

# Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories

Marlieke Kieboom - Kennisland



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# About the author, Lab2, Kennisland and Hivos

## About the author

Marlieke Kieboom is a researcher and advisor at Kennisland. Her encompassing question is: how can we make knowledge useful to support people's practices? Marlieke's expertise is divided among conducting (action) research, designing innovation support structures, and practically managing operations. In practice this means she designs new learning infrastructures (like Lab2) and research methodologies, such as a new evaluation methodology to support social innovation practices. Marlieke obtained an MSc in Anthropology (Utrecht University, NL) and an MA in Conflict and Governance (Simon Fraser University, CA). She was part of several knowledge initiatives in the Netherlands, Canada, India and Central-South America. Please email her at [mk@kl.nl](mailto:mk@kl.nl) with questions, literature references, feedback, comments or new ideas for future endeavours.

## About Lab2

This paper is based on knowledge elicited from an event: [Lab2](http://lab2.kl.nl)<sup>2</sup>. Lab2 was a two-day pop up lab about labs, organized by Kennisland (do-think-tank) in close cooperation with Sarah Schulman (IWF), Hivos (Development Cooperation Organization) and SIX (International Social Innovation Network) in April 2013. Lab2 aimed to go beyond the hope and hype of labs and further understand what is actually put in the black box called 'the lab', and what actually comes out of it. Hivos and Kennisland invited 40 people from 15 countries on 6 continents. The underlying reasons for organising this event were twofold. The first is that both Hivos and Kennisland work on improving societies and were curious to learn from and with labs by connecting labs in a learning experience. The second is that Hivos and Kennisland noticed that such learning opportunities for labs were lacking, especially in connecting the global South, West, North and East.

At Lab2 we aimed to have a varied sample of labs present at the event in order to have a solid representation of the field, and not just a mere representation of what a lab 'should be' according to the definitions found in literature. We had a very loose requirement for determining who could participate: practitioners identified themselves as people working in the field of social innovation/devel-

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2 <http://lab2.kl.nl>



opment cooperation; who are running spaces to design, experiment and spread interventions that try and shift “systemic social challenges”, and who are using lab-like methodologies. The characteristics of the labs we invited varied in terms of thematic focus (technical, environmental, economic, social), naming (social innovation lab, design lab, living lab, do-tanks, tech lab, hub, hive, centre for innovation), space (either physical or virtual), age of organization (between 0 and 15 years old) and place (covering all global continents).

At Lab2 we attempted to learn how labs move from an idea to an invention (day 1) and how they travel from an invention to an innovation that changes behavior, processes and structures on a systemic level (day 2). Through homework assignments, case studies, open spaces and visits to lab-like initiatives in the city, the laborants debriefed and swapped practices.

#### Team Lab2

Chris Sigaloff (Kennisland)

Marlieke Kieboom (Kennisland)

Thijs van Exel (Kennisland)

Jos van Kuik (Kennisland)

Remko Berkhout (Hivos)

Louise Pulford (SIX)

Muryani Kasdani (InWithForward)

Sarah Schulman (InWithForward)



#### About Kennisland

Kennisland<sup>3</sup> