowable, but often requires expertise</p> <p data-bbox="516 1373 730 1394">Use good practice</p> | <p data-bbox="922 1134 1032 1213">Probe Sense Respond</p> <p data-bbox="863 1255 1084 1339">Cause and effect can only be known retroactively</p> <p data-bbox="889 1373 1058 1428">Use emergent practice</p> | <p data-bbox="1282 1134 1393 1213">Act Sense Respond</p> <p data-bbox="1234 1255 1442 1339">Cause and effect are not clear/unpredictable</p> <p data-bbox="1224 1373 1451 1394">Use novel practice</p> <p data-bbox="1256 1428 1419 1449">Stories guide</p> |

TIMELINE OF LAB MOVEMENTS, INFLECTION POINTS, AND EVENTS

Below is a timeline of Lab movements, inflection points, and events. To create it we drew from Social Innovation Generation's Timeline⁷, ESADE's Labs for Social Innovation Timeline⁸, and the knowledge of the Future of Labs Convenors. Our hope with the timeline is to illuminate both the history and future work Future of Labs is 'couched' between, shaped by, building upon and building towards.



⁷ "Timeline", Social Innovation Generation, <https://sicanada.org/the-sig-story/>
⁸ Papageorgiou, k., "Timeline" in Labs for Social Innovation, 2017, p. 8-12, <https://itemsweb.esade.edu/research/Labs-Social-Innovation-ESADE.pdf>



2015
[Social Innovation Lab Guide](#) published by Westley and Laban and funded by McConnell Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation

2014
[SIX](#)
 (Vancouver, Canada) convened by Social Innovation Exchange, Social Innovation Generation, and BC Partners for Social Impact

2016
[Lab Connections](#)
 (Brussels, Belgium) convened by EU Policy Lab

2018
[CONVERGE: Canadian Lab Practitioners Exchange](#)
 (Vancouver, Canada) convened by Radius

2023
[SIX Global Social Lab Landscape Report](#)
 (Hong Kong, China)

2014
[Labs for Systems Change](#) (Toronto, Canada) convened by MaRS Solutions Labs and Social Innovation Generation

2015
[Lab Works](#) (London, UK) convened by Nesta

2016
[Open Living Lab Days](#) in Montreal

2024
[Future of Labs](#) (Cortes Island, Canada) convened by Action Lab and Social Innovation Canada

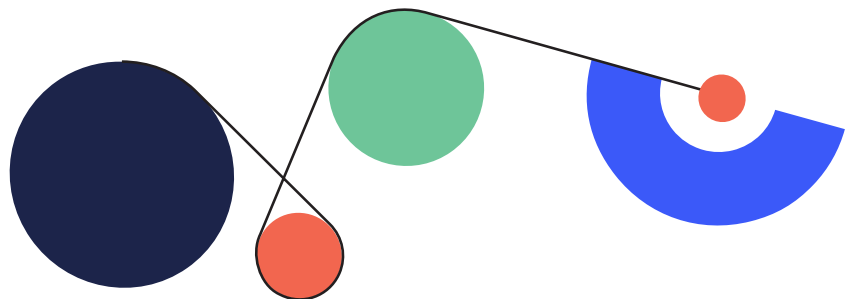
2014
[Lab Matters: Challenging the Practice of Social Innovation Laboratories](#) is published by Marlieke Kieboom

2015
 Al Etmanski publishes his book [Impact: Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation](#)

2017
[Labs for Social Innovation](#) by ESADE Institute for Social Innovation and the Robert Bosch Stiftung

2022
[CaNeoLabs](#) in riviere du loup (Quebec)

2023
[Enoll-Living Lab](#) training in Montreal



CONVERSATION 1: DEFINING LABS

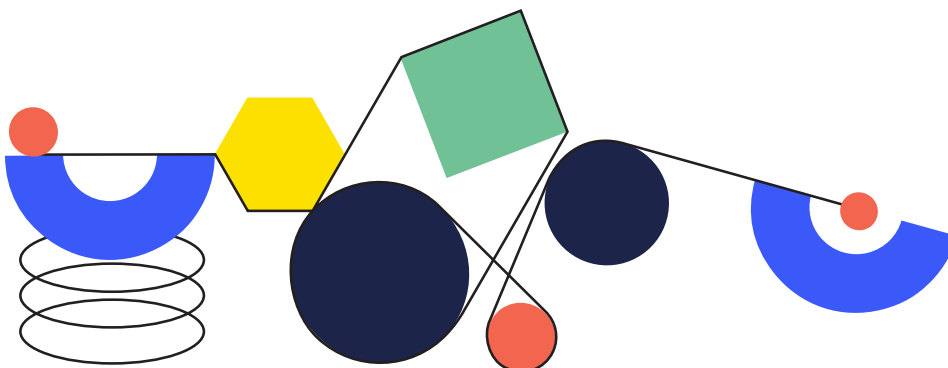
So what the heck is a Lab?

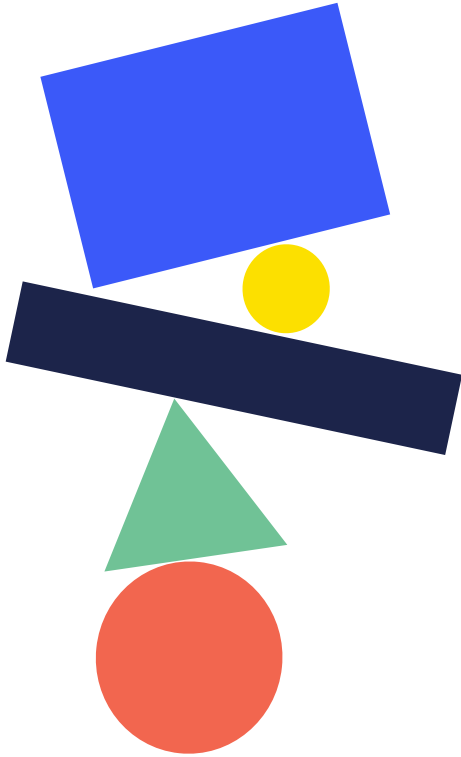
Defining a Lab is actually one of the more tricky and controversial things to explore in the social innovation and systems change space. Why? Because there are so many Lab-like initiatives in the world.

Over the last 15 years in Canada, we have called these initiatives Social Innovation Labs, innovations Labs, Systemic Design Labs, Impact Labs, Social Labs, Living Labs, Systems Innovation Labs, Social Good Incubators and likely many more names. Many social innovation practitioners tend to call a collective problem solving process a Lab whether it is a one day exploration with Lab-like processes, or a week long intensive sprint, or multi year systems Lab tackling wicked entangled challenges. Some Labs might ground their processes in deep Indigenous world views and practices, and some may rely exclusively on linear business or human-centered design practices. Some Labs are weaving or blending many world views and practices to help a collective uncover possibilities, prototypes or interventions that aim at systemic solutions to complex wicked problems.

Why do we need to define “Labs”?

The purpose of converging on a working definition of Social Innovation Labs is not to establish a rigid, set standard but rather to try and understand the unique and shared attributes of this specific approach to change making, inclusive of its many variations (e.g., human-centred design, systemic design, among others). By doing so, our intention is to (1) enhance our Lab practice, and (2) get clearer on what we can reasonably expect from Labs - what they can and cannot do, and in what contexts. We acknowledge the inherent complexity and challenges of this task (i.e. ‘definition’). The alternative however - a lack of direction, where people can choose to do things however they please - does not help practitioners trying to enhance their work. Additionally, it makes it harder to engage others in the change making process as it appears disorganised, inaccessible, and too complex.





TENSIONS IN DEFINING “LABS”

When getting into defining something complex, there is discernment needed to try to sort patterns and create a coherent picture that distinguishes one thing from another. That discernment and making choices around definition can often feel exclusionary - especially in an experimental space like Labs where early definitions were very broad and emergent. In many ways, when Labs started it was like deciding to paint a picture, but not really being sure what one was painting. It was experimental and generative. Practitioners followed some patterns and signals and then after a while the painters stepped back and said, “*oh I painted such and such because of such and such*”. There are now some experienced Lab practitioners who know what they painted so to speak, can see many patterns, where ideas came from and what the next paintings could look like. There are also new Lab practitioners who are just beginning to paint. Often these new Lab artists are using the palette of the first Lab painters and bringing their own colors and maybe can't at present totally articulate what they're making, but they know it will be important. So, there is a tension to be inclusive in a definition while at the same time trying to be more coherent and discerning. Why? Well, if we can't point to some common principles and patterns of what makes

a Lab, then anything could be a Lab and this leads to confusion, incoherence and the danger that poor quality Lab practices get conflated with any style of Lab practice - some of which is still promising. So, we attempted to land on a working definition of Labs that focuses on principles instead of rules and leaves open some flexibility while striving to be more coherent.

In the definition we needed a sweet spot that was not too broad or too narrow. In the definition we offer principles or common attributes in most Labs up to today - the signature of how they are represented will be diverse. Many will also be working on diverse content or challenge areas. Part of having a roughly-right definition is also so that the field can be more coherent to those looking for ways of tackling and navigating complex challenges.

We invite you to consider that while a decent definition should feel okay for stewards of Labs, maybe more importantly, it should help funders, communities, and systems leaders to see more clearly the potential value, unique niche and purpose of Labs.

WORKING DEFINITION AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR FUTURE OF LABS

One consideration for this gathering is that we aren't including Labs that are predominantly social good incubators or accelerators (e.g. [Maison de l'innovation sociale](#), [Access to Success Labs](#), [Circular Opportunity Innovation Launchpad](#)). While these organisations have a close affinity to the Social Lab movement, their programs focus on pre-existing pilots or interventions that each need to scale individually. We are also inspired by, but excluding from this review, academic Labs with a predominantly research or educational focus rather than focused on the complex challenge itself (e.g.

[Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience](#), [sLab](#), [RADIUS](#), [Innovation North](#), [Centre for Policy Innovation and Public Engagement](#)).

Future of Labs focuses on processes of convening and collaborative problem solving, deep sense making of root causes, ideation, testing of portfolios of ideas, and impact evaluation. The table below differentiates Social Innovation Labs from these and other related approaches.

| | Complex Challenge Centred | Multi-Disciplinary Teams | Cross-Sector Partners | Multistakeholder Participants | Lab Approach | Lab Tools | Lab Space |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Social Innovation Lab | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Living Lab | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Academic Lab | | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Incubator / Accelerator | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| Product / Service Design Team | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Behavioural Insights Team | ✓ | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Innovation Challenges | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Mission-Oriented Innovation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Social Justice Movements | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

Table 2. Comparison of Social Innovation Labs and related approaches against the key features of Labs.

Initial Offering of a Working Definition for Future of Labs

Words highlighted in red are changes based on the feedback received from the Future of Labs survey (see Feedback on Working Definition) and convening group.

Social Innovation Labs hold space for diverse change-makers to sense-make, generate, develop and test a portfolio of promising solutions to address complex societal challenges in a way that is collaborative, experimental, iterative, and systemic.

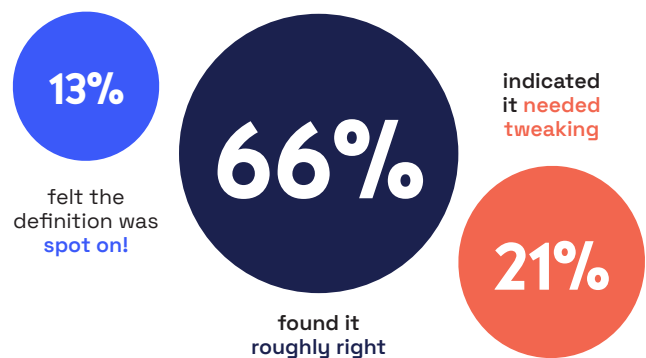
Minimum core principles of Social Innovation Labs:

- Focused on complex societal challenges
- Learns from diverse perspectives from across a system, including those with lived experience
- Explores collaborative ways of working on a shared complex challenge
- Systemic in thinking and action
- Experimental in iteratively developing and testing possible solutions, ideally in real life and at a minimum in realistic settings
- Aim at exploring root causes of complex challenges and then generating possible solutions and pathways from leverage points

9

Feedback on Working Definition

Out of the respondents who provided feedback on the above working definition of Labs:

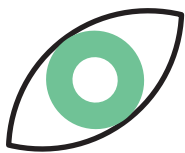
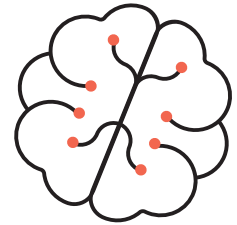


Overall, the majority of respondents felt the working definition and guiding principles were accurate or approximately accurate. Proposed additions or revisions included:

- Being explicit that diverse perspectives includes centering lived and living experience throughout the process
- Including principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, justice and reconciliation
- Adding a piece around setting boundaries. Effective Labs have clear boundaries that can explicate what's in and what's out as a best first guess
- Nuance in the definition that allows for diverse types, expressions, and contexts of Labs
- Adding a piece around implementing solutions

⁹ Cabaj, Mark. "Defining Social Innovation Labs: Somewhere Between a Butterfly and a Blueprint." Here to There Consulting. November 10, 2023. <https://here2there.ca/blog/>; Radius SFU. "Learnings from CONVERGE: Canadian Lab Practitioners Exchange." September 2018. <https://radiusfu.com/converge2018/>

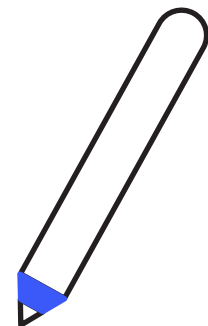
“I’m not sure that Labs are actually “aiming” at generating solutions. I know they usually generate prototypes/concepts, but more often than not these seem more like exploratory system probes than solutions. The aim seems to be more about enabling/cultivating novel networks and design/prototyping is a powerful tool to do that, but the “solutionism” embedded in the last point over-promises and under-delivers on what Labs can actually do in a complex system while under-promises and over-delivers on what the Lab is actually good at. Additionally, the framing in the first point about ‘complex societal challenges’ implies that these processes only work at a large (societal) scale. I wonder if this might limit our creativity in thinking about Lab processes as being useful in smaller-scale, fast-fail complex environments. ‘Complex challenges’ without the societal piece would work a bit better for me.” Survey Respondent



“there isn’t a single “root cause”, that even where I identify the predominant “root causes”, very often targeting those directly without tinkering around with the connective tissue around them, caused more harm than good... over time, then, my goal with Labs became less about trying to “address root causes” and more about building deep relationships, decolonizing our frames of reference when it comes to sensing and understanding the problem, and finding ways to give power back to community ... over time, it helped me see the connective tissue shift, and the root causes transform and perhaps that’s something we need to reconsider in the definition you’ve presented.”

Survey Respondent

“The criteria are a good start but hard to distinguish how Labs are different from other multi-stakeholder change-making efforts. Perhaps a different way of looking at what makes Labs distinct is in terms of Labs have a lifecycle (e.g., innovation swirl), they have emblematic architecture, and they have different types of outcomes that they can deliver better than most.” Survey Respondent



SO IF THIS IS THE 'DEFINITION' OF LABS... WHAT ARE THE LAB TYPES AND CONTEXTS?

Are there different types of Labs that fit under the general definition?

Due to the diffuse origins of Labs, diverse backgrounds of Lab founders, and variety of complex challenges they apply to, there is not one single model that all Social Innovation Labs follow. One way to make sense of the variety of Labs is to consider the type of challenge they are designed to address (technical, social or systemic), and where they are situated (government, mediator or community).

Technical challenges involve deep subject matter expertise, and often require product innovation. Social challenges involve lived experience of underserved communities, and often require service innovation. Systemic challenges involve cross-sector multi-stakeholder engagement, and often require policy and system change. In practice, Labs may span these categories to address entangled technical, social and systemic challenges.

Labs can be situated inside government to improve citizen engagement, cross-department innovation and experimentation. Labs can be stewarded by mediator organisations, including universities, not for profits, and consultancies as knowledgeable, neutral third parties. They can also be situated within communities in grassroots not for profits, co-ops and social enterprises to amplify and organise community solutions. In practice, government and community Labs often make use of third-party mediators to augment their Lab team.



Technical Challenge Labs

This type of Lab context focuses on solving a complex socio-technical challenge. This requires weaving deep expertise of a scientific, technical or financial nature with the social dimensions of the challenge.

For example: [Montréal in Common](#) is a community of 36 project owners and partners working together with the city of Montreal to develop, test and deploy solutions to mobility and food issues, using the city as a laboratory. Their portfolio of 13 experimental projects are contributing to the ecological transition and promote social inclusion through the use of data. In 2019, they [won](#) the \$50m Infrastructure Canada smart cities challenge to deploy data-driven technologies to reduce automobile usage, while also using innovative governance and citizen engagement models to ensure responsible and trusted data sharing.

Technical challenge Labs require a convening team that understands both the technical content of the domain as well as the methods of human-centred design and multi-stakeholder facilitation. A key requirement is the capacity to weave together the contributions of technical subject matter experts with the lived experience of users and citizens. Technical Challenge Labs are well suited to the intersection of technology and society in areas such as smart cities, cleantech, fintech, and healthtech.

Examples include:

→ [Laboratoire d'innovation urbaine de Montreal](https://montreal.ca/unites/laboratoire-de-linnovation-urbaine-de-montreal)
montreal.ca/unites/laboratoire-de-linnovation-urbaine-de-montreal

→ [DUCA Impact Lab](https://ducaimpactlab.com/escalator/)
ducaimpactlab.com/escalator/

→ [Social Innovation Canada's Financialization and Housing Lab](https://sicanada.org/program/financialization-and-housing/)
sicanada.org/program/financialization-and-housing/

| | Technical | Social | Systemic |
|------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Government | Technical Challenge Lab | Service Design Lab | Policy Lab |
| Mediator | | Lab as a Service | Systems Change Lab |
| Community | Place-Based Lab | | |

Figure 2. Types of Social Innovation Labs based on the type of challenge they are designed to address and where they are situated.



Service Design Labs

This type of Lab context involves re-imagining the services of governments, business, or non-profits. Service Design Labs focus on improving the end-to-end customer or citizen experience (CX), and convene stakeholders from across the customer journey.

For example: UHN OpenLab is a design and innovation shop dedicated to finding creative solutions that transform the way health care is delivered and experienced. OpenLab has used service design to [redesign discharge](#) for spinal cord injury patients during the transition from hospital to home. Another example, the OpenLab publication [From Patients Who Know: A Hospital Handbook](#) is a “travel guide” for hospitals written from the perspective of over 25 Canadian seniors with hospital stay experience. The guide exemplifies what truly patient-centred care looks like.

Service Design Labs require a convening team with experience applying service design in complex environments where many stakeholders touch the user experience; and where services need to be designed as human rights accessible to all, not just those segments who can afford them. Service Design Labs may go beyond existing services to designing completely new services for systems that don't yet exist. This draws on experiential futures, speculative design and worldbuilding techniques. A key challenge and imperative for Service Design Labs is developing valid and objective metrics for subjective and personal customer experiences. In some governments (ie BC public service) and public sector organisations service design as a practice has become accepted and embedded in decentralised innovations teams and as such moved out of the more experimental (centralised) Lab spaces.

In Canada, Service Design Labs have found most traction in the health sector, although they have applicability to all complex services.

Examples include:

→ CityStudio Vancouver
citystudiovancouver.com/

→ UHN OpenLab
www.uhn.ca/corporate/AboutUHN/General_Services/OpenLab

→ AHS Design Lab
www.albertahealthservices.ca/about/Page13721.aspx

→ Emily Carr Health Design Lab
research.ecuad.ca/healthdesignlab/

→ IRCC Pier SIX
dl.designresearchsociety.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1068&context=learnxdesign

→ City of Austin Office of Design and Deliver
www.ereodd.com/

→ Pulse Data Labs, Indonesia
pulselabjakarta.org/

→ The Care Lab, Spain
www.thecarelab.org/

→ Service Design Lab, Singapore
www.servicedesignlab.net/



Policy Labs

This type of Lab context is housed within (or on the edge of) a particular order of government (or intergovernmental organisation) and focuses on innovating the policy development process, through citizen-centred multi-stakeholder engagements, systems thinking, design, strategic foresight, ethnography, behavioural insights and Indigenous epistemologies.

For example: The ESDC Innovation Lab (Employment and Social Development Canada) was established in 2015 with the launch of a dedicated collaboration space and a team of designers and behavioural scientists. Their full-design projects are year-long and focus on a departmental priority, such as increasing uptake of the Canada Learning Bond among low income families. They work with the client Branch to frame the problem and design the approach. They meet with Canadians across the country to build empathy and understanding, then co-design solutions and nudges to shift behaviours and systems towards the desired future state. Their approach is based on deep and rigorous research, and because they work from within government they have access to policy levers to affect systems change.

Policy Labs require a convening team that understands both innovation methodologies and the mechanics of government and the policymaking process. They co-design new policies, strategies, regulations, bylaws, grants and contributions. Policies have wide-reaching direct and indirect effects, so citizen and stakeholder engagement is critical in Policy Labs. Policy Labs can be focused on a singular complex challenge – such as a major transition in public policy – but often act as in-house centres of expertise that consult with internal government clients leading a variety of transformation and innovation initiatives.

Examples include:

- ESDC Innovation Lab
t.co/LVL37bTWd2
- NS GovLab
novascotia.ca/govlab/
- UNDP Accelerator Labs
www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs
- Policy Lab UK
openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/
- Boston Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, US
www.boston.gov/departments/new-urban-mechanics
- Mindlab Denmark (the original policy innovation lab)
apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/how-denmark-lost-its-mindlab-the-inside-story



Systems Change Labs

This type of Lab context convenes stakeholders from across sectors and across systems to address a complex and systemic challenge at the roots. As the most ambitious type of Lab, it aspires to enduring systems change on a challenge that appears stuck and entangled with other challenges. Systems Change Labs involve multi-year commitment, deep systems sensing, whole system engagement, a dynamic prototype portfolio, and sophisticated scaling pathways.

For example: The Energy Futures Lab was launched in 2015 by The Natural Step with initial support from Suncor Energy Foundation, Pembina Institute and the Government of Alberta, along with a growing list of

funding and convening partners. For over nine years, the Lab has convened its Fellows, representing dozens of diverse perspectives from across the energy system, to accelerate the transition to the energy system the future requires of us. The Energy Futures Lab combines social innovation practices, diverse perspectives, backcasting, systems thinking, and experimentation to incubate, accelerate and spin out energy innovation initiatives aligned with five key innovation challenges identified by the Lab.

In facing the wicked complexity in these types of Labs, leaders can be critiqued for inaccessible concepts that fail to resonate in communities. Some can also surprisingly centre a marginalised community too much and overburden an already oppressed community that deeply wants some help to relieve the pain of a systemic challenge they're facing, not additional engagement.

Systems Change Labs require a convening team with patience and commitment to long term change, deep understanding of the system of interest, and an ability to create safe spaces to address polarisation among actors and interest groups in the system. Systems Change Labs cannot stick to a repeatable methodology; they draw on a wide repertoire of innovation methods that constantly evolves as the Lab matures.

Systems Change Labs are most successful when they anticipate a future crisis and then build the knowledge, networks and experimental solutions needed to navigate the crisis and transition to a better future.

Examples include:

- Engineering Change Lab
engineeringchangelab.ca/
- LICER - Civic and Regulatory Innovation Lab.
www.mis.quebec/en/completed-projects/2020/10/26/licer-civic-regulatory-innovation-laboratory/
- Energy Futures Lab
energyfutureslab.com/
- Early Childhood Education Lab
www.ecelaboepe.ca/
- Edmonton Shift Lab
www.edmontonshiftlab.ca/

- Future of Home Lab
www.actionlab.ca/our-work/the-future-of-home-inclusive-housing-solutions-lab
- Bhutanese Refugee Employment Lab
www.actionlab.ca/our-work/design-by-doing-1-point-0-and-2-point-0
- The Doughnut Economics Action Lab, UK
doughnuteconomics.org/about
- Arantzazulab, Spain
arantzazulab.eus/en/



Place-Based Labs

This type of Lab context is centred on and embedded in a particular live/work/play community to address local systemic challenges that matter to people who share physical and/or virtual places. Being in and of community, these Labs avoid the more technical Labs jargon and methods while adhering to the spirit and principles of Social Innovation Labs, including co-design and co-production. Trust and legitimacy are critical for Place-Based Labs.

For example: The Winnipeg Boldness Project launched in 2014 is an Indigenous-led, Place-Based Lab grounded in Indigenous worldviews and social innovation to research and develop ideas, in order to improve outcomes for young children in the Point Douglas community in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They weave traditional Indigenous knowledge and reconciliation with social innovation, including Indigenous ceremony, sage picking, and wholistic ways of knowing, being, doing and feeling. The work is stewarded by four guide groups comprised of local residents, volunteers, workers, executives, researchers, and knowledge keepers. Prototypes are community-led and community-validated.

Place-Based Labs require a convening team that are trusted members of the community they support. Place-Based Labs rely on volunteer community participation, so they need to be flexible in when and how often they meet, connect with community on an emotional level, and move at the speed of trust. Specialised embedded social innovation supports, such as research, graphic design and prototype development are especially valuable for community Labs.

Scoping of challenges in these types of Labs can vary from focus on something very specific to a street or a neighbourhood, to something very big and complex that has intersections and lived experience in a neighbourhood but requires deeper and wider systems change. Just as community is defined in many different ways beyond geography, Place-Based Labs can also be organised around a shared sport, online community, or way of living. What differentiates Place-Based Labs is the centring of a defined community in determining the Lab's vision and direction.

Examples include:

- Winnipeg Boldness Project
www.winnipegboldness.ca/
- Acadie Lab - Agroenvironment living Lab
www.mis.quebec/en/completed-projects/2019/08/29/acadielab/
- Edmonton RECOVER project
www.urbanwellnessedmonton.com/
- Future of Hockey Lab
www.futureofhockeylab.com/
- Daegu Living Lab, South Korea
zenodo.org/record/1434936/files/15_Daegu%20Living%20Labs.pdf



Labs as a Service

This type of Lab context is for Labs that steward a diverse portfolio of Social Innovation Labs as a knowledgeable, neutral mediator. It also includes consultancies that offer third party Lab design, convening and capacity building services.

For example: Skills Society Action Lab has led multiple Labs and Lab-like convenings since the mid-2000s to foster more creative thinking and innovation in human service systems. In the past five years, Action Lab has launched the Edmonton Shift Lab to address racism; the Future of Home: Inclusive Housing Solutions Lab; and the Bhutanese Refugee Employment Lab. Action Lab extensively documents and publishes their learnings and evaluations. They have a custom-designed Lab space that encourages creativity and collaboration in their own Labs and shared with the

community. And they have a team and partner network of Social Innovation Lab professionals.

One challenge these types of Labs can often face is whether it's appropriate in certain contexts to have outside Lab experts steward or facilitate a process with a particular organisation, community or group. In recent years, one answer to this challenge is for these types of Labs to build capacity in a community or organisation to lead and adapt a Lab process themselves. This has a whole other set of challenges in that it can take considerable time and resources to achieve the necessary quality of Lab practice.

Labs as a service requires a convening team with a mastery of labcraft, able to select and tailor the right approach for a uniquely complex challenge from among multiple methodologies and tools. They need a reflective practice grounded in a wide repertoire of Lab experience; an appropriate balance of confidence and humility; and operational experience in scoping out Lab initiatives. Labs as a service are most impactful when they form transparent, equitable and regenerative partnerships with the governments and communities they serve.

Examples include:

→ Social Innovation Canada

sicanada.org/

→ LLI

llo.quebec/

→ Action Lab

www.actionlab.ca/

→ NouLab

ponddeshpande.ca/noulab/

→ Reos Partners

reospartners.com/

→ Health Commons Solutions Lab

www.healthcommons.ca/

→ Synthetikos

www.synthetikos.com/

→ ShiftFlow

www.shiftflow.ca/

→ Kennisland

www.kennisland.nl

→ The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI)

www.tacsi.org.au/

KEY FEATURES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS

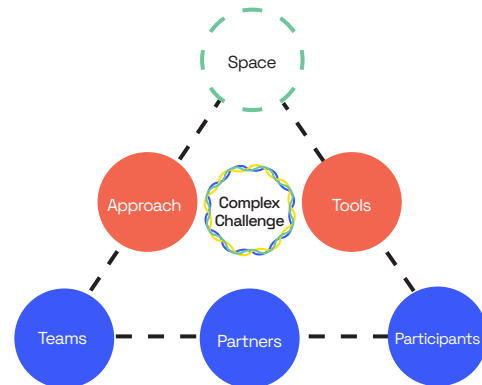
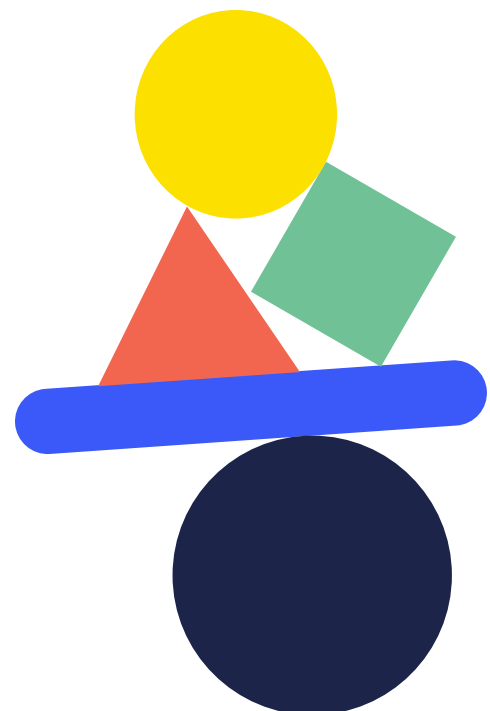


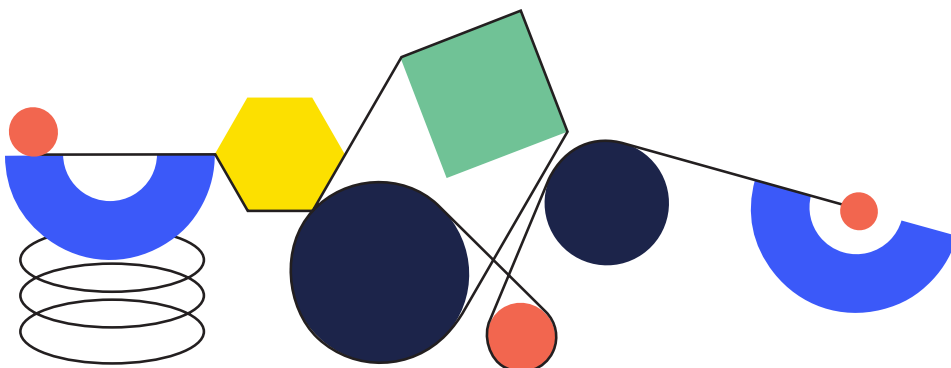
Figure 3. Promising visualisation in the mid-2000s from Joeri Van Den Steenhoven suggesting Key attributes of Social Innovation Labs.



CONVERSATION 2: EXPLORING OUR 'NICHE', SITUATING LABS AMONGST OTHER CHANGE APPROACHES

“Labs are a problem-centred approach. How good a Lab is depends on whether it is fit for purpose for the problem it has been designed to improve. So if we are going to understand the future of Labs, we need to understand the future problem space. How is the problem set for humanity evolving? This has been called the Polycrisis, the Great Transition, etc. where we notice that systemic risk is escalating, complex social, environmental and economic challenges are entangling, while inequality, polarisation and misinformation are exponentially increasing, eroding our ability to even agree on the problem set. If the problem sets are becoming more complex, entangled and urgent, what does this mean for the future of Labs? For a start, we cannot expect that episodic Labs focused on a small part of the polycrisis will be able to make headway on systemic risk.”

- Alex Ryan, Early Systemic Design and Lab Trailblazer, Co-founder of Alberta CoLab, Synthetikos



Social transformation work requires multiple types of change strategies (e.g. creation of social movements, active protest, collective problem solving). Labs fill a small but powerful niche in this larger ecosystem of efforts to make meaningful progress on complex social challenges. Our focus on the practices of Labs is not a slight to other systems change or justice approaches. We assume that Labs are ONE approach – not THE – approach to making change.

As a part of visioning the future of Labs, we think it can be helpful to explore the boundaries of Lab work and the ways it bumps up against, contrasts, and maybe even is entangled with other social change approaches. In this section we take a closer look at two change approaches Labs have become connected to, social justice organising and social entrepreneurship, as well as offer some of the promising signals that brought practitioners to Labs as a social change approach. At the Future of Labs gathering we will have an opportunity to dig deeper into these areas, exploring questions such as:

- What are Labs' unique contributions to social change?
- How do Labs distinguish themselves from other social change approaches?
- Under what conditions is a Lab approach appropriate and when might other social change approaches be better?

WHY LABS OVER OTHER APPROACHES?

Through survey and focus group discussions, participants shared promising and unexpected learnings, as well as successes from their work in the Lab space. Themes from these responses are shared below, framed as 'qualities' that make Lab approaches particularly and uniquely promising.

Emphasis on Systemic and Relational Collectivism

A common theme across responses and examples was Labs' transformative potential to bring people together, not around an organisational imperative, but a larger, collective challenge or opportunity. Stories highlighted the success and impact of forming unlikely connections and collaborations between diverse stakeholders, and offering new ways of working together that help people to see issues from other perspectives. It was felt that this led to more innovative solutions and fosters new connections that drive impact through the development of networks for sustained collaborative efforts.

“At the core of what’s happening here is you’re bringing together people who are disconnected and don’t talk to each other, and you’re creating space for them to not only talk to each other, but create together and make together, and that’s an incredibly powerful thing. So to me that is the thing that still resonates the most, is how can you hold space to bring disconnected, fragmented, and polarised people together in as much of a safe and level, and generative space as possible. I don’t know any other field or discipline that does that better than Labs with as much sophistication? - Alex Ryan

“My best and fondest memories are just walking into a city hall, getting that policy maker from their desk, and like literally walking with them out the door, and going to the city square and talking to the youth and bringing those stories back to the city council. It’s weaving those threads between people - I saw magic happening there. Those experiences were profound, and I can still go back to those people 10 years later and ask them Do you remember that? and it’s like, yeah, it was very scary, but it was so good. I still do it or I still keep that practice close.”

- Marlieke Kieboom

Geraldine reflected that this element of Labs - the space created whether it’s closed or open - is what sets it apart from other ways of coordinating social change activities:

“it’s that initial, not just the relationships, it’s the way of bounding this work together, bringing people in and creating that space. That’s so critical.”

- Geraldine Cahill

Create Space for Empowerment and Agency

Mark Cabaj shared, both from a philosophical and evidence point of view, that consistently, what’s worked well for Labs is the relational elements, sense of agency, and empowerment. This was further supported by survey and focus group responses. Many stories and responses highlighted the longer-term impacts of Labs on capacity building, including relationships, and the personal growth and development of Lab participants. Stakeholders are empowered through the process, distributing power and enhancing collaboration.

Diane Roussin shared her community’s experiences of empowerment through Winnipeg Boldness:

“Community members have shared that the Lab provided a place and space where people can come together, rooted in a relational approach. It’s a place for us to build trust with each other because we recognize and see ourselves reflected there - which has a way of building trust and safety. When that’s there, we can more naturally move into risk taking and processes that are more emergent, rather than simply “here’s the answer”. We feel comfortable to ask questions without judgement, to iterate, to sit in the chaos and unknowing, and be okay with that - we’re in that together.”

- Diane Roussin

One survey respondent in sharing a success story they most often tell about their Lab experience, reflected that for people who are nervous about showing up in an experimental space with new methods, and who are not used to disrupting the status quo, Labs create the connection for them to hold space for change:

“She felt supported in her newness... The Lab offered many vantage points to see how digging into the root cause and trying a variety of approaches meant that everyone was learning together. This individual came to be extremely comfortable leading a team in completely new ways. This is the story I often tell because most people

can relate, and our Lab experience has always been highly relational as a means to unleash human collaborative potential” - Survey Respondent

Mark reflected there are likely several hidden outcomes from simply the act of people going through social innovation processes:

“To what degree do they disrupt systems because you’re engaging actors? Are we softening up systems and disrupting them in gentle - or less gentle - ways and readying them?”

- Mark Cabaj

These outcomes are subtle and don’t receive much attention, but are likely happening.

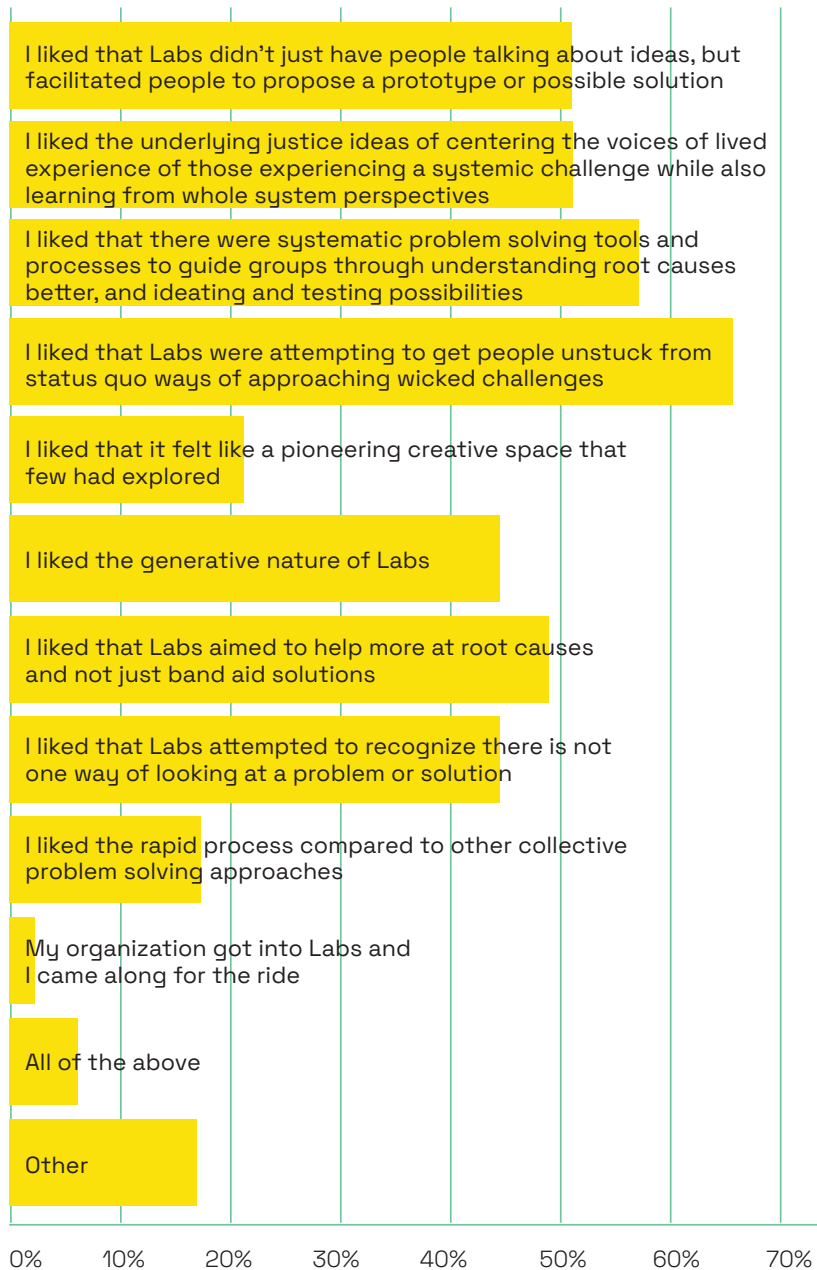
“It was transformative to centre the lived and living experiences of newcomers in the Lab. Instead of focusing on the inputs of service providers and settlement agencies, we took care and time to listen to the realities of newcomers and put ourselves in their shoes when thinking of solutions. Many of the newcomer women from this Lab shared feelings of incredible empowerment and agency and I have engaged with them in a variety of capacities including as consulting collaborators since. This confidence boost to newcomer women and following the journey of the impact they are bringing to our local communities has been incredible to witness and support in some small way.”

- Survey Respondent

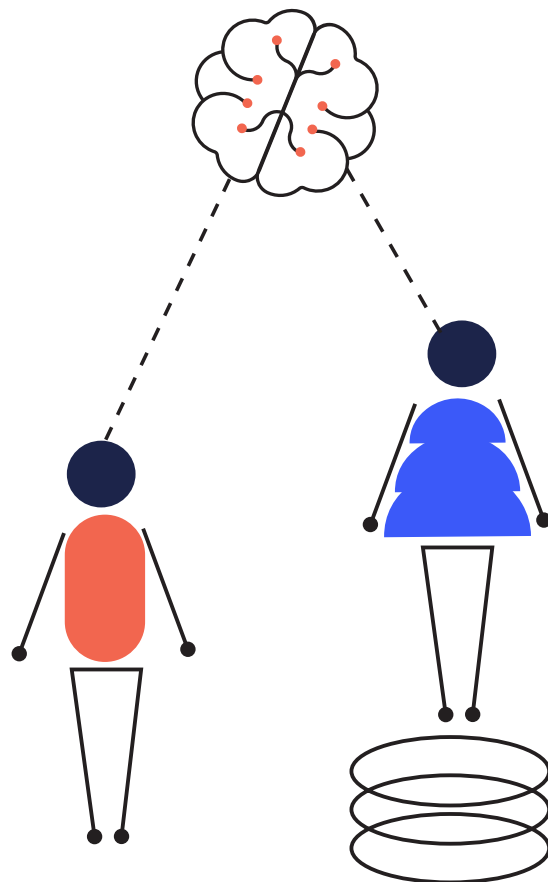
“I watched people come into the Lab, offer their wisdom and lived experience, and see tangible solutions come out of it. I also watched as the process changed people, and myself as I had to confront my own ideas or beliefs about the intersectionality of racism and poverty. It was an eye-opening experience about how important the process is and how a different process will get us to different results.”

- Survey Respondent

Why Labs Over Other Approaches?: Survey Respondent Perspectives



Within the survey, participants were invited to share why they first became interested in Labs and what it was in Labs that seemed promising, selecting responses that resonated most with them. Resoundingly, what brought practitioners to Labs was liking that Labs were **attempting to get people unstuck from status quo ways of approaching wicked challenges**. Furthermore, the majority liked that there were **systematic problem-solving tools and processes to guide groups through understanding root causes better**.



DEFINING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE LAB CONTEXT

Social innovation is part of the larger ecosystem of social change strategies, and is a broad umbrella under which Social Innovation **Labs** fall, including other change methodologies like systemic design. While we dug deeper into defining Social Innovation Labs (see Conversation #1 - Defining Labs), we feel it's important to explore definitions of 'social innovation' in the Lab context; the intention is to help us further reflect on what distinguishes Social Innovation Labs from other social change approaches.

Defining social innovation as it relates to Labs has been challenging. Numerous exploratory definitions of social innovation have been proposed over the last 10-20 years. Here we've gathered a smattering of definitions and highlighted similarities, differences, and gaps in how social innovation is often conceptualised.

“A process, product, program, platform, project that challenges and ultimately changes the system that created the problem in the first place. Successful social innovations have durability and broad impact. The capacity of any society to create a steady flow of social innovations, particularly those which re-engage vulnerable populations, is an important contributor to overall social and ecological resilience.”

- Social Innovation Generation (SiG)

“A social innovation can be a product, process, or technology, but it can also be a principle, an idea, a piece of legislation, a social movement, an intervention, or some combination of them.”

- Stanford Social Innovation Review

“At CSI, we define social innovation as the creation, development, adoption, and integration of new and renewed concepts, systems, organizations and practices that put people and planet first. At their best, social innovations address root causes and change the very systems resisting change to unlock a better world for all. Social innovators achieve change by nudging and sometimes [radically shifting markets, policies and cultures](#). Put simply, social innovation is about new solutions for a better world. We see them everywhere!”

- Center for Social Innovation¹⁰

“With Social Innovation, we believe the problem solving process should aim at not just creating more band aid solutions, but go deeper to tackle problems at their root. We see social innovation as being both about outcomes and processes. The outcomes of social innovation processes should be better solutions to complex problems facing our world. Better means social innovation solutions truly work better for people, communities, systems and the planet. Outcomes should also aim to have fewer negative side effects from proposed interventions. Social innovation really aims at helping as many as easily possible, rather than a solution just for a few in a system”

Skills Society Action Lab¹¹

“Social Innovation is about how one approaches complex challenges, and sometimes it is also an outcome. Social Innovation is designed to address the root causes of challenges and, if successfully implemented and scaled, has the potential to impact entire systems. It is innovation that drives social and environmental outcomes.”

- Social Innovation Canada

Definitions of social innovation are diverse. That said, common principles across definitions include:

- Aiming to solve or navigate complex social challenges
- Getting to and tackling *root causes* rather than symptoms
- Using *experimental* processes
- A recognition of the systemic nature of the problems being addressed

Although social innovation is considered a relatively recent social action, many of the processes used within the field of social innovation today draw upon long established social theory including the work of philosopher John Dewey, complexity theory, resilience theory, action research, organisational theory, and structuration theory. Interestingly, some suggest one of the projects John Dewey set up way back in 1896 in an Elementary School could be viewed as an expression of a Living Lab¹².

Indigenous Perspectives on Social Innovation

In more recent years, it's become clearer in Canadian and North and South American contexts, that early definitions of social innovation often left out Indigenous worldviews of collective community problem solving and innovation. Many Indigenous social innovation leaders in Canada, such as Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse and Diane Roussin, have shared definitions that center Indigenous knowledge and wisdom.

“Social innovation recognizes that a single individual is not the cause of complex challenges nor the only source of a promising intervention. In many ways, collective problem solving in Indigenous communities has been around for thousands of years, striving to meet all the challenges that might affect the community. Indigenous communities think and act in systems, and recognize the interconnectedness of land, water, people, the winged and four-legged ones.”

- Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse,
Co-founder of the Edmonton
Shift Lab

A further look at Indigenous perspectives on social innovation and the ways Indigenous epistemologies have and continue to influence Lab approaches can be found in Conversation 4.

¹⁰ <https://socialinnovation.org/>
¹¹ <https://www.actionlab.ca/blog/what-do-we-really-mean-by-social-innovation>
¹² https://ssir.org/articles/entry/a_lab_of_labs#

The Relationship between Social Innovation and Social Justice

In this section we draw on the work of Struthers¹³, exploring the relationship between social innovation and social justice. We highlight synergies and tensions between the two approaches for the purpose of sparking reflective dialogue.

Struthers distinguishes social innovation and social justice as two distinct, albeit interrelated, approaches to social change work. She describes social justice organizing as having deep historical roots in Canada dating back to the 1960s while social innovation as relatively newer to the landscape, first gaining momentum in the late 1990s. According to Struthers,

each approach can be thought of as “based on a distinct set of assumptions leading to different strategies and ways of organizing for social benefit”. In the chart below we highlight some of the distinctions between social innovation and social justice approaches.

While the two approaches are distinct, increasingly, they have become entangled and at times, conflated (thought of as one and the same). A number of important improvements have come from the influence of social justice on social innovation including: greater attention to power and privilege, equitable outcomes, and inclusion of people who experience marginalisation in lab leadership and processes. However, there are also risks with social innovation and social justice

Distinctions between Social Innovation and Social Justice Approaches

Summarized from Struthers Article¹⁴.

Note this is an attempt to highlight rough distinctions for the purpose of sparking reflective dialogue not to create false dichotomies or rigid definitions.

| SOCIAL INNOVATION | SOCIAL JUSTICE |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → “New and fluid”, relatively new approach with loos(er) theoretical associations → Focus on social(group) problem solving → Asset based, opportunistic frame that aims to amplify what is working in a system → Results oriented towards improved social outcomes → Preference for loose and evolving language to leave room for ‘getting to action’ → Historically did not emphasize the inclusion of marginalized groups nor prioritize a deeper social analysis of power and privilege → Often deliberate about creating relationships amongst very different organizations or individuals → Generative orientated | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → “Established and entrenched”, long(er) history more robustly rooted in theory → Equity and justice as primary goal of practice → Skeptical approach to systems of power - “critical theory” approach that aims to identify problems or needs as flaws to be resisted or corrected → Results oriented towards access to justice and equity → Emphasis on precision in language that supports clarity and insight into nuance → Intentional inclusion of marginalized groups and prioritizes a deeper social analysis of power and privilege → Seeks allies with common values → Looks at issues and systems through lens’ of oppressor/oppressed |

¹³ Struthers, M. (2018). At odds or an opportunity? Exploring the tension between the social justice and social innovation narratives, The Philanthropist Journal.

¹⁴ Struthers, M. (2018). At odds or an opportunity? Exploring the tension between the social justice and social innovation narratives, The Philanthropist Journal.

becoming entangled and/or conflated. Expectations can be unrealistic or unfair if a Lab process is being undertaken but people expect outcomes associated with social justice organising or vice versa. Labs also run the risk of losing their definition and sense of identity if they stray too far from their theoretical and practice based roots. And finally, the entangling of social innovation and social justice creates tensions related to how the work is carried out - tensions that are not always reconcilable and can force difficult choices and uncollaborative conversations.

“Ultimate goals may be the same, but processes of social justice and social innovation seem to be quite distinct. Social justice approaches mostly seem to aim at deconstructing power through the lens of oppressor-oppressed. Social innovation approaches tend to attempt “both-and” approaches involving sense making of power and then safeguarding space for generative ideation, future imagining, and helping a collective to boldly propose a portfolio of experimental possibilities to test”

- Ben Weinlick, Founder of Action Lab and co-founder of the Edmonton Shift Lab

Leaders in the field of social innovation in Canada have been calling for more reflection and intention around the ways social justice and social innovation approaches may complement and where they may be distinct in the future.

“This is a generative moment with the potential to build social organizing practice that has stronger impact than when we work from either narrative alone. What if we could convene conversations around the country looking at our experience of what is the same and different between social justice and social innovation?”

- Marilyn Struther

Struthers provides one perspective on how social innovation and social justice might coexist within the social change ecosystem in Canada:

“Imagine social justice practice that fosters invention, or social innovation practice that advances equity. In reality, between social justice and social innovation, cross-over examples abound in the constantly mobile patterns of civic organizing practice in [Canada]”

Alex Ryan offers another:

“I’ve always thought of these approaches as existing at different points in the panarchy cycle. Activism raises pressure on the current system to accelerate breakdown. Social innovation works the backwards loop into the start of the new S curve. While they can be very complementary, it is rare that the actor who disrupts the status quo has the legitimacy to then convene all the stakeholders around the new system.”

- Alex Ryan

Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship

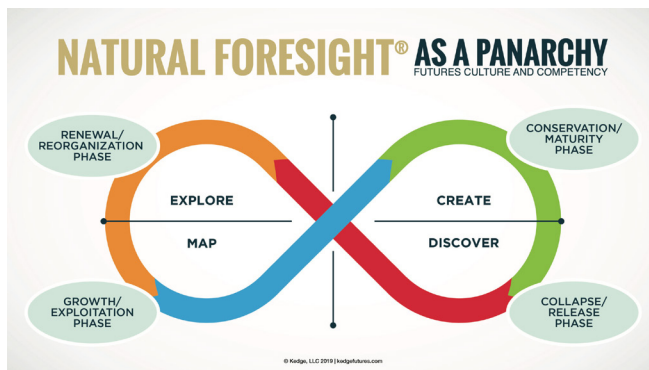
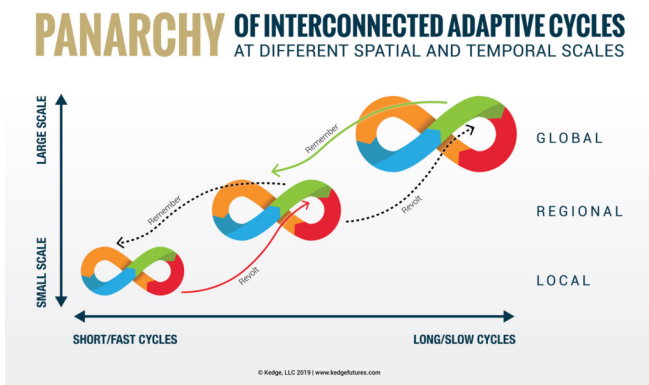


Figure 4. The Panarchy Model of Adaptive Cycles¹⁵

There's no doubt, the relationship between social innovation and social justice is complex - rife with nuance and tension. Negotiating the relationship between the two into the future will inevitably require Lab practitioners to continue to engage in iterative loops of reflection, action, and dialogue about the processes they design and participate in.

“James Surowiecki of The New Yorker reminds us that inventions—like concentrated beef stock—aren’t by themselves innovative. An innovation changes the systems around an invention so that it can spread with some sort of fidelity.”

- A Lab of Labs¹⁶

Social innovation is also often conflated with social entrepreneurship (e.g. social good business incubators). While there are some similarities across the two approaches, the value of seeing them as distinct is increasingly being discussed¹⁷. Two main differences between social innovation and social entrepreneurship lie in scope of impact and depth of problem exploration. Social entrepreneurship often aims at programmatic innovation while social innovation strives for systemic impact. Additionally, social innovation approaches tend to help participants probe root causes of a problem and explore the ways a challenge is interconnected with other systems in a deeper and more thorough way than social entrepreneurship approaches. In social entrepreneurship approaches, the focus tends to be more on business viability of a mission driven existing innovation. Whereas, in social innovation, an innovation that aims to get at root causes but may not be a viable or sustainable business idea, can still be valued and pursued.

Of course, the differentiation between these two approaches is not always black and white. As is discussed in this example shared on the Action Lab blog¹⁸, sometimes a social enterprise, if it is reaching for systemic impact, might have the potential to be a social innovation, but not all social enterprises are social innovations:

¹⁵ Wahl, D. C. (2016). Designing regenerative cultures. Axminster: Triarchy Press.

¹⁶ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/a_lab_of_labs

¹⁷ Rediscovering Social Innovation, Stanford Social Innovation Review https://ssir.org/articles/entry/rediscovering_social_innovation#

¹⁸ actionlab.ca/blog/what-do-we-really-mean-by-social-innovation

“Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship are often conflated as the same thing and we think that is a mistake. A social enterprise or social good business isn’t always aiming to address root causes of a complex challenge. For example, a thrift store social enterprise that generates revenue for a charity, could also have a mission to employ people with disabilities. That’s great, but not really working at a systemic level, with larger collectives, around inequities in employment and disability rights issues.

On the other hand, a social enterprise may have a mandate for systemic impact and so it might have the potential for social innovation. For example, we stewarded the creation of MyCompass Planning Inc., which aims to humanize social service case management and planning, so that the voices of people with disabilities served are not pushed to the sidelines in service delivery. The enterprise aspect of this venture helps to generate research and development dollars. As it scales and more organizations adopt MyCompass Planning, the aim is to keep re-designing the architecture and interactions of how social services are delivered - re-designing them so that organizations and systems instinctively center rights and good relationship building between service providers and those served. In that way

this social enterprise aims at systemic impact around the complex challenge of dehumanized case management and power imbalance in the delivery of social services.”

- Ben Weinlick, Founder of Action Lab and co-founder of the Edmonton Shift Lab

There’s no doubt, both social innovation and social entrepreneurship play an important role within the broader social change ecosystem. What we (the Convenors) and others working in the social innovation space see as important though, is that the two be appreciated for their individual strengths and limitations and not conflated as one and the same.

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are the distinctions between Labs and other social change approaches such as social justice organising?
- Are Lab approaches inherently grounded in critical theories? Or is a critical theory lens something that is brought if/when the context or a specific phase of a Lab process?
- What risks might exist if social justice organising or social entrepreneurship and Labs are conflated? What strengths come from their entanglement?
- If we try to do social justice approaches in Labs, what might we have to do to help increase coherence for participants, funders, supporters, and allies?
- How might we get better at distinguishing social justice, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation approaches and help collectives know in what contexts and/or phases each approach helps and in which phases or contexts they shouldn’t be conflated?

CONVERSATION 3: WHAT'S REASONABLE TO EXPECT FROM LABS?

All Social Innovation Lab advocates, practitioners and participants are eager to develop a coherent response to the question: What is reasonable to expect about the scale, pace and durability of Lab results?

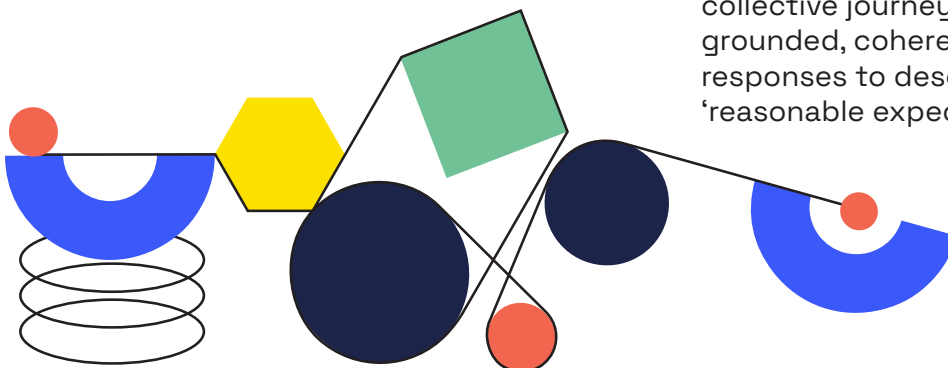
The answer to this question is important for several reasons:

- It shapes expectations amongst Lab stakeholders about what defines 'success' and what comprises 'progress', which in turn influences their level of support for specific Labs, and the Lab approach in general, as well as if/when they might choose to employ Labs in parallel to, or combined with, other change strategies.
- It informs almost all choices that Lab convenors, designers and facilitators make about the design, implementation and follow-up to a Lab.
- It guides the selection of questions, methods and even criteria for monitoring, evaluation, research and learning efforts.¹⁹

This section of the Primer explores four ideas that help to paint a picture of what 'reasonable results' look like in a Lab. These are:

- **Idea 1:** Different Labs aim to create different results, but there are some commonalities.
- **Idea 2:** A Lab's ability to 'make an impact' on a complex challenge depends on what role it plays in the innovation journey.
- **Idea 3:** Labs can contribute to – not drive – a long term process of systems change.
- **Idea 4:** A Lab's ability to contribute to powerful results is influenced by a variety of enabling conditions.

These ideas are preliminary, a little geeky, and very clumsy. But they are ideas, not positions, designed to stimulate conversations that might help us in our collective journey to develop a set of more grounded, coherent, and shared set of responses to describing what we mean by 'reasonable expectations of results' in Labs.



¹⁹ This section does not explore questions related to how best to measure, evaluate and track the impacts of Labs. This is an important area of Lab work, however, beyond the scope of this section of the Primer.

IDEA 1: DIFFERENT LABS FOCUS ON DIFFERENT RESULTS, BUT THERE ARE COMMONALITIES

There is an impressive diversity of Labs across Canada. Table 2 in the Primer describes at least six broad types. There are probably more. Each Lab will have a distinct set of activities, outputs and results.

It is important to embrace this impressive diversity of experiences, while eagerly looking for some categories or domains of results that are common across all levels, each at a high level. That would open up the possibility that we could say something like ‘all labs tend to yield some shared results but after that, it’s important to appreciate the unique approach and results of each individually’.

The Radius Team that hosted the 2018 CONVERGE conference²⁰ identified four broad, yet interrelated, types of results that ‘seem’ to cut across all models, archetypes, and instances of Labs.

| DOMAIN | DESCRIPTION |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Building Citizen Agency | Increasing Lab participants’ confidence, skills, and commitment to participating in civic life and the change process. This is not only necessary for a productive Lab, but it’s an outcome that reflects a commitment to building a vibrant, inclusive, participatory democracy. |
| Increasing Community Connections | Strengthening the connections and relationships between diverse stakeholders encourages people to see issues through a variety of different lenses, enhances a sense of collective agency, and can build a constituency for making change. |
| Systemic Innovations | Expanding the set of quality solutions to a complex challenge in a way that is informed by diverse perspectives, systems thinking and based on a systematic process of surfacing, developing and testing possible solutions. |
| Impact | The tangible progress made on complex challenges (e.g., more equitable employment, protecting biodiversity, better housing) and changing the deeper systems that hold them in place. |

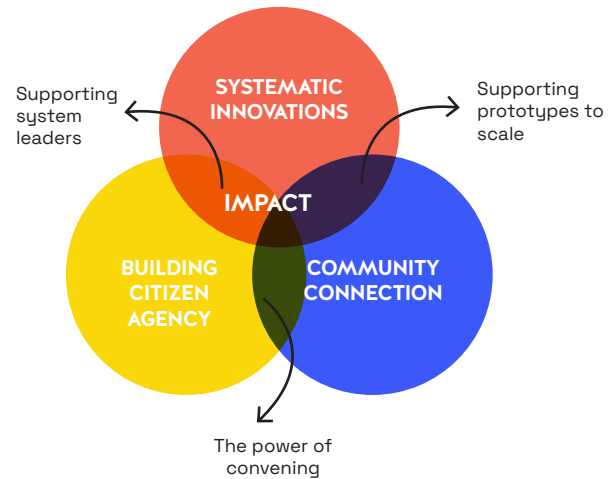


Figure 5. Impact Diagram from the CONVERGE Final Report

While all Labs have the potential to contribute to all types of these results, they typically vary in their emphasis on which results they wish to prioritise. Here are some examples that we’ve come across in our own Lab work that represent the diverse perspectives of the ‘value proposition’ of Labs in a larger change effort.

→ A seasoned change-maker in a regional Lab working on reforming workforce development systems to generate better employment for young adults, disclosed that the Lab participants were “not too fussed” on landing on perfect solutions. He noted: “We just need to get in front of - and engage - these big powerful actors in the public and private sector in discussions about what they could do better. The ideas have to be good enough that they treat us seriously, and keep calling us back. We don’t know which ones will catch!” For them, success was building up relationships with system actors – and prototypes, community connections and citizen agency were either a means to an end or a nice spin-off.

→ The lead of a Lab embedded in a neighbourhood explained that their priority was to create meaningful opportunities for residents in their neighbourhood to connect with each other, be active in civic life, and be involved in creating practical ways to improve their own lives. While it was important that their efforts translated into tangible ‘projects’ and ‘results’, successes for her and the Lab team was creating a platform for grass-roots community change over the long term.

→ A senior executive of a national sustainability organisation was clear that the goal of their short-term Lab was to develop concrete ways that a small but powerful set of actors in one province’s plastics and recycling sector could work together to take

²⁰ A gathering that brought together over 130 Lab practitioners to begin to build a common set of tools, practices, language, and knowledge, and identify key problems and opportunities within the Canadian labs landscape: <https://radiusfu.com/converge2018/>

advantage of a new government's new policy to promote a circular economy approach. "We need some quick wins to get momentum for a longer-term campaign on this," she noted, "and that is the purpose of this rapid Lab". For these Lab participants, the success of the Lab would be judged on its ability to help move a larger, more comprehensive change strategy forward, of which the Lab comprised only one element.

Different Labs, different hoped-for results. Different Lab design, resources, expertise and participants. Different perspectives on what is 'reasonable to expect'. See "Reflections on Different Types of Results".

Unsurprisingly, even seasoned Lab practitioners differ in their preference for different Labs. And one of the biggest debates among them is whether it's possible for Lab participants to focus too narrowly on developing and testing a portfolio of solutions.

Reflections on Different Types of Results

"To a certain extent I was hoping that Labs would be more effective at bringing together broad perspectives and would lead to more meaningful relationships across systems. Although this has likely happened for some it doesn't seem to be a reliable outcome of Labs. Labs, like a lot of spaces, can become echo chambers and relationships don't expand at a level that correlates to the scale of the challenge a Lab is likely looking to impact."

- Survey Respondent

"Labs can have positive impact in building citizen capacity and constituencies to tackle Canada's intractable problems, yet this is work that takes a long, steady effort and the resources to sustain it. Often Labs are funded based on the prototypes they produce, yet very few of these are actually

implemented. We need more defined proof points for what funders and partners can expect at different stages of Labs, and to more clearly understand what success looks like under what conditions. Funding for Labs needs to be long-term enough so that emerging solutions can be implemented.²¹"

"Centering of lived and living experiences and the decentering of power in Labs. It's tough balance to find the right people to bring together who have the right backgrounds and experiences to dig in, the right power and authority to make change, and the right amount of time, energy and agency to dive into implementation of solutions. This is something I'd love for us to grapple with in this gathering."

- Survey Respondent

²¹ CONVERGE Final Report

Those who favour a strong emphasis on ‘solution-finding’ have a good case. Some of the common arguments include:

- People want and demand solutions, not just good process, new connections, and personal development.
- The stakes of not getting to practical solutions that make a difference are high because many stubborn challenges are getting worse, not better (e.g., inequitable social outcomes, loss of biodiversity, increasing polarisation).
- It is easier to mobilise people and resources for a solutions-oriented initiative.

In response, the critics of the ‘solution-centric’ Labs argue that the orientation increases the chances that Labs will slip into ‘solutionism’- when people approach tough societal challenges with the mistaken belief that they can be addressed with simple solutions rather than addressing deeper systemic and cultural patterns that underlie them. This ‘quick fix’ approach creates a host of difficulties:

- It is likely to yield only superficial (technocratic or managerial) results that don’t get at the deeper causes of whatever stubborn issue is being addressed;
- It can create unintended negative outcomes as rushed solutions that fail to anticipate the good, bad, and uncertain ripple effects of their idea, and;
- It completely overlooks the value of meaningful engaging and supporting new networks of people in the change-making process, which includes the ethical benefit of allowing people to have some agency in their lives, improving the chances that solutions meet the needs, values of stakeholders, and ‘activating’ a broader set of change-makers that can only help with long term change processes.

It was ok to skirt around these debates in the first decade of Labs. We barely understood what we were doing and some of these issues were not yet clear. However, the success of the next generation of Labs requires stakeholders to understand the different value propositions of Labs, their strengths, and limitations, and be more intentional and explicit in making choices about what types of results they hope to achieve and why.

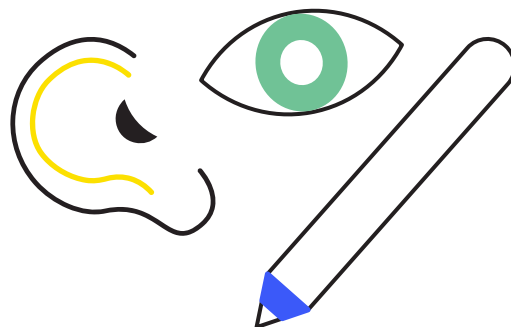
The Implications

The types of results likely to emerge from an individual Lab depend on how its convenors, facilitators, participants, and supporters understand its value proposition.

This diversity of orientations to the value proposition across the Lab field – and some of the simmering-yet-not-fully explored debates about the strengths and limitations associated with each – means it’s difficult to develop some broader statements.

Survey Findings

In addition, this raised concerns about barriers to Lab participation, in particular the capacity and ability of Lab participants, partners and stewards to continue beyond prototypes to pilot, implement, and scale solutions. A further challenge raised was the lack of impact narrative - evaluation of Labs including not only the process, impact on participants, and the prototypes that emerge, but in particular, their ability to drive systemic change. Respondents highlighted the need for clearer communication about the purpose, scope, and duration of Labs, and long-term funding and resource support to enable relationships with communities and sustained transformative work over decades.



IDEA 2: THE CHANCES FOR SIGNIFICANT RESULTS GO UP WHEN THE ENABLING CONDITIONS ARE GOOD

The next idea is blindingly obvious but deserves to be reviewed: the chances that a Lab can generate significant results of any kind go up when the enabling conditions are good.

The enabling condition that Lab practitioners typically point to as the most important is the level and length of time and resources made available for a Lab:

“Funding is one of the biggest, as always - which is also a code for ‘maintaining sustainability of systemic-oriented platforms over time’. I think of Labs as ‘ecotone’ organisations, which sit at the intersection of systems, which makes them generative, but also outsiders. Figuring out how to build long term commitment to enable 10–20-year horizons of work, which enable long term investment in relationships, capability, stability of livelihood and more is tricky - and whilst it’s often mentioned, I don’t have enough conversations about how to make this happen with progressive funders.”

- Survey Respondent

Survey Findings

A significant theme from the survey findings was the financing of Labs. Resoundingly, respondents highlighted challenges faced in evaluating, implementing, and scaling Lab-generated solutions; this was intertwined with uncertainties around Lab impact and sustainability. Among the responses, there appeared to be a recognized discrepancy between the resources required to conduct Labs (i.e., time, financial and human resources, advocacy support) and the outcomes that can be achieved within the existing funding structures.

The level of funding is certainly a critical factor in shaping eventual Lab results. But there are more. The following table provides a summary of some of the better-known factors that limit and amplify the potential for results of any Lab.

Table 3. A Sample of Factors That Shape Scale, Pace and Durability of Lab Results

| | Less likelihood of immediate &/or tangible changes & impacts | Greater likelihood of immediate &/or tangible changes and impacts. |
|--|---|---|
| FRAMING THE CHALLENGE TO BE ADDRESSED | | |
| Degree of complexity | More complex | Less complex |
| Scale/ Boundaries | Large scale | Small scale |
| Stuckness/ inertia of the system | Greater stuckness/ inertia | Less stuckness/inertia |
| External pressure or disruption | No pressure or disruption to change | Significant pressure or disruption to change |
| LAB ACTORS | | |
| Convenor | Weak legitimacy, trust, and relationships with stakeholders | Strong legitimacy, trust, and relationships with stakeholders |
| Facilitators | Limited to no experience and expertise with Labs | Extensive experience and expertise with Labs |
| Participants | Little experience with the issue, uneven ownership and motivation, improperly supported, with modest credibility, influence and authority in their zone of influence. | Extensive experience with the issue, deep ownership, highly motivated, properly supported, with strong credibility, influence and authority in their zone of influence. |

| RESOURCES | | |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Length of Funding | Short-term, one-time funding | Longer term, multi-year funding. |
| Amount | Does not cover the full costs of the Lab | Covers the full cost of Lab activities and includes a budget for contingencies |
| Flexibility | Requires strict fidelity to the original design | Allows for an evolution in the approach in response to new learning and shifts in context |

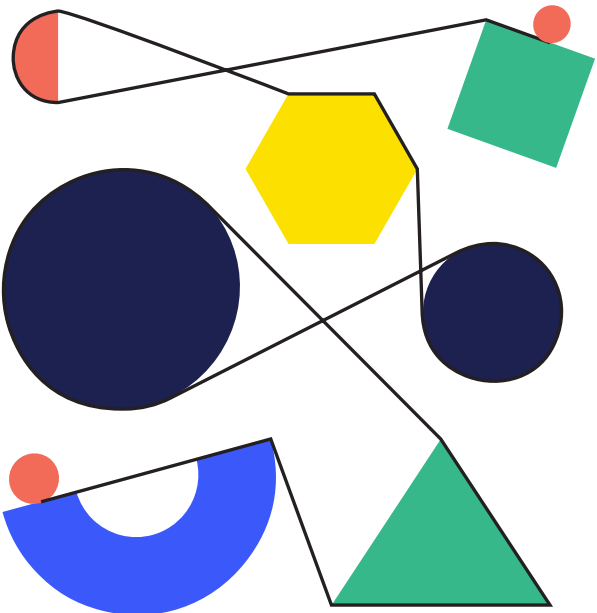
There are many other factors. What would you put here?

The Implications

It is reasonable to expect that Labs can yield even stronger civic agency, connections, and systems innovation outcomes – and eventually impact – when they have stronger enabling conditions. The weaker the conditions, the weaker the impact.

The stakeholders of an individual Lab should map their enabling conditions together and co-develop realistic expectations about what the results they can achieve.

Those interested in building a strong lab field should develop a more comprehensive and shared agenda to strengthen these enabling conditions (e.g., expanding resources, educational resources to strengthen the capabilities of lab practitioners, etc.).



IDEA 3: A LAB'S ABILITY TO 'MAKE AN IMPACT' ON A COMPLEX ISSUE DEPENDS ON ITS ROLE IN FACILITATING THE INNOVATION JOURNEY

Beyond creating a platform and process for diverse stakeholders to come together to better understand a challenge, build relationships, and co-create and test possible solutions to a complex challenge, what kind of impact can Labs make on whatever stubborn challenge (e.g., more equitable employment, access to housing, protecting biodiversity)?

To answer this question, Lab participants, facilitators, and supporters should be conversant in where and how Labs can play a role in the innovation journey, and what that means for the type of impact they might have in each.

The NESTA Foundation's 7-phase innovation swirl is one useful way of thinking about the innovation journey. The organisation's distinction between different methods of testing ideas is also helpful in understanding the different types of experimentation a Lab might employ in the 'development and testing' phase of that journey.

These two frameworks help to make sense of at least three approaches or orientations that Labs might take.

- Approach 1: Just Prototyping Please
- Approach 2: The Full Meal Deal
- Approach 3: Prototyping and Bridging

Each is explored in turn.

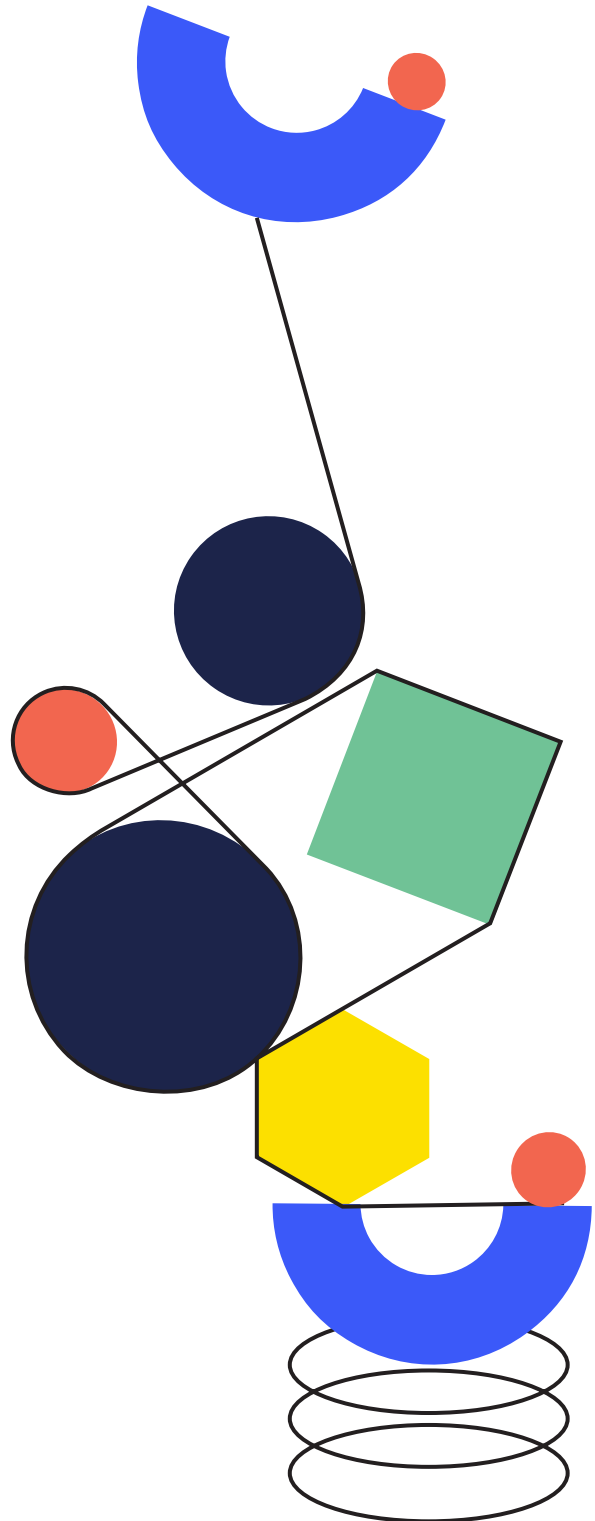
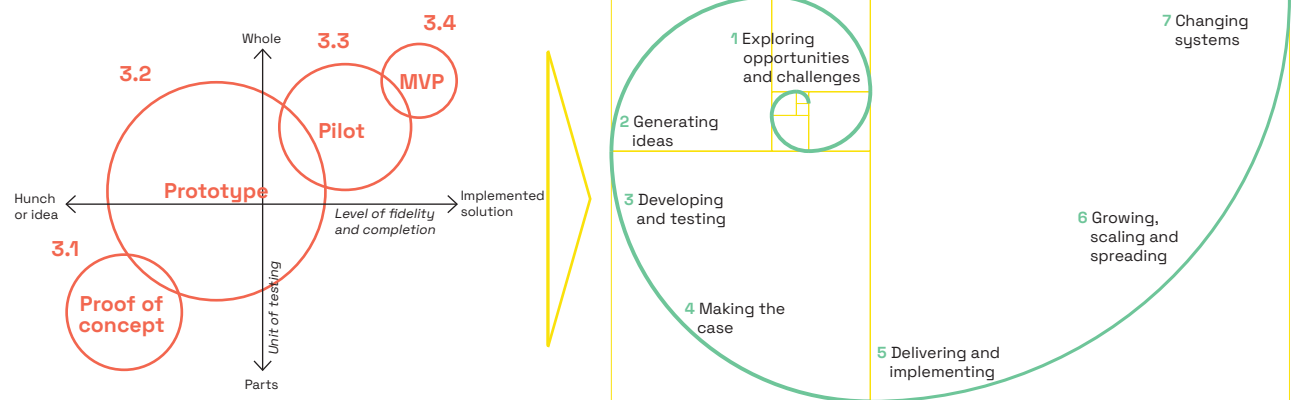


Figure 6. NESTA Innovation Frameworks²²

| | LAB / STUDIO | | REAL WORLD | |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| | PROOF OF CONCEPT | PROTOTYPE | PILOT | MINIMAL VIABLE PRODUCT (MVP) |
| What is the method about? | Testing the feasibility of a crude idea or assumption to justify further development | Testing how an idea may work, look, or feel like to learn from and identify assumptions | Testing whether a solution will work in the real context to justify scaling or implementing | Testing the viability of the essential core of your solution in action and continuously adapting to create value |
| When is it used in the process? | Early stage | Early stage | Roll out | Live testing |
| What are you testing? | A hunch or assumption | An idea | A solution | The core of a solution |
| What is the purpose of the test? | You have a hunch and want to test if it can be made real | You have an idea and want to test how it might work and learn from it | You have a solution and want to test if it actually will work and iron out minor creases before implementing or scaling it | You have the core of a solution and want to test if there is a demand, if not you change your approach |
| When is your test a success or proven? | When your idea is feasible | When your idea works as anticipated - if not, you must have gained insights to improve it | When a solution works as anticipated | When there is demand and the solutions work as anticipated |
| Who's involved in testing it? | Internal stakeholders | Users, citizens, decision makers, sponsors | Real users, , decision makers, sponsors | Real users |
| How much development time is needed? | A couple of minutes, hours or a few days | From half an hour up to a few days or even weeks | A few weeks up to a couple of months or a year | Continuous |
| What costs* are involved? | A few pennies up to 1,000 GBP | A few pennies up to 5,000 GBP | 10,000 GBP up to hundreds of thousands | Core part of the business model 100K up to millions |

* These numbers are indicative



²² <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/innovation-and-jobs-a-summary-of-what-were-working-on/> & <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/proof-of-concept-prototype-pilot-mvp-whats-in-a-name/>

Approach 1: Just Prototyping Please

Labs that focus on phases 1 to 3.2 make an important contribution to a larger change-making process: they expand the number, variety and quality of possible solutions to a complex challenge in the form of prototypes. They then complete that contribution by documenting the results (e.g., reports, PPTs, briefs, websites, meetings) and make the case that they deserve further attention. They then hope that 'someone' will find some of the ideas compelling enough to roll up their sleeves to do the work of phase 5, 6 and 7.

The strength of the model is that it is relatively straightforward to plan and easier to 'sell' to funders. The limitation is that like dandelion seeds in the wind, only a small percentage of which will take root and flourish, there is no guarantee that these ideas will be taken up after the Lab wraps up. While there are plenty of examples of Lab participants choosing to continue to work on an innovative idea after they leave the Lab - and some examples of non-Lab participants picking them up after the Lab is over - this type of uptake is the exception, not the rule.

This approach is the 'default' for most Labs because much of the funding made available for Labs is short term and only sufficient to cover phases 1 to 3.2 and some of phase 4. However, it is important to note that it is unreasonable to expect that this Lab approach will directly contribute to impact for one simple reason: prototypes yield insights about the strengths and limitations of each approach, including the 'potential' for impact. But, they do not generate impact. This can only happen in phases 3.3 to 7.

At best, this means that Lab participants might be able to claim they have indirectly contributed to making an impact if and when they can track how Lab participants or others have been successful implementing their ideas in phase 3.3 to 7 and find a way to measure the impact of those efforts.

Approach 2: The Full Meal Deal

Full meal deal Labs are theoretically possible but hard to find. It's one where Labs assume responsibility of stewarding the innovation process from phase 1 to 7. After developing prototypes in Phase 3.2, they are ready, willing and able to play a central role in:

- coordinating pilot projects and minimum viable product testing when necessary, get actively involved in organisations.
- facilitating the adoption of an innovation somewhere' in a system.
- play a role in scaling social innovations more broadly (scaling out), including whatever work is required to change systems (scaling up and deep).

There are very few examples of such Labs in Canada. This is not a surprise. The type of Lab is complex to design and manage. Each phase of the process often requires different participants, methods, capacities, and resources. The participants involved in the early phases of research and prototyping, for example, may not be the ones involved in efforts to scale them up.

They are also incredibly demanding. Developing and managing one pilot or facilitating the adoption of a single compelling innovative idea can require the same volume of time, effort, and resources, and running 1-2 cycles of research and developing a portfolio of prototypes. Similarly, the work of scaling up an innovative model is so involved that it often necessitates the creation of entirely new organisations dedicated solely to that mission.²³

The advantages and disadvantages of full meal deal Labs are clear. They appear to dramatically improve the possibility that they can 'deliver' impact. However, they require significant amounts of funding and first-rate stewardship to operate well. More importantly, the need to spread a Lab's work across the entire innovation journey reduces the space available for surfacing, developing, and testing a better set of responses to a complex challenge - the primary niche of Labs in the first place.

By the Way, Not All Prototypes Warrant Continued Support

Even narrowly focused solutions oriented Labs can only expect some of their innovative ideas to 'work out'. Sarah Shulman, a veteran innovation facilitator, illustrates this point by sharing that it took the Dyson company over 5,000 prototypes to bring their highly successful model to the market. Yes, this is an awkward comparison: developing and testing ideas to stubborn societal challenges is far more challenging – and important – than creating a marketable vacuum cleaner. However, the general idea is the same: many (most?) ideas will not and should not make it past the prototype phase simply because a group will want to invest more time and resources on the ideas with the most potential.

What is, then, the right 'conversion rate' in a Lab? There is no way to answer that question conclusively. However, it is reasonable to expect that some prototypes will make it to the next phase of innovation and perhaps make a direct impact on a stubborn societal challenge.

This insight requires Lab participants to keep the following ideas in mind:

1. It is important to develop and manage appropriate expectations about the 'conversion' rate of ideas to implementation in any Lab.
2. All Lab participants are prone to developing 'commitment bias' to their promising idea, which means that they are reluctant to let go of a promising idea that they've worked on even for a short period of time, even in the face of feedback of its limitations and/or not as promising as other ideas (see sidebar). This should be acknowledged and addressed in the design and implementation of each Lab.

For example: One experienced Lab practitioner shared a story of how Zaid Hassan – author of the Social Lab Revolution – revealed how quickly commitment bias develops through a simple exercise. After starting off a workshop to demonstrate the practice of prototyping by asking people to build paper towers, he proceeded to walk around the workshop tables, toppling one fragile tower after another. When people understandably expressed their frustration in response to his tower-wrecking act, he responded: "See, you have only invested about 20 minutes of your time on this, and already you are holding on to it, protecting it, and wanting to maintain it. Imagine what it's like when you are dealing with ideas to real-world problems!"

3. In many cases, the specific idea that is being developed and tested is not as important to Lab participants as the other benefits of Labs empowering people to make change, expanding networks and engaging in – and hopefully disrupting – stuck systems.



²⁵ Many of the exemplar innovations featured in the book, *Getting to Maybe: How the World as Changed*, required the people who developed the initial innovation to establish entirely new organizations to manage their scaling: JUMP Math, Art Smarts, Roots of Empathy, Tamarack Institute, and Plan.

Approach 3: Prototyping and Follow Up Bridging

A third approach is for Labs to assume a lead role in stewarding phases 1 to 3.2, and then adopting a 'bridging' role for whatever works needs to be done in phases 3.3 to 7.

Al Etmanski, a veteran innovator, describes the importance of 'bridging innovators' in his book, *Impact*:

Bridging innovators are the link between disruptive innovators and formal organisations and institutions. Bridging innovators excel at spotting the potential in big ideas, then leveraging their connections, reputations and resources to make sure that potential is realized. Their support makes disruptive innovators more credible to others in the system. They are equally sympathetic to the struggles of originators and restraints of institutions. They act as broker, coach, buffer, champion, liaison and sometimes peacemaker. [...] These intermediaries explain to disruptors how best to describe or package an idea so it can be understood. They also interpret for disruptors the constraints, subtleties and openings in the system.²⁴

Lab practitioners demonstrate great ingenuity in their bridging efforts. Some have organised versions of Dragon's Den or Shark Tank where Lab participants present their ideas to funders willing to support their next phase of development. The participants in the Skills Society's Anti-racism Lab, the Edmonton Shift Lab 2.0 created the role of 'prototype coach' responsible for working with a small group of 'possible adopters' of innovations. Other Labs participants have mobilised

their own social networks to disseminate their ideas widely and advocate for their adoption across multiple systems.

The best examples of this type of Lab in Canada are those attached to institutions and therefore able to operate over the long term: Radius SFU, La Maison de l'innovation Sociale, MaRS Solutions Lab, Dark Matter Lab, and the UN Accelerator Lab, the Skills Society Action Lab. There are also examples of independent Lab initiatives that have been operating for ten years or more, such as Winnipeg Boldness and the Alberta Energy Futures Labs.

The 'bridger' Lab model significantly increases the chances that innovative ideas move from the prototype blackboard into implementation, and therefore, have a better chance of making a measurable difference on a complex challenge. However, they almost all require resources to fulfill the bridging activities: even the most committed group of Lab convenors, participants and facilitators can only champion the evolution of innovative response off the side of their desks for so long.

By the Way, Not All Innovations Should Be Scaled

There is a wide-spread assumption in the social innovation field that any promising – and eventually 'proven' – innovation to come out of Labs should be scaled out more broadly to other contexts. This is a key step in ensuring 'local' impact evolves into a 'larger' impact.

Take, for example, the Maranguka Justice Reinvestment Project in north-west New South Wales, Australia, an Aboriginal-led place-based model of justice reinvestment. This significant 'social innovation' emerged out of grassroots efforts to improve the wellbeing of children from their earliest years and using the 'savings' from reduced interactions with 'systems of sorrow' to reinvest in community and supportive services (e.g., education, recreation, cultural events). It is a wonderful initiative that has garnered widespread applause and support. However, while the people

²⁴ Etmanski, Al. 2015. *Impact: Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation*. Orwell Corve. Page 40.

IDEA #4: LABS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO – NOT DRIVE – A LONG TERM PROCESS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

and organisations of Maranguka are happy to share their experiences, their focus is primarily on sustaining, developing and adapting the initiative in their community, not more.

It is important to understand the pressures on Lab participants to scale their best solutions. The pressure is a reflection of (at least) two things: (1) a deeply rooted 'industrial paradigm' in dominant mainstream institutions that emphasise large scale, one-size-fits-all solutions, and (2) an urge for many (but not all) people to have as big an impact on stubborn challenges as possible. It's also important for Lab to be clear when it is – and is not – appropriate to consider scaling.

Implications for Lab Practitioners and Field Builders

1. Confirm that it is not always appropriate to scale out an innovation
2. Get clear about if and how scaling might be appropriate in each individual Lab
3. Manage stakeholder expectations about the scale, pace, and durability of results.

The Implication

It is reasonable to expect that Lab's impact on whatever stubborn societal challenge they aim to address is highly influenced by what parts of the innovation journey they are involved in, and how well they are supported to play those key roles.

“At their worst, Labs are innovation theatre with no impact. At their best, they can catalyze systems change at the roots of our most complex challenges - but this takes 10-40 years”

- Alex Ryan

Lab practitioners can point to a variety of examples of where their efforts have created changes in systems at a small scale. The following examples were shared by survey respondents:

“The Belonging Lab with UpSocial in North York, Ontario offered up a myriad solutions to test in/with the local community. The chosen innovation and the agency are still working together and are returning impactful outcomes.”

“Promising ideas that emerged from Shift Lab 2.0 have continued to be prototyped and scaled beyond the formal lab (e.g., [You Need This Box](#), [Bystander & A Guide to Bystander Intervention](#))”

“Capacity for Courage, a prototype stewarded out of the Economic Immigration Lab, set out to improve diversity education in the Anglophone school system of New Brunswick. It quickly gained traction and was picked up in 27 schools across the province.”

Some can identify instances where they influenced one element of a system at a larger scale. The following examples were shared by survey respondents:

“In the Lifehack series we took a longer term view of what it would take to shift the mental health and wellbeing system for young people in Aotearoa NZ. Instead of “accelerating solutions” we supported people to explore experiments and prototypes, but also to create new relationships, build new skills, and reflect on their progress and pathways forward. This resulted in more robust initiatives which were systemically-oriented, and more sustainable over time - some of the initiatives which stemmed from Lifehack are still going 10 years later, and the relationships have resulted in new collaborations, people shifting roles, and policy, narrative and place-based changes to support youth wellbeing.”

“The Economic Immigration Lab developed 15 prototypes and a number of them are operating at scale today including a job position called an Internationally Educated Nurse Navigator, which is housed within the provincial government and has become a model for a number of different areas and roles.”

“‘Sustainable Waterloo Region - External Working Group’ process led to the design of CO2-reduction program and became the core component of a broad community engagement/strategic planning process for Sustainable Waterloo Region. The mindset that went into the process then became operationally embedded within the organization, which in turn dramatically increased its long-term impact. This included spinning off a national scaling organization (Green Economy Canada) and was part of such a dramatic political change in our region that Sustainable Waterloo’s first ED was later elected to the Canadian Parliament under the Green Party banner.”

It is more difficult to find stories of Labs contributing to large scale systems innovation and change. Why? Because it takes a long time to change a system and even the most powerful Lab can only contribute to – not drive – such changes.

This is the central point of the book, *The Slow Lane: Why Quick Fixes Fail and How to Achieve Real Change*, by Sascha Haselmayer (2023). Sascha reminds us that shared public bicycles – a marvellous-yet-simple social innovation that has met with only modest public resistance – took over 40 years to catch on after it was introduced in Amsterdam in 1965. He goes on to argue that significant social innovation requires a long-term commitment and a ‘slow lane’ orientation.

[...] Slow Lane process decouples speed from scale. Fast Lane processes strip away complexity in favour of focus, circumventing [...] “the human mess’ of conflicting desires and emotions to

instead deliver measurable outputs. “Move fast and break things” is the now discredited mantra of Silicon Valley: indeed, the definition of “disruption” is a sharp break in the status quo. Fast, furious, and focused has been seen as key to disrupting entire systems – of transport, commerce, communications, education, and many other systems – and thereby achieving change at a systemic scale.

Slow lane change is no less wedded to scale. Social entrepreneurs also seek to change entire systems. Many public problem solvers focus on changing government policies and the implementation of those policies precisely because government works at a scale that even the biggest corporations can rarely achieve. Yet the changemakers [...] have learned, often the hard way, that speed can be the enemy of scale. Fast solutions often simply don't stick (p. viii).

Even in those instances of systems innovation that appear to have unfolded quickly are typically made possible by years of slow-lane work. Take, for instance, the new Canada Disability Benefit, a landmark change in legislation which aims to reduce poverty and increase the financial security of working-age persons with disabilities by providing monthly income tops ups. The exemplar ‘systemic innovation’ did not appear out of nowhere, but instead was made possible through a variety of earlier efforts and outcomes.

Decades of community organising and advocacy efforts by participants in the country's impressive disability movement has ensured that there is constant

‘pressure’ on system actors to be aware of the rights and plight of persons with disabilities.

→ A diverse group of community leaders in the disability field had been working on developing the concept of a disability benefit in a highly inclusive way for many years, one that included extensive cooperation and ‘bridging’ between activists, researchers, civil servants and political leaders.

→ The concept of the Disability Benefit was familiar – not radical -- to system actors thanks to a long history of similar innovation with income support programs (e.g., Basic Annual Income experiment in Dauphin Manitoba from 1975-1979, and the Registered Disability Savings Plan (2008)).

→ The disruption of COVID-19 dramatically increased the awareness of precarious work and incomes across Canada, which in turn prompted governments to develop a variety of large-scale income support programs.

A closer examination of the milestones leading up to the adoption of the Disability Benefit would certainly uncover even more system changes that helped to create a tipping point for yet one more. This reinforces the argument that systems change is the result of cumulative changes in a system – from small to large – over time.

While it's clear that it takes a long time to change ‘big’ systems, this is also true at the local level. There are plenty of examples of Lab activities that have led to improvements in the systems to manage local water resources, change how school boards support their diverse students, and adjustments to workforce development systems respond to the unique needs of immigrants and refugees. And none of these systems changes happened overnight. They were the product of relentless and widespread change-making efforts over time, some of which were influenced by local Labs.

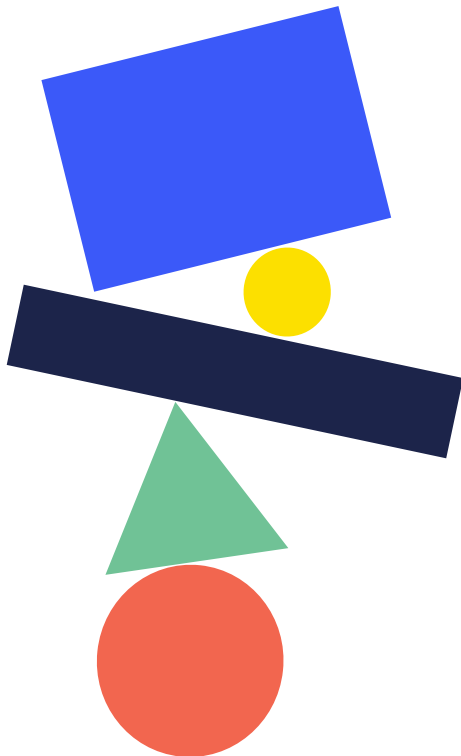
The Implication

It is reasonable to expect that Labs can contribute to small to large systems changes in the following ways:

→ creating opportunities for system stakeholders to develop knowledge, agency and connections that not only result in better ideas, but also leads to their increasing participation in pushing for change;

- the development and testing of thoughtful new ways to change a system for the better that might influence the thinking – or be adopted – by system actors;
- strengthening connections between ‘disruptive innovators’ inside the Lab and the ‘receptor’ innovators in a way that increases the chances that system actors will adopt new ideas; and
- achieving a series of smaller scale system changes over time, including the occasional ‘big win’ (e.g., Disability Benefit) when there is a ‘perfect storm’ of enabling conditions (e.g., social movements that press for change, disruptive events that create space for adopting new ideas).

However, it is unreasonable to expect Labs to make these contributions powerfully and consistently when the enabling conditions are weak (e.g., short term funding, too broadly framed challenges, relatively inexperienced Lab participants).



WORKING CONCLUSION

This section of the Primer set out to answer the question: What is reasonable to expect about the scale, pace, and durability of Lab results? The answer to that question is that ‘it depends’ on (at least) four things (and probably more):

- The type of results sought by Lab participants
- The enabling conditions surrounding the Lab
- Where in the “innovation journey” a Lab chooses to play a role
- Having a realistic understanding of how ‘big systems’ change.

This exploration of these ideas points to two streams of work required at the level of individual Labs and the level of the broader field to increase the chances the next generation of Labs in Canada yield even more powerful results.

1. Convenors, facilitators, participants, and supporters of individual Labs must explicitly and systematically co-develop and frame what ‘reasonable results’ look like for their initiative. This requires, at a minimum, them to discuss and agree on:

- A. The value proposition and/or type of results they hope to achieve in their unique context and why.
 - i. The current enabling conditions for the Lab, how they might be improved, and how they influence results.
 - ii. Where the Lab will play a role in the innovation journey, why, and ensure that they have the resources and capacity to do so effectively.
 - iii. A better sense of the unique contributions that a Lab might make to the larger process of system change.

Their ability to work through these items will dramatically improve their ability to design, implement, evaluate, and communicate good Labs and engage Lab stakeholders over the long term.

2. Those interested in strengthening the overall field of Labs can do so through two types of activities:

- A. Make the ‘Lab results’ conversation’ more formal and robust:
 - i. Document the different types of Labs, the kinds of results that each might achieve, their

respective strengths and limitations, and what might be required for enabling conditions for each.

ii. Develop white papers or position statements on what type of results are reasonable to expect, backed up by good examples (e.g., How Labs contribute to systems change).

iii. Produce frameworks, methods and examples that can assist people to spot, track, evaluate and communicate their actual results and impacts.

B. Improve the enabling conditions for Labs to achieve results:

i. Expand the access to activities knowledge, skills, confidence and connection of Lab convenors, facilitators, participants and supporters (e.g., training, resources, communities of practice).

ii. Increase the number, variety and responsiveness of quality funding opportunities (public, private, third sector) for Labs in a way that increases funders' understanding of the value proposition of Labs and what is reasonable to expect in terms of outcomes.

Questions for Further Reflection

→ What other types of results have Lab practitioners and participants emerged from Labs not covered in this document?

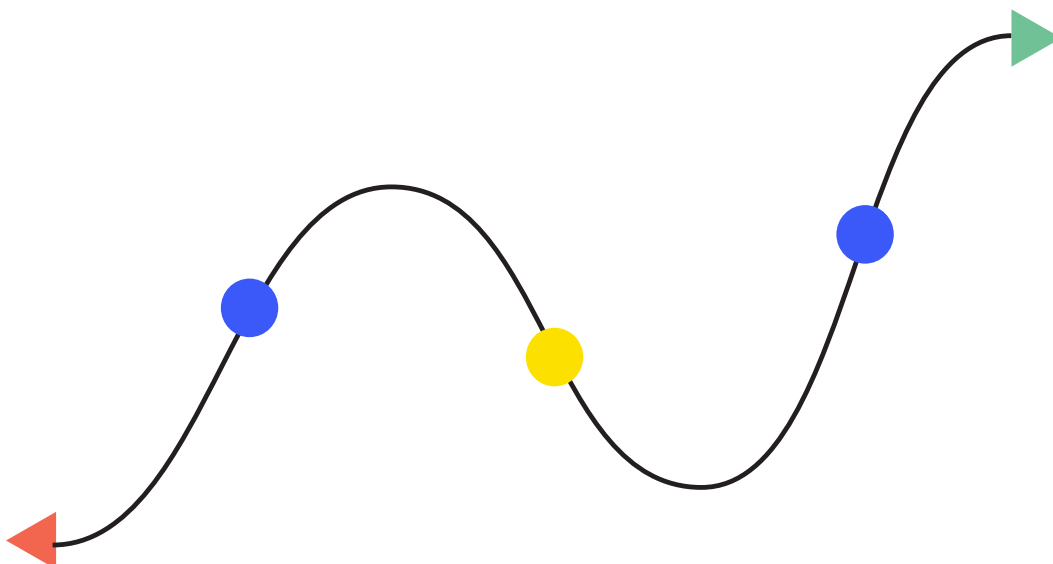
→ Should the Lab field embrace a pluralist approach that encourages each Lab to sort out which types of results they want to prioritise, or should those in the field seek to develop a standard or a position on which ones might be more preferable to others?

→ What other enabling conditions influence the scale, pace and durability of Lab results? How?

→ What are the different ways to better understand how Labs play a role in the social innovation journey and how that influences their contribution to making an impact on a stubborn challenge?

→ Are we a step closer to developing a shared understanding of the contribution of Labs to larger systems innovation and change?

→ What are the ways that the convenors, facilitators, participants and supporters of Labs can develop a more explicit, shared and reasonable set of expectations about the scale, pace and durability of their results?



CONVERSATION 4: HELPFUL LAB PRACTICES

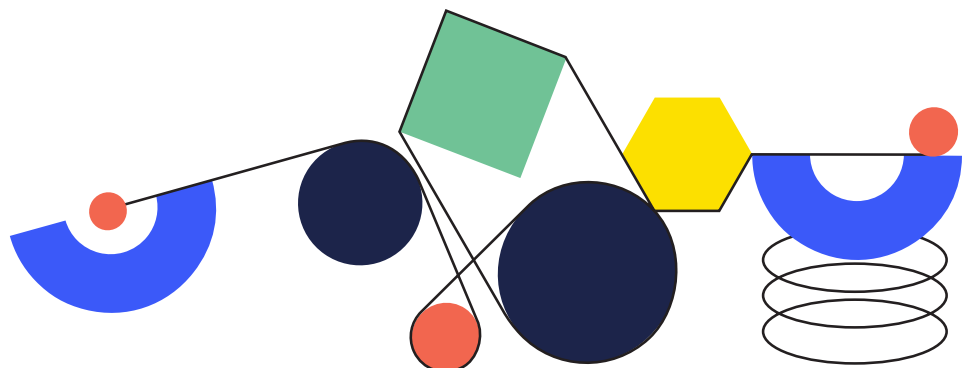
As we look to collectively vision and offer possible next practices for the field, we feel it's important to reflect on and name the practices and processes that support meaningful and impactful Labs. In this section we further explore some of the antecedents of Labs, importantly Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews, as well as other processes, methods, and philosophies practitioners have been mixing into their Lab practices the last 20 years. This is a starting place to support further reflection at the Future of Labs gathering, where we will begin to converge on:

- the capabilities, mindsets, methods, and skills needed to design, manage and evaluate high quality Social Innovation Labs;
- what capabilities are 'core' to Labs, what are important and relational, and what are deeply situational/context specific; and.
- what Labs and Lab practitioners need to get substantially better at in the next 5-10 years.

INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS OF COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING

Social innovation approaches may not be entirely new, and many of the core tenets of collective problem solving can be connected to deeply rooted ancient human traditions around the world, including Indigenous traditions on Turtle Island. Indigenous communities and worldviews are diverse, and deeply rooted in the contexts, histories, and communities in which Indigenous people have and continue to live, create, and care for. It is important to emphasise that there is no 'single' Indigenous worldview or epistemology²⁵, and approaches within the context of Labs need to be tailored to the people and contexts of the Lab or challenge.

For this section, we share some reflections on Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews from Indigenous social innovation leaders in Turtle Island. The purpose of this sharing is to help illustrate the unique and important ways Indigenous epistemologies have and continue to shape the field of social innovation. We also share some tensions that arise in intertwining Indigenous approaches with Labs and end with some questions for further reflection. We express our gratitude to Diane Roussin, Jeska Slater, and Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse for sharing their stories and wisdom with us.



Relationships in systems

Diane reflected that complex challenges require a different approach and Indigenous worldviews, which see the world holistically and interconnected, lend themselves to complexity. Inherent within Indigenous worldviews is systems thinking and action, seeing how everything - land, water, people, the winged and four-legged ones are interconnected.

“Many Indigenous epistemologies are based on holistic, universal, and de-centralized modes of thinking. Indigenous worldviews have been rooted in systems perspectives for thousands of years. For example, in the Cree worldview, the human is not the centre of the system; the Cree recognize the interconnection of the four-legged beings, the winged ones, the water, the air, the cosmos, and the land with us, the two-legged.”

- Shift Lab 2.0 Report²⁶

Oral Traditions and Artefacts

For many Indigenous communities, oral traditions and artefacts hold significant importance in the transfer and memory of knowledge. These artefacts, whether it is a totem pole or beaded jacket for example, each represent practices and processes within that system, and are used for sharing and generating knowledge. Jodi shares:

“Things that often you just look at as simple, beautiful objects of art, actually are - because of oral traditions - are actually ways to remind us of who we are. You know, our axiology, our ontology,

our pedagogy, our epistemology - everything about who we are, is rooted and reflected as a people in these items and stories they signify.”

- Jodi

Jodi highlights parallels with social innovation processes and knowledge coming from Lab processes, tools, methods being part of carrying, creating, and sharing knowledge. Artefacts - in both social innovation processes and Indigenous worldviews - play an important role in the upholding of the memory of a specific prototype and the worldviews that were drawn from.

Diane emphasised the need to attend to oral traditions when co-creating with community and to “sit in conversation with people”. She cautioned privileging or giving space only to intellectual ways of thinking and the written word, pointing to the Indigenous tradition of thinking with the medicine wheel, attending to and balancing all aspects of our being - the intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual (knowing we’re part of something bigger than ourselves).

“We(humans) are holistic and many of our Indigenous ceremonies are based on natural ways of being - this idea of sharing and expressing ourselves is a natural way of healing”

- Diane Roussin

²⁶ Learnings from Shift Lab 2.0 https://issuu.com/edmontonshiftlab/docs/final_finished_report

Some Ways This Shows Up in Practice

Rooted in relationality and traditional knowledge, some common Indigenous epistemologies of collective problem solving include land-based practices, ceremony, deep listening, asking elders for guidance, storytelling, and relationship-building practices.

What Indigenous Epistemologies Look Like in Action²⁷

Indigenous epistemologies are based in:

- Storytelling
- Land-based practices
- Customary law
- Ceremonies
- Languages
- Connections to land, water, and cosmos

Questions Indigenous epistemologies ask:

- What relationships are existing here?
- What are my obligations and responsibilities?
- How is this problem connected to the world around us?
- What legal traditions provide precedent here?
- Whose territory am I on?
- What languages are spoken here?
- Who are all my relatives in this territory (two-leggeds, four-leggeds, winged ones)?
- What are the existing treaties in this territory?

Image taken from Learnings from Shift Lab 2.0

Tensions and Questions for Further Reflection

Sharing Power and Caring in Equitable Ways For Those Involved In a Lab Process

Historically in Turtle Island, research and community engagement practices with Indigenous communities have often been extractive. This has led to barriers to connecting with communities in a good way. Jeska shares the excitement she felt when first experiencing social innovation processes, not only in the amount of confluence between Indigenous worldviews, but also for the opportunity it afforded to embed ethical research practices - in particular the ways in which it shares and shifts power. At the same time, Jeska experienced tensions early on in her work, sharing how communities hold knowledge and are their own experts, but often are not empowered to explore how social innovation aligns with their worldview, or how it could be used to express their worldview. Jeska goes on to say that as Labs and Lab practitioners, we need to be mindful of power differentials, including being accountable to who we're bringing in and how we're caring for them. An important piece is how people are recognized - being explicit about where the wisdom comes from and how it's impacted the process. Jeska points to a consent-based approach which involves being very clear with how a community's wisdom, knowledge, and gifts will be used in the process.

Empowering Communities

“...as much as you want the community to learn about social innovation methodologies, I think the practitioners need to learn about the worldviews that they're stepping into. ... I don't know that there's been given equal consideration to that in the past.”

- Jeska

²⁷ https://issuu.com/edmontonshiftlab/docs/final_finished_report

In recent years, social innovation has begun to better reflect the diversity of the communities within which it works. However, Jeska and Jodi call in Labs and Lab practitioners to be mindful of not trying to ‘fit’ diversities into a pre-described methodology - one that largely has roots in Western ways of thinking, among others (e.g. Eastern philosophical epistemologies). Drawing from their experiences, Jeska and Jodi wondered how Labs may become more of a tool making it more accessible to communities. Jodi shared that the marriage of these processes - Indigenous ways of being and social innovation - has much to offer organisations, nations, and communities working through complex challenges. As a result of colonisation, many Indigenous communities have lost some of their traditional processes of problem-solving and navigating complexity. **Jodi highlighted that capacity building, offering and sharing social innovation tools as a methodology to communities, is part of reconciliation and reparation, and emphasise the importance of gifting the tool at the pace of the people.** Promising examples exist that show how this approach can empower communities and redistribute power (see Skookum Lab and Winnipeg Boldness on page 85). On the other hand, some marginalised communities have expressed challenges, finding it burdensome, and often seeking external support in stewarding the process. This underscores the importance of a relational, consent-based approach, acknowledging the unintended consequences and burden that good intentions might inadvertently place on communities by simply providing tools.

Nurturing a Supportive Ecosystem - Time and Funding

The above conversation led the group to surface a hard tension several communities and Labs practitioners are facing, in that many of the systems in which we operate are trending back towards solutionism and oversimplified, quick fixes. There is a lack of investment in relational processes that prioritize careful thought and reflection over short-term outcomes and efficiency. Furthermore, many Indigenous communities find current funding structures and processes inaccessible by having to fit into pre-determined frames in order to access support. Jodi shared:

“all these ways in which you can apply for granting, but oftentimes, it’s perpetuating harm, in that it’s reducing a nation’s ability to just do as they intended to do. Now, they’re fitting their practice into the current context and construct of a social innovation systemic design type application grant. So you know, addressing the colonial systemic harm that we often can perpetuate, rather than what is your nation doing? How can we use social innovation to lift what it is that you’re already doing?”

- Jodi

Questions for Further Reflection

- How might we mobilise Labs, and supporting systems, to mentor, make space, and help build capacity within communities?
- In what contexts are social innovation tools offered as options for community exploration? In what contexts is external social innovation support provided (meaningfully weaving Indigenous epistemologies into the process in a way that respects and aligns with the unique perspectives and contexts of the community)? In what contexts might it be a mix of both?
- How might we ensure the introduction of tools is based in relationships of mutual understanding and respect and that the pace of introduction is set by the needs and readiness of communities with appropriate investment so as to not be at the cost of the community?
- How must Social Innovation Labs operate to be positioned as a contribution to reconciliation and avoid reinforcing colonisation?

EARLY DESIGN THINKING AND SYSTEMS THINKING CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES THAT HAVE INFLUENCED LABS

The social innovation ecosystem within Turtle Island is predominantly informed by a Western perspective²⁸. As we look ahead to getting more clear and coherent on how we navigate the complexities of theory and practice as it relates to being in good relationship and decolonizing Lab approaches, Jodi offers:

“there has to be a little space to be okay in the zone, that we’re never going to embody the idealized belief systems. And it happens in the common law between primary and secondary forms of law of what we constitute is the law and then what is actually practiced as a principle. So it happens in all kinds of systems the way we imagine and philosophize about us being and then the way we embody that action. And so I think similar to other systems, we have to allow innovation and systems thinking, to also have that gray area where we strive to practice these idealized methods, whatever they are for each nation, but that on the ground, sometimes the practical embodied application looks different.”

- Jodi

The concept of holding Two-eyed Seeing can also serve as a method of inquiry when navigating tensions between different worldviews. As described by Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall, Two-eyed Seeing is:

“to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together.”

- Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall

Driven by a need to better serve communities that typically did not benefit from the Western design studio, Labs were situated to tackle systemic, complex, and social challenges “to make the world a better place.”²⁹ With such diverse lineages and backgrounds forming the methodological foundations of Labs, it created space for divergence in Lab practices and typologies³⁰. Some common early design and systems stewardship practices and processes within Labs included:

→ **Interdisciplinary foundations:** incorporating diverse disciplinary methodologies like psychology, complexity theory, design thinking, and computer modelling, to explore and work within whole systems.

→ **Inclusive and diverse participation:** engaging a wide range of stakeholders with diverse perspectives, including those with living and lived experience and individuals with systems authority.

→ **Broad dual-phased research:** research-in is used to base understanding of the challenge and a starting point for the Lab, while research-out happens throughout the Lab process as the Lab participants engage in types of ethnographic field research to test ideas, assumptions, and solutions.³¹

→ **Specialised environments:** these may be a specific location within a community or embedded in the context of the challenge, or a curated environment that is removed from daily routine to facilitate creative problem-solving.

→ **Process roadmaps and facilitation:** Lab participants are typically provided with a clear understanding of their roles, the challenge being explored, and the overall Lab process.

→ **Diverse support and expertise:** Participants have access to a wide range of support expertise for research, prototyping, and engagement, to support their work.

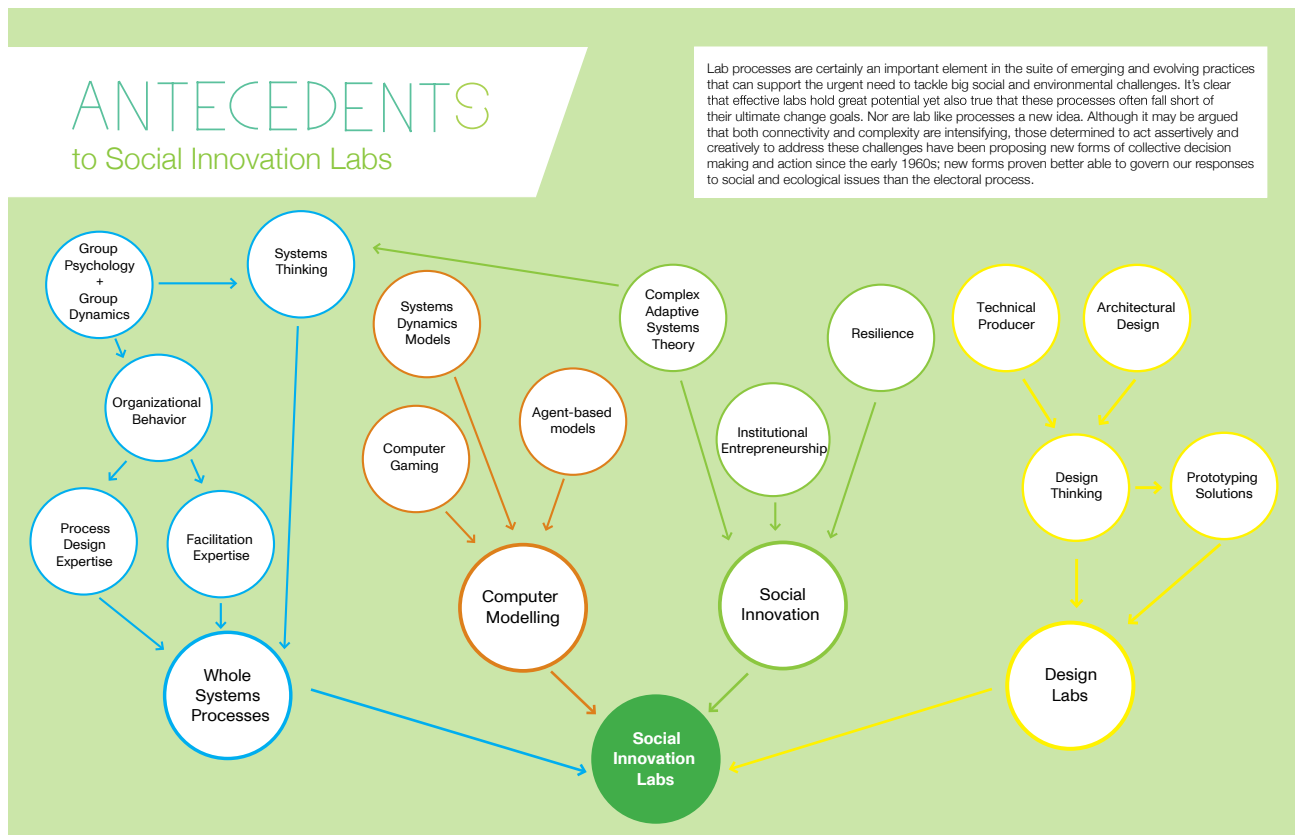
→ **Continual learning and capacity building:** Continuous development of tools, methodologies, and training, often in collaboration with academic institutions, to support participant engagement and adapt to evolving challenges.

→ **A focus on systemic change and cultural shifts:** Labs may include immediate solutions but typically aim farther ahead to foster behavioural and cultural change that leads to sustained systemic impact.

²⁸ <https://widjiwagan.abo-peoples.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Indigenous-Innovation-and-Social-Innovation-in-Canada1.pdf>

²⁹ Labs: Designing the Future - Torjman

Image and model from Social Innovation Lab Guide by Frances Westley, Sam Laban, Cheryl Rose, Katharine McGowan, Kirsten Robinson, Ola Tjornbo, Mark Tovey



Lab processes are certainly an important element in the suite of emerging and evolving practices that can support the urgent need to tackle big social and environmental challenges. It's clear that effective labs hold great potential yet also true that these processes often fall short of their ultimate change goals. Nor are lab like processes a new idea. Although it may be argued that both connectivity and complexity are intensifying, those determined to act assertively and creatively to address these challenges have been proposing new forms of collective decision making and action since the early 1960s; new forms proven better able to govern our responses to social and ecological issues than the electoral process.

Several key principles were, and many continue to be, woven through these practices including:

- **Collaboration:** convening the whole system in the room to work together across silos and ideological divides on a complex challenge.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** bringing together and using diverse knowledge bases to address complex problems.
- **Systems thinking** to understand and address root causes of issues rather than just the symptoms. Stepping back to look at broader system connections, dynamics, and patterns to identify leverage points.
- **User-centred design:** ensuring that the needs, experiences, and aspirations of those affected by the challenges are centred and at the heart of the process.
- **Experimentation and prototyping:** trying new ideas quickly and iteratively to test assumptions, learn quickly from failure, and refine solutions in real-world settings.

→ **Openness and transparency:** fostering trust amongst participants and stakeholders, through sharing learnings, challenges, and successes.

→ **Flexibility and adaptability:** responding to emergent knowledge that may pivot the Lab strategy and approach.

→ **Inclusivity and equity:** prioritising inclusion and equity, ensuring diverse voices, particularly those that are marginalised, underserved or underrepresented are heard and valued.

→ **Sustainability:** Solutions are intended to be long-term, sustainable, and address root causes.

→ **Empowerment and capacity building:** participants are empowered and supported in their capacity building throughout the Lab process, so that communities may be more resilient and left better equipped.

→ **Partnership and network building:** Diverse stakeholders are connected across sectors, building strong relationships and amplifying available resources.

³⁰ Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories - Kieboom

³¹ Change Lab/Design Lab for Social Innovation - Westley, Goeby, and Robinson

A TAPESTRY OF INFLUENCE: WORLDVIEWS, THEORIES, AND FRAMEWORKS LAB PRACTITIONERS DRAW ON

Landscape of Innovation Approaches by States of Change

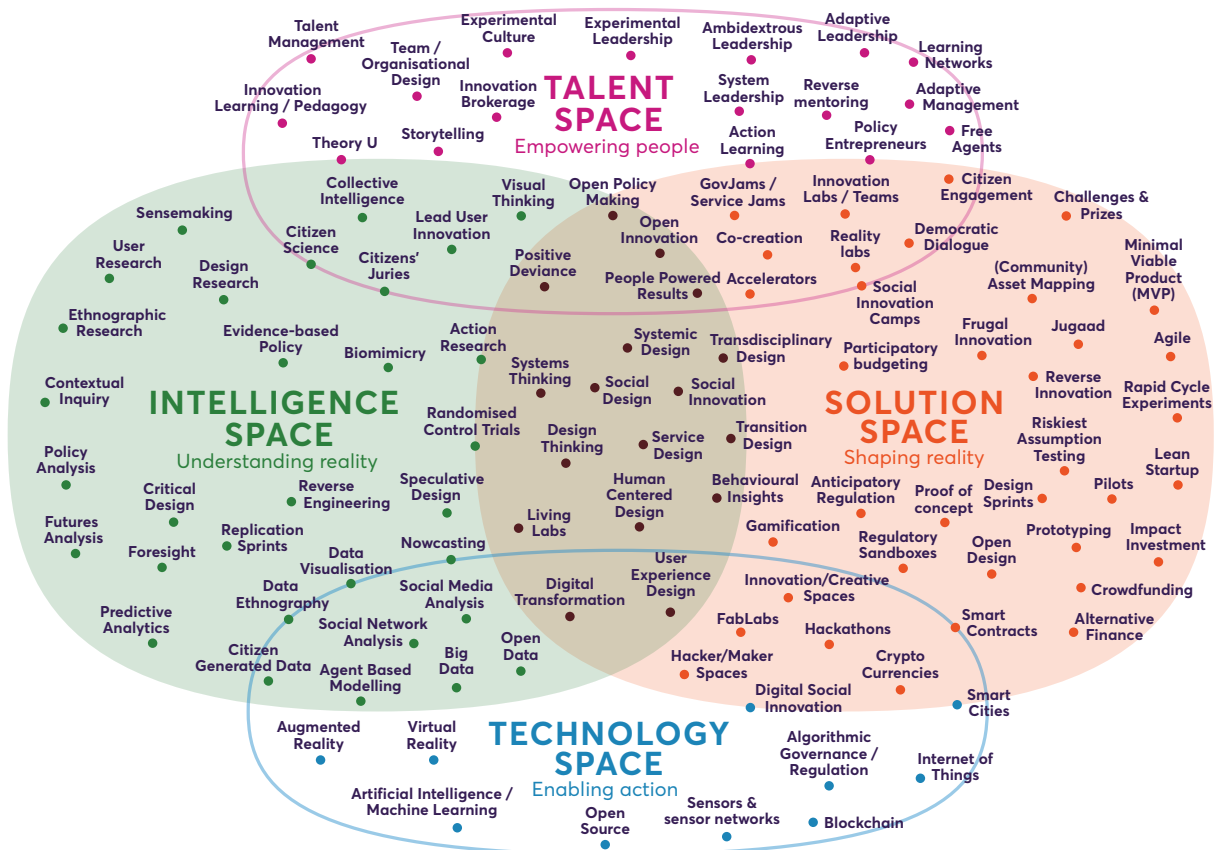
Below is a diagram created by Nesta that maps methods and approaches within the innovation landscape in four spaces:

- **Intelligence space:** focuses on approaches that help you make sense of and conceptualize reality
- **Solution space:** focuses on methods that help you test and develop solutions

→ **Technology space:** includes approaches and technology that enable action and change such as digital tools and data-related methods

→ **Talent space:** focuses on how to mobilize talent, develop skills and increase organizational readiness in order to ultimately make change happen³²

Landscape of Innovation Approaches
Version 2 (December 2018)



³² <https://states-of-change.org/resources/landscape-of-innovation-approaches>

Examples Sourced from Survey Participants

As part of the Future of Labs survey, participants were invited to share the worldviews, philosophies, epistemologies, theories, individuals/mentors, and frameworks that have helped to significantly inform their Lab practice. What is represented is not exhaustive, but serves as a snapshot of some of the lineages, experiences, and people who inform and influence Lab practice.



PROMISING LAB PRACTICES

Individuals/Mentors

Individuals who have mentored, shaped, and influenced respondents' Lab practices:

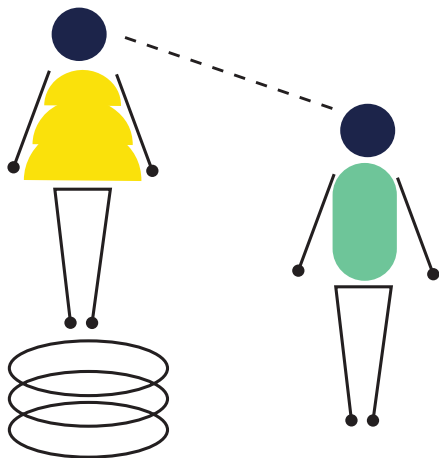
| | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Adam Kahane | Leanne Betasamosake |
| Aleeya Velji | Simpson |
| Alex Ryan | Leslie Johnston |
| Annand Ollivierre | Lona Lieren |
| Audrey Lorde | Louise Adongo |
| Ben Weinlick | Mark Cabaj |
| Bell Hooks | Martin Shaw |
| Bonnitta Roy | Madeleine Ashby |
| Charles Leadbeater | Margaret Wheatley |
| Claire Buré | Melanie Goodchild |
| 'Cúagilákv (Jess Háusti) | Michael Quinn Patton |
| Daniel Schmachtenberger | Nate Hagens |
| Darlene Spelten | Nick Scott |
| Diane Roussin | Nora Bateson |
| Donella Meadows | Pat Meheny |
| Frances Westley | Peter Senge |
| Giulio Quaggitotto | Robin Wall Kimmerer |
| Indy Johar | Roya Damabi |
| Jane Vella | Sascha Haselmayer |
| Jen Pahlka | Sarah Schulman |
| Jerry Koh | Scott Smith |
| Jessie Hemphill | Thomas Homer-Dixon |
| Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse | Tim Draimin |
| Joeri van den Steenhoven | Toke Mueller |
| Johnnie Freeland | Tyson Yunkaporta |
| Keren Perla | Zaid Hassan |
| Kristofer Kelly-Frere | |

As part of preparing for Future of Labs, diverse Lab practitioners were asked in focus groups and through a survey, to identify strong Lab practises the field should hold onto and lab practises the field might need to let go of. Responses were diverse but highlighted four areas to pay attention to: avoid perpetuating systemic harm, prioritise capacity building, get better a scoping and evaluation, and resist prescriptive and rigid methods.

Avoid Perpetuating Systemic Harm

Incorporating social justice principles and, in particular, decolonizing practices, was identified by a number of practitioners as something to strive to get better at. Some specific social justice oriented practices raised were: practitioners reflecting on their power and privilege in Labs, centering the voices and experiences of lived and living experience, engaging in self inquiry/embodyed practices, focusing in on nurturing relationships, and challenging or resisting Western ways of thinking, doing, and being (e.g. valuing perfectionism, concepts of time, rhetorical patterns). Foundational to these practices being viewed as promising was a desire by practitioners to avoid perpetuating systemic harm. As is surfaced in Conversations 2 and 3 in this Primer, while Lab practitioners generally agree they want to avoid perpetuating systemic harm, tensions and disagreement exist related to how to best do this in practice.

The intersections of social justice and social innovation is a thread of reflection and inquiry that transcends conversations in this Primer. See Conversations 2 and 3 for additional information on the synergies and tensions that surface in intertwining these approaches.



Prioritise Capacity Building

Several respondents shared a desire for the field to prioritise capacity building and knowledge sharing with communities so that communities can then set out to do their own change work. Respondents suggested part of this work might involve making Lab practices more participatory and consent-oriented with a focus on relationship and collaborative environments.

“Labs need the grounded perspective of those engaged in/affected by what the Lab is working on - however, relying on these individuals for particular skills (e.g. design or research) and/or a lot of heavy lifting is a limitation of many Labs. Some recent Labs are finding effective ways to address this by building in these specialized skills as a direct support to the core team working on the ideas and solutions.”

- Survey Respondent

While in general respondents agreed that capacity building is an important practice, other respondents emphasised the complexity of this work - that it's not as simple as it may appear and that marginalised communities may not always want to be involved in all aspects of designing systemic solutions. In these respondents' experience, sometimes marginalised communities wanted the help and involvement of those outside their community to bring knowledge, resources, and expertise specific to social innovation. A good starting point to addressing this tension is to ask communities how they want to participate before the Lab is designed. Another tension surfaced related to capacity building was the challenge of maintaining a 'quality of practice' - how can the field ensure that the tools of social innovation are shared in ways that maintain their integrity?

Get Better at Scoping and Evaluation

Respondents articulated a desire to continue to get better at scoping and evaluation. Several respondents shared a desire for evaluation and knowledge mobilisation to be more intentionally incorporated into Lab structures and design. Related to scoping, some respondents shared they'd like to see less of a focus on novelty and a stronger incorporation of what might be already working when scoping a Lab. UpSocial's approach was shared as a promising example of this.

“It sometimes feels like each Lab is starting new. I wonder sometimes if there would be value in trying to bring in things we already know, or might know if we are still unsure, and using that to set some early context”

- Survey Respondent

Another respondent voiced the many tensions that can come with scoping a Lab well. They shared how they've observed a tendency in the Lab space to want to invite “everyone” from a system into a Lab experience, make sense of all the wicked, interconnected challenges, and decide together as a large collective what the Lab will focus on. From their perspective there are risks to consider when taking this approach:

“In principle, inviting everyone in, seems like a good inclusive approach, but in practice with limited resources and limited analysis, experienced practitioners often say this approach can lead to a Lab biting off more than it can chew so to speak. Or might cause a Lab to focus on a scope that may not be a decent leverage point or relevant.”

- Survey Respondent

For this respondent, a more promising approach to scoping involves a Lab stewardship group leading robust scoping, pre-Lab research, literature reviews, focus groups that include both folks with lived experience and system leaders, and triangulates all of it into Primer reports, briefs and meaningful stories that express why a certain scope is important.

Edmonton Shift Lab 1.0 and 2.0³³ are good case studies to look to around the importance of scoping and how different approaches to scoping can shape different outcomes. In Shift Lab 1.0, the stewardship team took on the challenge of exploring the intersections of racism and poverty in Edmonton. In this iteration of the Lab they took a more open approach to scoping - asking a broad and diverse cross-section of community members where they thought the Lab should focus. Community members stated that food security and more specifically, food banks, were a strong leverage point. While community members identified a need, food security and food banks and their intersections with racism and poverty felt removed from the initial intent of the Shift Lab. The stewardship team was left grappling with how far to drift from the original intent of the Lab. Reflecting on learning from Shift Lab 1.0, in Shift Lab 2.0, the stewardship team and developmental evaluator stewarded robust scoping over 9 months and engaged the community, wove together systemic design, informal story sharing with community, indigenous ceremony, and expert insights to help land on 4 specific scoped challenges. Due to this more focused scoping, outputs and impacts were much more significant, prototypes turned into pilots and then evolved into stand-alone non-profits and scaling interventions that continue to this day to show promise for addressing racism in systemic ways.

Resist Prescriptive and Rigid Methods

“I find that the Lab movement is held together, maybe not by the Lab concept, but by the drive and by the people and the relationships that keep going up to today, which I think is the most beautiful element of this community. Where

like-minded experimentalist people come together, and think deeply, and are daring and bold to try new things. We have this intrinsic drive for a just, equitable, regenerative world.”

- Marlieke Kieboom

Numerous respondents shared a desire to let go of prescriptive and rigid methods that might overtly or inadvertently promise silver bullets and/or quick fixes. Respondents were unsure where this pressure originates from - some wondered if it is short sighted thinking on the part of Lab practitioners? Or does it have more to do with the funding, time, and runway Labs are given? Or a mix of both? This is in fact a wider pattern that is [experienced](#) by many change methodologies.³⁴ There was also a recognition that prescriptive methods, while they can provide structure and ‘stepping stones’ for new practitioners to build their practice from, they also risk glossing over the importance of the human characteristics a Lab practitioner brings to the Lab process - things like judgement and improvisation. Mark Cabaj, a focus group participant, shared there’s an important middle ground to aim for called “coherency”:

“You can provide framework and guidance [on Lab process], but you really need judgement and improvisation, and some experience to do it. And so at that point I went: ‘stop doing recipes and stop overly codifying Labs’... there’s something between chaos and consistency, and it’s called coherency.”

- Mark Cabaj, Here2There Consulting

Alex Ryan, another focus group participant, echoed Mark’s sentiments, articulating a need to professionalise the field. To Alex, professionalisation incorporates both a focus on elevating our standards related to methods and cultivating a critical reflective practice as a practitioner bringing those methods to life:

³³ More on Shift Lab 1.0 and 2.0, including reports and tools developed at www.edmontonshiftlab.ca. View reflections on scoping starting on p. 16 of “Learnings from Shift Lab 2.0” report.

³⁴ Sarah Sheard, Life Cycle of a Silver Bullet, CrossTalk, 2003.

“For me, I think what we’re trying to do is, on the one hand, elevate the practice of the field, which is a form of professionalisation. Because as long as you have people thinking that they can watch a couple of TED talks, and then go and start a Lab, I mean, that’s what killed off most of the Labs in the last iteration was people coming in without enough depth of knowledge. This is harder than brain surgery or rocket science, like it literally is, but there are the people that think that anyone can pick this up and start doing it. So I think we want to professionalise in a sense and have a higher standard of work, because we know that without that the field as a whole just gets a bad rap. And it’s seen as a fad...So I’m not averse to methods, I’m averse to the uncritical approach to methods.”

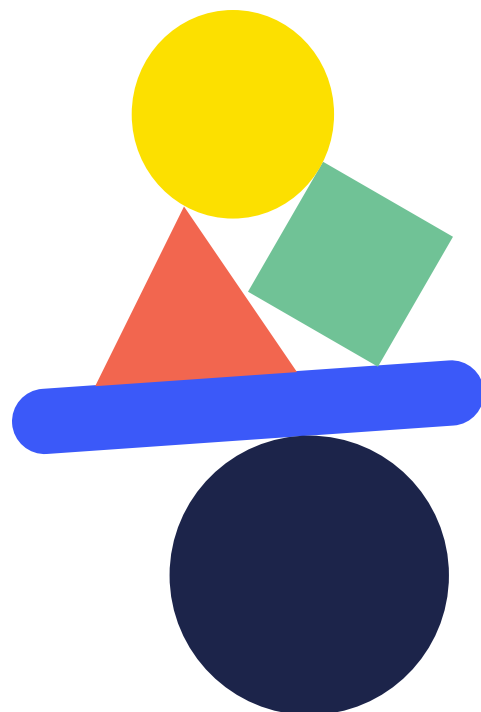
- Alex Ryan

Alex goes on to share the work of Otto Scharmer as a source of inspiration for becoming a critically reflective practitioner:

“Like that quote from Otto Scharmer’s book on Theory U, it is one of my all time favourite quotes, ‘the success of the intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener’. We don’t think of that, when we’re thinking about why Labs failed. We don’t go there. But that’s really the starting point for all of this. And if you can’t have that reflective

journey at the same time as you’re trying to make change in the world, it’s not going to work at all.”

- Alex Ryan



CONVERSATION 5: WHAT ARE THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS AND SUPPORTING ECOSYSTEM FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS TO THRIVE IN CANADA?

OVERVIEW OF THE STATE OF LABS IN CANADA

In 2018 in response to hearing practitioners' desire to learn from each other and build robust practice together, RADIUS SFU hosted CONVERGE, which brought together over 130 Social Innovation Lab practitioners and key ecosystem enablers.

"CONVERGE aimed to:

- Deepen relationships and trust amongst Lab practitioners, laying the foundation for an active pan-Canadian Community of Practice;
- Create a space for Lab practitioners to add value to each other's work through Peer Input Processes;
- Make visible the diversity and impact of Social Innovation Labs in Canada through system mapping;

- Begin to build a shared set of tools, practices, language, knowledge, and expertise across the lifecycle of a Lab; and
- Identify key problem/opportunity areas where Canadian Labs can better align for increased coordination and impact.³⁵

In the five years leading up to CONVERGE, Canada saw a dramatic increase in the number of Social Innovation Labs.

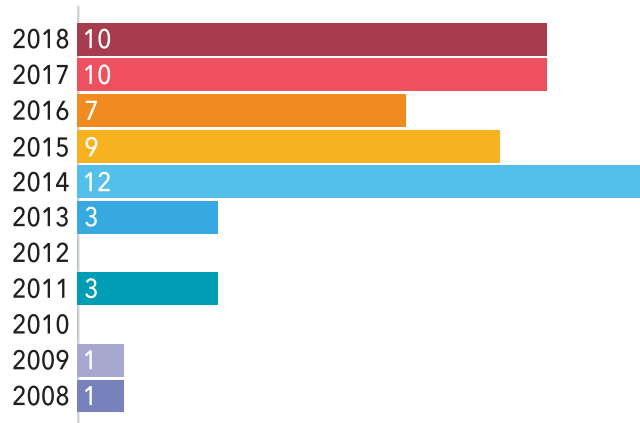
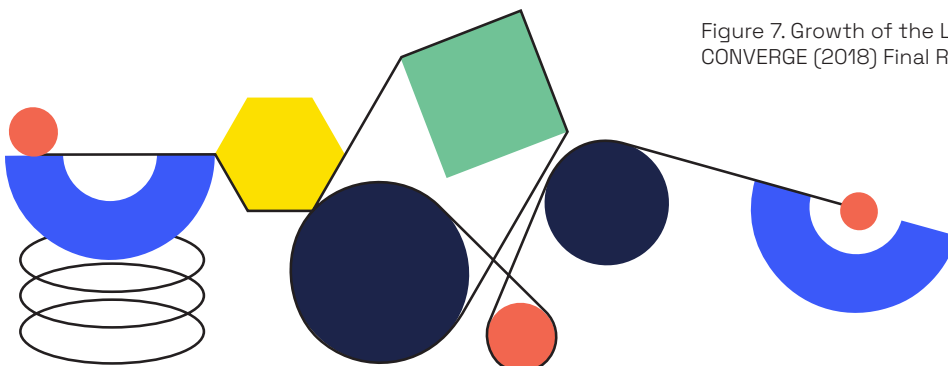



Figure 7. Growth of the Labs Field in Canada taken from CONVERGE (2018) Final Report




³⁵ CONVERGE Final Report

Many of the tensions and questions surfaced throughout this Primer Report were also raised at CONVERGE:




EQUITY PRACTICE

We need to be constantly asking ourselves ‘who are we including and excluding’? How are we holding convenings and who is holding them? How is social justice and equity practice expressed or not in the way we are operating? Who are we learning from? These questions all came up in the final plenary session at CONVERGE. There was an invitation posed to broaden our circles for the next gathering to include other people who might not look, speak or act like us and might not agree as much as we do. What is at risk if we do this and if we don’t?




FOCUS ON TOOLS VS ISSUES

Many lab conversations can be focused on tools and methodologies rather than the issues we’re actually trying to effect change around. There was a call at CONVERGE to yes, develop and evolve our methodologies, but also to not lose sight of the most important thing, which is positive impact on real issues and people. This ensures that we’re not becoming process geeks in a shiny bubble, but instead staying close to the ground. An increased issues focus could also be beneficial for funding and evaluation, as well as alignment between labs. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals are being explored as a shared framework.



TALENT PIPELINE

There are still very few direct social innovation / lab practitioner academic or other training programs in Canada. Most of us tend to be self-taught. This becomes a challenge as the labs approach takes force and there are opportunities to scale but no talent pipeline to support it. How can we assess or certify that someone is equipped to run a lab? How do we rapidly grow the number of people who have these competencies? How do we ensure that the people leading labs have connection to the issues topic and are representative of impacted communities?



FUNDING TO MATCH THE SCALE OF OUR AMBITIONS

Labs exist to get at the root causes of Canada’s most complex, intergenerational problems but the resources we are operating on doesn’t match this ambition. This makes it difficult to back up the systems transformation claims of labs and could undermine the true potential of the labs approach. Systems transformation, and the constituencies to support it, take sustained resourcing and many labs are scrambling to get multi-year investment. How could investment collectives be set up to provide stable funding at the scale of the change we’re wanting to create?

Image taken from CONVERGE (2018) Final Report

Following Converge, the Canadian Labs community stayed connected through monthly Lab Community of Practice calls hosted by Social Innovation Canada and the MaRS Solutions Lab. A [Living Guide to Social Innovation Labs](#) was published Led by MaRS Solutions Lab with contributions from the community of practice.

Between 2018 and 2021, a number of the original Canadian Social Innovation Labs

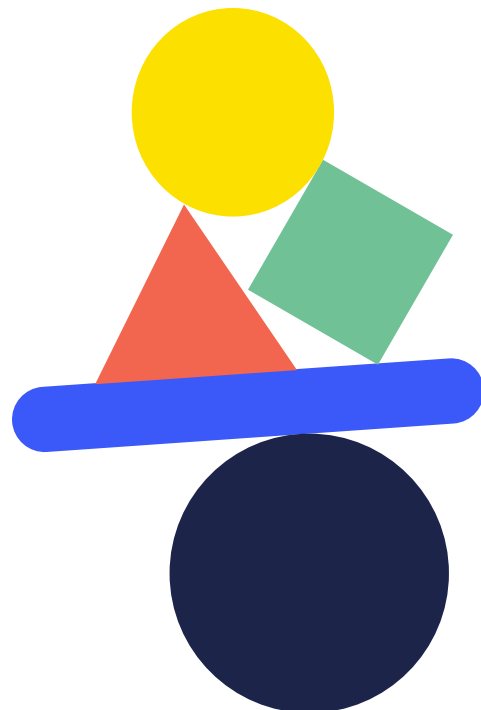
began to shut down due to a combination of changes in government direction and movement of Lab leadership. This included ISED Innovation Lab, Alberta CoLab and the Government of New Brunswick’s Lab. WellAhead was sunset after five years in 2020. MaRS Solutions Lab was restructured into a larger MaRS systems change team. Original Canadian Lab practitioners like InWithForward and Nourish branded away from the Social Innovation Lab label. Globally,

a similar trend of long-standing Labs shutting down was also observed, including Mindlab in Denmark and Laboratorio para la Ciudad in Mexico City.

While a more formal analysis of the causes of this period of Lab deaths is warranted, initial sensemaking by the Lab community observed a number of patterns:

- Changes in the funding landscape, including changes in direction at the McConnell Foundation, who were a principle funding partner for most Labs in the 2010s.
- Labs inside government proved brittle to changes in Lab leadership and loss of executive champions.
- Many Labs suffered from a credibility gulf between the promise (systems change) and the outputs (post-it notes, tabletop prototypes and reports).
- During the pandemic, there was a bifurcation between established Labs focused on topics amplified by the pandemic (e.g. mental health, youth employment, climate transition) that were able to attract additional support; and Labs at an earlier stage of development or more general-purpose that struggled to demonstrate relevance during the global health crisis.
- Following the pandemic, a snap-back to solutionism that lacked patience for convening, system sensing and early stage ideation.
- The emergence of new frames for public and social innovation, such as mission-oriented innovation.

The closure of Labs in this period is not necessarily a bad thing. But it does point to the need to more clearly differentiate value proposition (as discussed in Conversation 3), and niche for Labs among other change approaches (as discussed in Conversation 2); as well as continue to professionalise the Lab approach to engender greater trust and confidence that it will deliver results. As the first in-person convening of Canada's Lab community since CONVERGE, the Future of Labs gathering is an important time to reflect on the lessons of the last 5 years.



THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS AND SUPPORTING ECOSYSTEM

“The social innovation movement offers an alternative path forward. We seek to activate the radical middle and convene unusual suspects. We attempt to break through silos and bubbles to focus people on working together differently to address our thorniest challenges. We challenge each other to redesign our institutions to be more human and more inclusive and more responsible and more responsive to our 21st century reality. We need to keep doing this. But we need to think much bigger. We need more vision, more legitimacy, and more capacity if we are to turn the tide.”

- Alex Ryan³⁶

Fostering the creation of the ecosystem to support Labs involves building that vision, legitimacy and capacity. Like innovation ecosystems more broadly, the necessary conditions are multi-faceted, and as mentioned earlier in the Primer, require the contribution of enabling conditions, as well as institutions and organisations that can play a double role guiding and transforming the systems between which they move.

Although writing on Canada’s social innovation ecosystem and not just on Labs, Andrea Nemtin, CEO, Social Innovation Canada and Sandra Lapointe, Director, The Collaborative, highlight the valuable role enabling organisations can play as a catalyst by articulating the narrative and/or the strategic vision for the field. Enablers can also play a role in creating the dynamic, living repositories (or laboratories), where knowledge and expertise are curated and retrieved, offering social innovation actors the education tools and resources they need.³⁷

This ecosystem sight - identifying the role and contributions of both practitioners and enablers was less visible at CONVERGE in 2018, or perhaps unarticulated. The CONVERGE convening team found

the Lab landscape growing rapidly then, with 90% of the Labs reporting established in the previous 5 years, and close to half in the previous 2 years. In 2024 our landscape is very different. CONVERGE recognized the “relative immaturity of the field” and the “wild’ exploration of this way of working.” Today, we have grown in experience and have seen many Labs wrap or change form - opting for new language or different framing. How much is this shift a result of a poor value proposition, changing values or weak enabling infrastructure?

Helpfully timed for our Primer, in 2023 Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) were invited to review the global social Lab landscape for the Hong Kong-based MaD Social Lab to understand how the previous few years have affected their operations. Like us, SIX observed pressures on financing and funding for Labs as well as policy shifts away from some of these ways of working.

In their Top 5 takeaways, SIX included two that speak to the changing support ecosystem for Labs:

1. Framing and approach - many Labs are taking more of an ecosystemic approach, moving away from theory and methodology and conventional Lab language. They focus more on the connection with laymen, and the actual change on the ground.
2. Positioning in this new context - Whilst the relationship to an institution is still important, some Labs are doing more advocacy in their work and the different ways and roles they can play in influencing the systems around them.
3. **Diversify funding and longer term sustainability - Even Labs set up by governments are now concerned about sustainability and financial security. Diversified funding with network structures and membership models are essential for all Labs.**
4. **Operating in new conditions - New ways of working must be adapted, so Labs are upskilling teams, building digital literacy and getting grounded in different social issues.**
5. Evaluating and communicating impact - Labs have taken a long view and recognized that changes happen on various levels: individual, organisational and structural, which are not most effectively tracked by traditional measurement approaches.

³⁶ A History and Future of Policy Innovation (2017)

<https://medium.com/@alexryan/a-history-and-future-of-policy-innovation-c364b0948542>

³⁷ Canada’s Social Innovation Ecosystem 2023, Andrea Nemtin and Sandra Lapointe

We are not surprised to see that funding challenges persist globally, and it's interesting to see the suggestion to investigate network structures and membership models. From an ecosystem perspective, it may be useful to draw that out in the Canadian context. The second insight is drawn from several case studies that emphasise the need to build greater capacity - especially digital literacy - and to think systemically. To that end, SIX concludes that Labs themselves must be seen as part of a bigger system of change.³⁸

As a starting point to consider what that bigger system looks like or could look like, we can use the map (below) as a prompt. It is incomplete and ready for us to improve, but it's a beginning. In anticipation of this Primer, other enabling organisations have also expressed a desire for us to probe:

1. How do we support Social Innovation Labs to access resources, including funding and research?
2. What resources does the field need to accelerate the adoption of social and environmental solutions in Canada? Investment dollars? Program dollars?
3. How might those aligned but separate from Labs be engaged in a generative and mutually reinforcing way?
4. How does our Canadian ecosystem feed into and how is it fed by the global Lab ecosystem?
5. How are these practices and tools being integrated into post secondary education and how might post-secondary contribute more effectively?
6. What is the integration of AI and emerging tech as tools for weaving, data systems and collaboration?

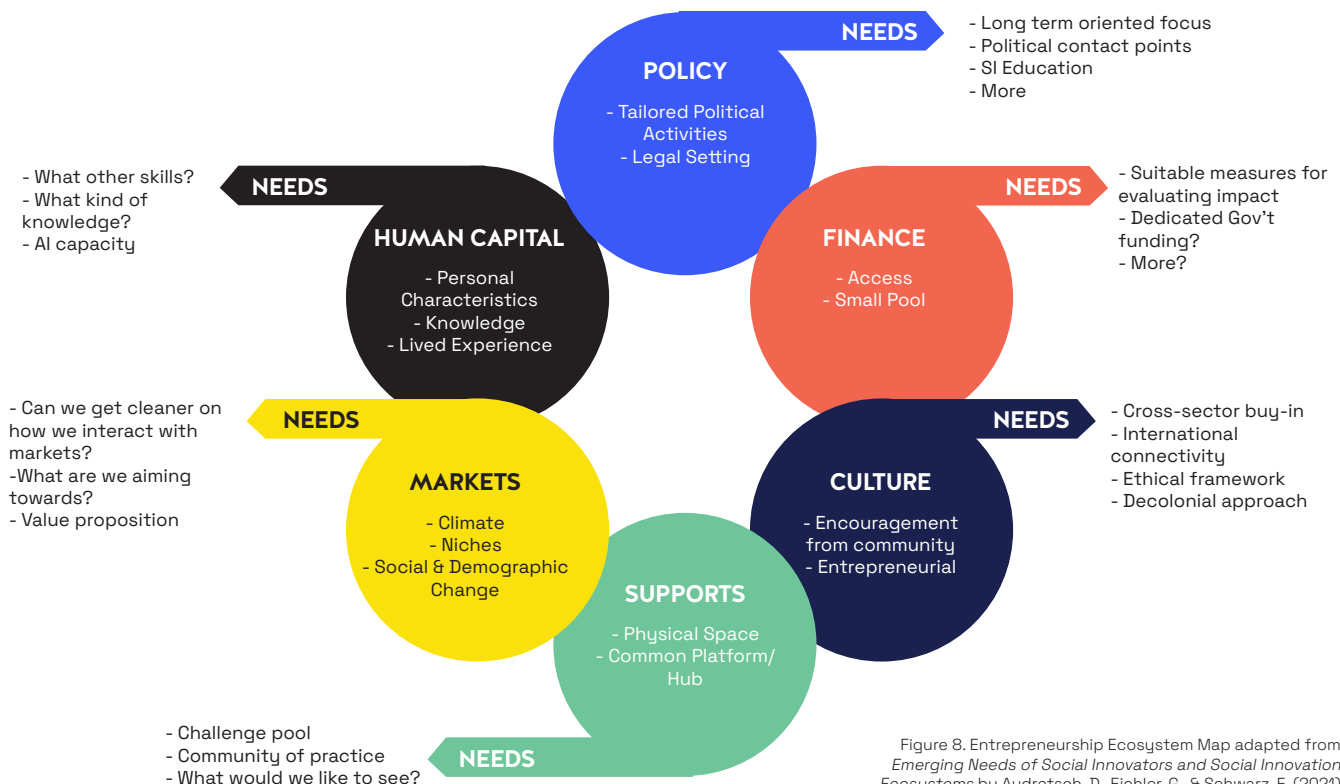


Figure 8. Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Map adapted from *Emerging Needs of Social Innovators and Social Innovation Ecosystems* by Audretsch, D., Eichler, G., & Schwarz, E. (2021)

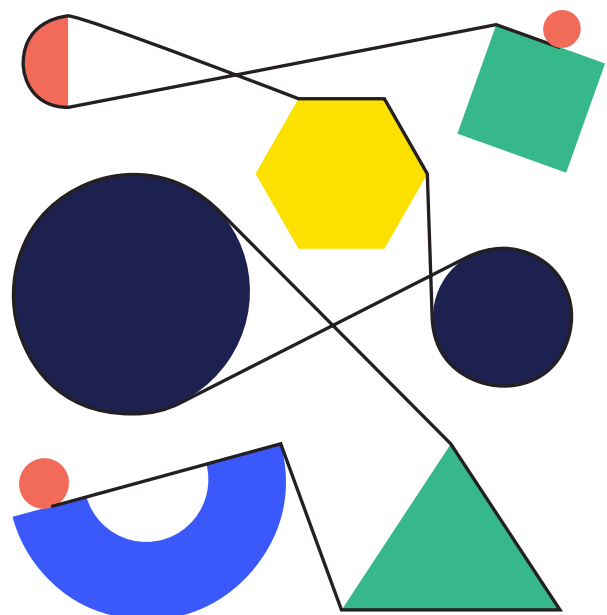
This graphic builds upon the work of David B. Audretsch, Georg M. Eichler and Erich J. Schwarz, and appeared in their 2021 article, *Emerging needs of social innovators and social innovation ecosystems*. They explained that the inner bubbles are based on the general dimensions of the traditional entrepreneurship ecosystem. These seem roughly right as a starting point for us, but we may add more together, or take some away. They also explained that the research of what a social innovation ecosystem needs is relatively thin. We can help change that together.

As practitioners we understand that Labs have a place in a larger ecosystem and our aim in populating this map in May, is to do two things: articulate a pathway to better resource and deepen the Lab field; and identify synergies and pathways through policy, finance, culture, supports, markets and skills development, to how our collective efforts can contribute to positive system change.

It may become apparent, and maybe it already is to some of you, that if we can become better connected to the enabling infrastructure around us, that the pathway to greater impact will be made more clear. While it may be that many prototypes can't and shouldn't scale, some tested and piloted solutions could certainly be better supported into systems. Energy Futures Lab is an example of a Lab in tune with its ecosystem. We're keen to identify the ecosystem for the field as a whole.

Energy Futures Lab - with its long run, iterations, and more appropriate scale of investment is relatively successful. Same with Bloomberg - investments in staff infrastructures, networking amongst them, shared learning - a whole ecosystem of supports. In my more direct experience, moving away from solely focusing on time-bound "Labs" to include an intentional learning infrastructure (community of practice) was really important. The conditions to do good Lab work were very limited; adding learning/capacity building was about cultivating/shifting enabling conditions in my organization, as a longer-term intervention.

- Survey Respondent



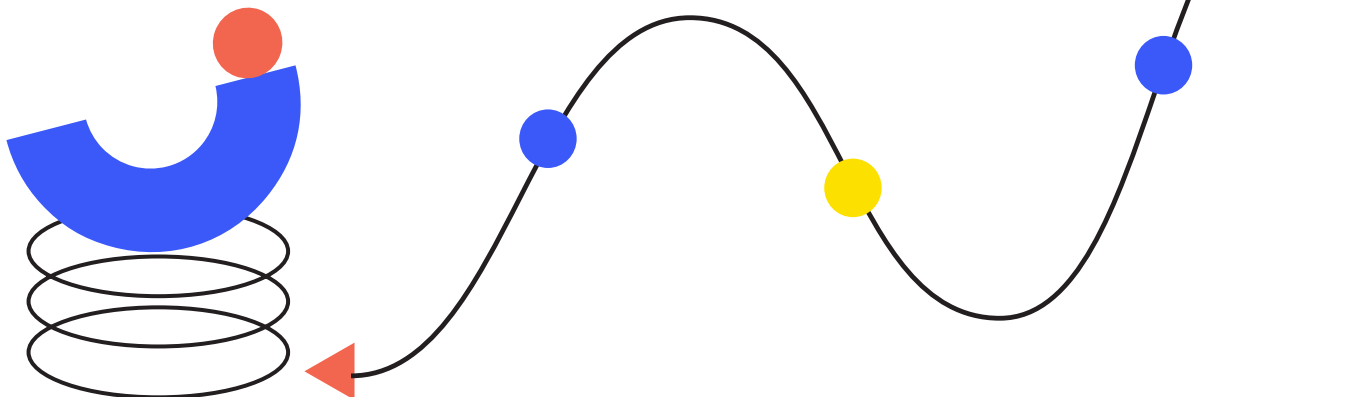
COLLECTIVELY IMAGINING A FUTURE VISION FOR LABS

GRATITUDE AND NEXT STEPS

This is just the beginning, and we're extremely grateful to our Labs community for the time, energy, resources, and perspectives that have already gone into the Future of Labs. It is because of this enthusiasm and wisdom that we have the necessary conditions and feel this is a great starting place to collectively imagine. We think we are at an exciting 'tipping point' in the Lab space in Canada and are excited to seize the opportunity to vision and help shape the future of Labs. Where do we want the 'field' to go? What might success look like in 2034? Future of Labs plays one part in the larger arc of field building. The intention of Future of Labs is to start these conversations, but in no way finish them.

As a final offering of this Primer, we've highlighted some of the major tensions we see Lab practitioners needing to continue to surf into the future. Although the tensions are presented as polarities, our intention is not to create a false dichotomy or force the choosing of 'either or'. Instead it is to spur 'both/and' conversations, creating space for the surfacing and exploration of the 'messy middle'. These tensions are emerging from literature, Convenor conversations, survey and focus group responses, and previous convenings of Lab practitioners (i.e., CONVERGE 2018).

We invite you to reflect on the tensions we've provided and maybe even add your own to the list. We look forward to digging in deeper together when we gather!



TENSIONS IN LAB WORK

To what extent should Labs emphasise capacity building vs offering additional, external support to communities?

On the one hand...there is a push for Labs to build the capacity of community members to be able to use Lab tools and approaches on their own. Part of this is coming from a sense that Lab experts often don't have the right relationships within particular communities to be able to steward a Lab exploration in a good way.

On the other hand...Some equity denied communities report that capacity building initiatives can feel burdensome, placing onerous demands on leaders who are already stretched thin trying to meet their communities' basic needs. There is sometimes a desire for 'outside' help so long as it is offered in relational, genuine, and consent based ways. Also with capacity building approaches, it can be hard to support quality of practice. And finally, sometimes communities can hold strong biases which can generate short sighted solutions to complex challenges.

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

There is a general consensus among experienced Lab leaders, that leading quality Lab practices is not something anyone can just pick up in a short amount of time. In the future, might there be ways to both have expertise of Lab stewards and centre and work alongside community members in good relationship in those contexts?

Could there be new principles and investment in both the relational way of trust building with communities and recognition of the deep expertise required to help steward impactful Labs of the future?

Might there be a need for codifying practices, competencies, and creating min specs of what it takes to become decently adept to lead a good Lab process?

How are different perspectives valued in Lab processes (e.g. lived and living versus other system perspectives)?

On the one hand...social justice approaches emphasise the importance of centering lived and living experience in Lab processes. This can lead to some understanding of how a person's lived and living experience is shaped by the system. However, if not done thoughtfully, it can also place unfair onus on the people experiencing marginalisation to generate solutions to their oppression.

On the other hand...a unique offering of Lab approaches is their incorporation of whole systems perspectives which include the lived experiences of people facing the challenge but also extend to other actors, organisations, policies, and institutions. This can lead to rich and nuanced understandings of the interconnectedness of someone's experience to other influences within a system, can push other system actors to shift their perspective, and creates space for a revolutionary idea to come from anywhere in the system. One long time Lab leader has commented: *"We have to be careful if ideological and one sided about lived experience as it could be akin to asking a person to identify causes of symptoms to an illness, create the cure, AND create the systemic delivery system to help all others with similar illnesses"*

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

Might we develop principles and practices that safeguard and equitably centre lived experiences in the right contexts and phases of Labs?

How do we ensure equitable compensation for lived experience engagement and not just tokenistic recognition?

What if in the future we were able to increase recognition of the need for whole systems learning and not just privileging one system view over another?

What if Lab leaders got better at leading in relational ways and recognize how to involve lived experience perspectives in various phases of Labs?

What if we got better at navigating the paradox of needing both 'on the ground' perspectives and stories and bigger picture system shifts that are possible in the short term, medium term, and maybe down the road complete paradigm shifts?

What's the more powerful lever for change, internal individual shifts (e.g. personal beliefs, attitudes, choices, actions) or more external system shifts (e.g. policy, institutional processes)? Or both...?

On the one hand...there is an increasing push in the last few years for the incorporation of inner systems change work such as spiritual, somatic, and embodied practices within Lab processes. These notions tend to place emphasis on the need for internal, individual change before external, systemic change is possible. This is often seen as a way to decolonize Lab practice and/or can come from a recognition that no one is outside a system they are trying to change. These ideas are often grounded in ancient and new traditions where there is an emphasis that if one focuses on inner transformation this may help influence those around one and eventually cause a cascade of systemic influence.

On the other hand...there is an understanding that for many pressing complex problems we face in the world, there are system change interventions at the policy and institutional levels needed. Often these changes are more removed from personal transformation experiences. In addition, bringing in diverse spiritual traditions and practices could be opening up a whole other set of challenges related to power, who has authority to share certain practices, privilege, and pushing spiritual practices in places where they may be better left in private lives than in group problem solving processes. Some of these practices may also require spiritual traditions and frameworks that Labs cannot safely claim to provide or experiment with.

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

How might we get better at recognizing both the value and risks of reflexive, reflective and contemplative practices to help spark awe, become aware of personal biases, preferences, attachments and aversions as we steward Labs?

How might we engage both the head and the heart in systems change work, while also being careful to not push personal spiritual, religious, or non-religious ideas on to others?

How might we ensure we don't get too sucked into systems change work being "about us" and our personal work and at the same time not get too sucked into Labs and systems change work being about "changing others"? It's likely a paradox.

How might we engage thoughtful, creative provocations that in Lab practices jar various stakeholders to see and be open to new perspectives that aren't simply based in logical reasoning, but in diverse ways of knowing and being?

Maybe Labs could consider 3 horizons of change making to recognize time scales of change, and distinctions of horizon 1, 2, and 3 interventions and needs at each scale?

Are Labs most about the process or the tangible outcomes? How do we get better at communicating the impact of Labs?

On the one hand...participants and leaders of Lab processes engage in rich and sometimes even transformational learning that has ripple effects in their relationships, workplaces, and communities long after a Lab has ended. These less tangible and harder to evaluate outcomes can be missed or devalued when the focus is all on prototypes.

On the other hand...Labs can be thought of as primarily about the tangible and more easily measured outcomes they produce - scalable prototypes - and their success in shifting systems and making a concrete impact on a stubborn challenge.

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

Can we get more coherent as a Lab community around the full range of intangible benefits of Labs, in a way that funders want to support and invest in?

Can we get clearer on what's reasonable to expect from Labs and then be better at sharing that when leading Labs?

How important is it that Social Innovation Labs be established as an identifiable 'field' with operating principles and soft boundaries distinct from other social change approaches?

On the one hand... Lab practitioners could choose to establish social innovation as a 'field' distinct from other social change approaches with soft boundaries (that can be continuously challenged), shared language, and operating principles that foster coherence and 'legitimization'.

On the other hand... collectively, Lab practitioners could choose to allow Lab approaches to continue to evolve with little coherence, shared language, boundaries, or operating principles. This provides endless freedom to remix, invent, and evolve approaches but can make it challenging for funders and 'outsiders' to the space to understand and value the work.

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

How might focussing on coherence over consensus be helpful as the 'field' of Labs evolves in the next 10 years? What might this look like?

Might we invest in experimental approaches and practices of Labs and recognize we might not know where they end up?

Might we invest in loosely codifying what seems to be working and is promising and sharing those offerings?

What does a 'do no harm' approach look like in action?

On the one hand... Lab practitioners want practices, and principles that avoid perpetuating systemic harm. This is well intended and aims to recognize and have mechanisms to consider unintended consequences of a change introduced in a system. If Labs, stewards, and leaders are too cavalier with proposed solutions to complex problems, more harm than good could be introduced in a system.

On the other hand... It is near utopian to think a collective could mitigate all potential harms. The meaning of 'do no harm' can be understood as more nuanced - recognizing there are risks to all actions, including the choice to take no action. What if in seeking to 'do no harm' Lab practitioners embraced the paradox of having to both be bold and take action whilst acting with humility and careful consideration of unintended harms?

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

Striving to 'do no harm' is important but what might it look like in action in Labs? Might there be principles that help with evaluating risks at individual, community, and larger system levels?

How do we keep in mind that what is perceived as harmful is constantly changing? Things we think are helpful and will not harm today, 100 years from now, it is likely our descendants will see the harms we caused and cannot see at present. This is part of the human condition.

How might we practise with transparency - acknowledging it is not possible to mitigate all possible systemic harms in Lab work?

Other important tensions you see as a Lab practitioner?

On the one hand...

On the other hand...

Possible implications for the Future of Labs in the next 10 years...

OUR PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING TOGETHER



Let's think inside the circle

A teaching shared by Diane Roussin, we emphasize creative thinking inside the circle to create space for relational ways of being and foster intuition, allowing us to be agile and responsive to our community.



Let's think systemically and act relationally with kindness

By both centering lived experience of lab stewardship and listening to whole system insights, we can better notice tensions and consider implications for decisions and future directions. Let's also be considerate of the time we have on the island. Many volunteer leaders have offered to design and facilitate the 5 conversations and within the limited time we have. Please try to show up on time. We will work hard together during the day, and play hard during meals and the evening to strengthen relationships. Look out for each other in our community and support.



Let's strive for coherence more than consensus

We accept and understand there will be differences in opinion, and disagreements. Our space is one of mutual respect, where disagreements are acknowledged but not required to be resolved. Let's recognize if there is something called labs into the future, it needs to be clearer to us, to system leaders, to funders, to communities, around what labs are, what niche contexts they are helpful for, where they shouldn't be used, and what is reasonable to expect from labs. Let's aim for coherence.



Let's hold space for intuition, questioning AND bold action

Let's be careful not to believe everything we think and feel - AND also trust our intuition. Let's try to recognize we all have preferences, biases and experiences we bring. There is a paradox in trusting our gut and also checking our biases as we move forward together. Let's be aware that good questions are powerful for change- AND let's recognize answering questions with more questions is a privilege, safe, and we can avoid critique if we just keep proposing deeper and deeper questions without bold action attached. Many communities and systems cannot afford endless questions as an answer to complex challenges. But there is a paradox in that we need the right questions to point us in good future directions too.



Let's embrace complexity with boldness and humility

A 'both-and' mindset is likely wiser than 'either-or'. In times of chaos and uncertainty, it's the stories we share and the relationships we nurture that guide us. We approach challenges with boldness, fearlessness, and kindness while being humble and striving to minimize harm. Remember, making labs better isn't really about us - AND it's a bit about us.



Let's be open to the old, the new and a dash of surprise-the emergent

Canadian Social Innovation leader Al Etmanski suggests for innovation, or new pathways in complex systems we likely need to be mixing ideas from history, being open to new possibilities and be open to surprises that will emerge through all of our sharing, exchanging, learning and being curious together about the future of labs.



Others from the Future of Labs delegation?



Let's try not to make labs about everything

There is kindness in clarity and creating boundaries on scope. Staying true to the original intentions and purpose of FOL helps to ensure we design and generate an offering for the future of labs that transcends individual interests - for lab processes and systems to work better.



Let's recognize we don't have to figure everything out in 2 and a half days

In our time together we aim to both strengthen relationships, coherence and insights around the future of labs, but we don't have to figure it all out. We can't. There will be a post gathering survey to share thoughts. There will also be opportunities to share ideas on the island with our podcaster. With funding we also hope to have short, thin- pieces/blogs related to the future of labs from experienced lab leaders who join the event. Exactly what will happen after and what organizations and leaders will pick up the threads and further develop them is still to be determined and will emerge from our collective.

OUR COMMITMENTS AND AGREEMENTS

Opt-out until you opt-in - maintaining a safe space for sharing

While we are encouraging the use and sharing of insights and lessons, the identities and affiliations of people will remain confidential unless explicitly opted in. We acknowledge that we are trying to build a field together, and the more, varied voices, the better. We will assume everything shared is confidential (opt-out), but we strongly encourage everyone to opt-in wherever they feel comfortable. If you wish for specific contributions and/or quotes to be attributed to you, please signal this (i.e. write your name next to an insight, let a Convenor or rapporteur know). Where contributions are shared across delegates, they will be reflected as a shared 'theme' to represent the collective voice, rather than attributed to one individual.

Wow! That was a lot of learning. And it's not even close to everything that could be said. There is so much richness, nuance, and complexity to Labs. We hope this scrappy practitioner oriented compilation of perspectives, stories, and literature evoked something in you, be it resonance, dissonance, or both. We invite you to bring those thoughts and feelings with you to Future of Labs to unpack, share, and explore further: *What's sticking? What's promising? What's puzzling? What is something you want to bring forward to help shape the future of collective problem solving? Revisit your thoughts on page 12.*

Write your reflections in bullet points here:

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A (NON-EXHAUSTIVE) LIST OF CURRENT AND PAST LABS

INTERNATIONAL



CANADA



EXAMPLES OF LABS IN ACTION

Respondents to our pre-gathering survey identified the following as strong examples of Labs in action.

POLICY LABS

Policy Lab UK

United Kingdom
openpolicy.blog.gov.uk

Started in 2014, Policy Lab's mission is to radically improve policy making through design, innovation, and people-centred approaches.

LABS AS SERVICE

Action Lab

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
actionlab.ca

A space to think differently and make things happen, Action Lab is a physical space that can be rented, builds capacity amongst community members and organisations to use Lab practices in their work including hosting [Systemic Design eXchange](#) a community of practice, and co-designs Lab processes with diverse communities and organisations looking for alternative approaches to tackling complex social challenges. Past projects include: [Edmonton Shift Lab](#) that explored racism in Edmonton, [Future of Home: Inclusive Housing Solutions Lab](#) that prototyped inclusive housing and support models with people with intellectual disabilities, [Design by Doing 2.0](#) that explored pathways to employment with the Bhutanese community, and the [Curbside Accessible Parking Project](#) that looked at improving accessibility of curbside parking in Edmonton. Action Lab's unique structure, nestled under a larger non profit organisation, supports its overall sustainability.

InWithForward

Canada based but also works internationally
inwithforward.com

A social design organisation that makes human services more human. Past work includes [Family by Family](#) a matching platform for families in contact with the child protection system, [Get Together](#) addressing social isolation among older people using the telephone, Loops connecting young people to new horizon broadening experiences, [Grounded Space](#) a 2 year exploration around building a culture of experimentation in Canadian social organisations, and Standing Up or Moving Forward which explored flourishing with women in a domestic violence shelter.

NouLAB

New Brunswick
Pond-Deshpande Centre, University of New Brunswick
ponddeshpande.ca/noulab/

A Social Innovation Lab that offers capacity building, strategic planning, project support, innovation lab stewardship, and service design. Two recent Social Innovation Labs they've stewarded include the [Economic Immigration Lab](#) and [Early Childhood Education Lab](#).

MaRS Discovery District

Toronto, Ontario, Canada
www.marsdd.com/

As North America's largest urban innovation hub and a registered charity, MaRS provides direct support for startups, builds communities of innovators and accelerates the adoption of high-impact solutions to some of the world's most pressing issues. They host MaRS IAF, an early stage investment fund; connect innovators seeking employment with high growth tech companies; rent out their spaces as event venues; and provide hands on support to start ups.

Social Innovation Canada

Canada-wide
sicanada.org

Social Innovation Canada's Labs are designed to focus on complex problems and to build strategies for transformation in systems. SI Canada co-led the Financialization of Housing Lab and is currently leading the Hamilton Transit Oriented Affordable Housing Lab, both CMHC Solutions Lab projects. In its early stages, the Climate and Equity Lab, a collaboration between Gore Mutual Foundation, Social Innovation Canada (SI Canada), and York University's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, aims to understand the impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups in Canadian urban areas, emphasising poverty, equity, and climate change intersections.

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI)

Australia
www.tacsi.org.au/

Formed in 2009 as an initiative of the South Australian Government, TACSI is an independent social enterprise working in the following action areas: mental health, social R&D, people powered responses, future of home, regenerative communities, and the social innovation workforce. [Family by Family](#) is one example of a TACSI born innovation that has scaled.

UpSocial

Spain
upsocial.org

UpSocial works in five lines of action: innovations, capacity building, scaling, policies, and learnings. UpSocial has supported the development and implementation of numerous projects spanning diverse challenge areas including: universal access to sustainable food, social inclusion, promoting mental well being, generating employment in the green economy to name a few. [STEM Lab](#), a project of UpSocial, produced [JUMP Math](#) which is a math program that is now scaling internationally.

Dark Matter Labs

Originated in the UK but now works globally
darkmatterlabs.org

An ambitious not-for-profit, the team at Dark Matter analyses shifts required in the underlying 'dark matter' (i.e. monetary, economic, governance, regulatory and policy systems) to manifest transformations to food, housing, land, material, and nature systems that support mutual thriving. Through their imaginative action projects they seek to challenge established thought and demonstrate alternative actions.

Griffith Centre for Systems Innovation

Australia
Griffith University
www.griffith.edu.au/griffith-business-school/centre-for-systems-innovation

Started in 2018, they partner with organisations across sectors to create safe and courageous spaces and action learning opportunities to transform 'stuck' systems. Then they take what they're learning and offer boundary-pushing post graduate courses for adaptive leaders of the future.

UNDP Accelerator Lab

Global
Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation,
Development of Germany, Qatar Fund for Development
www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs

The UNDP Accelerator Labs is the world's largest and fastest learning network on wicked sustainable development challenges. The Network is composed of 91 Lab teams covering countries and taps into local innovations to create actionable insights and reimagine sustainable development for the 21st century. The Lab is an interesting example of scaling up a network of people embedded in existing institutional contexts, but operating differently from dominant culture, and connecting the people across geographies. Whilst the scale is alluring (91 geographies), the quality and substance of what the team are building is

the most interesting part - a mix of central coordination and sensemaking, and decentralised operations and learning culture.

SERVICE DESIGN LABS

Reconciliation in Post-Secondary Education Social Innovation Lab

Coeuraj, McConnell Foundation
www.coeuraj.com/work/reconciliationlab

The first round of this lab took place in 2021 and engaged two post secondary institutions in its exploration of how to incorporate the TRC Calls to Action into their work. A second round, starting in 2023 is engaged two more post secondaries in this work. As part of the lab, post secondary institutions are supported to form and facilitate their own lab teams with peer learning, coaching, and other resources provided.

CityStudio Vancouver

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
citystudiovancouver.com/

An innovation hub that brings city staff, students, faculty, and community to co-create experimental projects that make Vancouver more sustainable, equitable, joyful, and inclusive. The hub aims to build capacity amongst everyday citizens to innovate and change make. Projects are on a wide range of topics including: climate emergency, democracy, reconciliation, equity and inclusion, or health and well being.

The Institutional Architecture Lab

tial.org

Uniquely focused on institutional innovation, TIAL was formed in 2023 to help the institutional design community coalesce, learn together, and grow. Their approach links practical work - specific projects aimed at significantly updating old institutions and creating new designs - with reflection, synthesis, and accumulation of knowledge in its field building.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGE LABS

Procurement by Co-Design

Ontario, Canada
MaRS Discovery District, Ministry of Government and Consumer Services
marsdd.com/service/procurement-by-co-design/

This Lab supported technological solutions for health care institutions (e.g. hospitals, long term care homes) by pairing them with emerging tech companies. It was also a systems intervention trying to model alternative ways to procure novel solutions and break out of the limitations and challenges of traditional RFP processes.

SIBs.CO

Colombia
IDB Lab, SECO (Swiss Economic Development Agency)
www.sibs.co/
bidlab.org/en

A Lab focussed on transforming the way social impact projects are financed and carried out in Colombia with a focus on promoting public-private partnerships. In the first 7 years they focused on the employment challenges of people far from the labour market and have plans to move to other critical social challenges as well. SIBs.CO Currently has 6 initiatives active including: social impact bonds, performance based contracts, financial vehicles, and an open data platform.

Global Peatlands Initiative

Global Peatlands Initiative, Climate Catalyst,
Climate Champions Team
globalpeatlands.org/events/gpi-innovation-lab-unlocking-private-sector-action-peatlands

This lab brought together policymakers, businesses, and other stakeholders to unlock private sector action for peatlands. Out of this lab unlocking finance through viable financing mechanisms that bring together private capital and businesses with an enabling environment from policymakers was identified as one of the most pressing challenges. Next a hackathon workshop is planned to unlock the financial 'deals' that are needed for peatlands conservation and restoration.

SYSTEMS CHANGE LABS

Engineering Change Lab

Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Engineers Canada, Engineers Without Borders
engineeringchangelab.ca
programs.techstewardship.com/

From 2015-2019, the [Engineering Change Lab](#) employed unique governance and funding models to co-create a scalable response to challenges facing the Engineering profession. One solution generated included a [technological stewardship framework and training](#) that is now scaling and helps engineers establish a practice more considerate of environmental, social, and ethical impacts.

Economic Immigration Lab

New Brunswick, Canada
NouLAB, New Brunswick Multicultural Council,
New Brunswick Business Council
economicimmigrationlab.org

A project of NouLAB, from 2017 to 2020, this Lab worked to improve outcomes for economic immigration to New Brunswick. The Lab engaged 68 participants and 49 unique organisations, produced 15 prototypes, contributed to shifting the attitudes and perspectives of participants, and sparked several policy changes.

Atlantic Canada Early Childhood Education Lab

New Brunswick, Canada
NouLAB
ecelaboepe.ca

Since March 2020 this Lab has brought together diverse stakeholders to co-create innovative ideas to support the early childhood education workforce. 4 prototypes in Round 1 and 5 prototypes in Round 2 were created including a 'centre mentor program' and 'study leave support program'.

Energy Futures Lab

Alberta, Canada
energyfutureslab.com

An Alberta based coalition of diverse innovators and organisations, this lab supports change makers as they collaboratively explore how to leverage Canada's assets and innovation capacity to accelerate an inclusive and equitable transition to a prosperous net-zero future. The lab's four core challenge areas include: financing the transition to future fit hydrocarbons, digital innovation for net-zero buildings, rural community resilience in a low carbon future, and Alberta's electricity future.

The Rural Arts Inclusion Lab (RAIL)

West Kootenays, British Columbia, Canada
Nelson Civic Theatre, Tiny Lights Festival,
Vancouver Foundation
www.ruralinclusion.ca/what-is-rail

Created to address the systems that exclude marginalised voices from arts organisations, audiences, and performers in rural British Columbia, this three year place based project is using art and artists as a medium to raise voices of marginalised groups.

Centre for First Nations Governance

Turtle Island, Canada
fngovernance.org/

Transforming the ways First Nations govern, this lab is the only organisation in Canada dedicated to transitioning First Nations from the Indian Act to their own concept of self-governance. Since 2012 the lab has worked in over 200 First Nations across Canada delivering self-governance services to citizens and leaders and have recently partnered with Carleton University to develop and launch the [Rebuilding First Nation Governance Project](#), a national alliance of First Nation communities and Tribal Councils, academic researchers, and public sector practitioners.

Edmonton Shift Lab

Treaty 6, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
Edmonton Community Foundation, Action Lab
www.edmontonshiftlab.ca

Running from 2015 to 2020, this lab focused on tackling racism in Edmonton. Shift Lab 2.0 focussed more specifically on creating interactive processes that motivate the 'sleepy middle' to change racist behaviours. Uniquely, Shift Lab developed what they called a 'triple helix approach', weaving together design thinking, systems thinking, and Indigenous epistemologies. The lab produced several prototypes, some of which are scaling across Canada.

Slow Research Lab

Amsterdam, The Netherlands
slowlab.net

Through in-situ dialogue, workshops, exhibitions, immersive study experiences, and research residencies, this Lab aims to expand the field of human awareness and activity in the pursuit of more harmonious and resilient forms of living. The Lab's approach is multidisciplinary and inspired by the integrity of our planet's living systems and what Goethe called 'conscious process participation'.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF REALLY GOOD LABS

If there's a promising Lab (i.e. it changed the way people thought, had impactful outcomes, etc.) you've been a part of, are aware of, or have been inspired by drop them here:

APPENDIX A: HOW SOME CANADIAN LABS EXPERIMENTED WITH DEFINING LABS AND LAB LIKE PROCESSES IN THE LAST 10-15 YEARS

Some labs and leaders in the space have produced diagrams to help visually explain the complex work of a lab. Below are a few examples. They aren't exhaustive possibilities, but offerings from experienced lab explorers.



Often smaller teams

Focus on improving systems by addressing practical issues through research, co-design, prototyping.

Finding out what might work for people by really chacking with people.

Bottom up approaches.

CAN BE SHORT SIGHTED IF ONLY APPLYING DESIGN THINKING.



Focus on assisting lab participants to better understand and work with the dynamics at play in complex problem domains.

Often a mix of Systems Thinking and Design Thinking.

Bias towards Action and prototyping solutions.

MIGHT LEAN A LITTLE MORE TOWARDS DESIGN APPROACHES.



Often bigger groups

Focus on the role of people in shaping systems, with intensive personal transformation as the major pathway to change.

A lot of group dynamics. Questions lead to more questions.

CAN BE TRICKY TO MOVE TO ACTION IF GROUPS GET STUCK IN EXISTENTIAL SYSTEMS THINKING FUNK.

Model and graphic courtesy of Think Jar Collective Social Innovation Field Guide <https://thinkjarcollective.com/tools/social-innovation-lab-field-guide/>

Shift Lab 2.0 Triple Helix Theory of Change

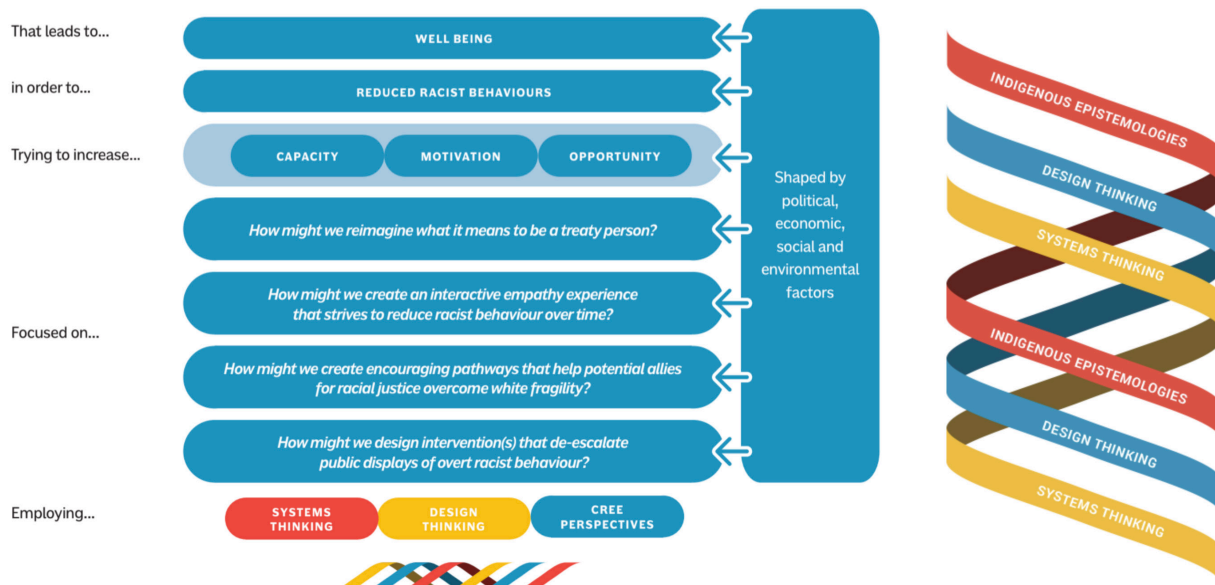
Shift Lab 1.0 and 2.0 was a 5-year Social Innovation Lab convened by the Edmonton Community Foundation and Action Lab, and was based in amiskwaciwâskahikan on Treaty 6 territory, traditional meeting grounds for the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Métis, and Inuit.

The guiding question for Shift Lab 2.0 was *How might we create better anti-racism interventions that acknowledge everyone’s humanity and create behaviour change?*

In Shift Lab 1.0, the process adopted Human Centered

Design (HCD), Systems Thinking and Theory U. Along the way, the stewards discovered that Indigenous methodologies have some startling similarities with design and systems thinking. They wondered what it would look like if, with the right guidance, they could put these three ways of thinking into conversation with one another? As a result, they intentionally brought together a triple helix process to all of their workshops and research. The triple helix is a braid of Treaty six Indigenous epistemologies, design thinking, and systems thinking.

www.edmontonshiftlab.ca/



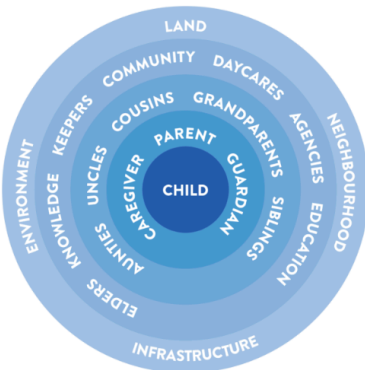
Winnipeg Boldness Theory of Change

In 2014, The Winnipeg Boldness Project launched a social innovation process to explore new ideas for addressing early childhood outcomes in the neighbourhood of Point Douglas, and is based on the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe), Anishinabewaki (Oji-Cree), Dené, Michif Piyii (Métis), Nêhiyawak (Cree), and Očhéthi Sakowin (Dakota). We recognize that we have benefited from and continue to benefit from colonisation on the Treaty 1, Treaty 3, and Treaty 5 Territories.

Using a social lab process, Winnipeg Boldness brings together diverse stakeholders to develop community-driven solutions to help children succeed and thrive. Winnipeg Boldness' theory of change, the Child Centred Model, was documented during the first year of the project with the help of community leaders, knowledge keepers, and the Point Douglas neighbourhood.

winnipegboldness.ca/project/

VALUES OF THE CHILD CENTRED MODEL



It is community wisdom

The model was developed through a deep dive into the vast knowledge base of local residents – a community that best knows how to define success for their children and what they need to achieve it.

It is guidance

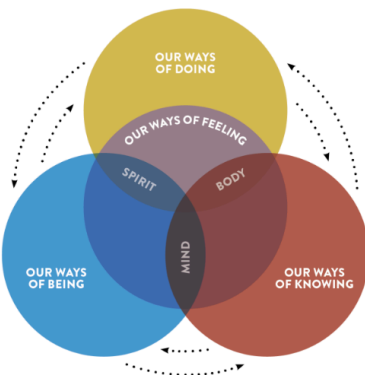
The model provides specific guidance on how we can all support a child's healthy development in this community. Anyone whose work affects their community should seek to understand and respect this wisdom.

It is reconciliation

The model prioritizes developing meaningful relationships and acknowledges community members as the experts in their lives. This way of working is the foundation of the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

It is wholistic

The foundation of the model is interconnectedness, in the sense that you cannot change one aspect of a child's life without also affecting all the other parts of their life.



Lined writing area consisting of multiple horizontal lines.

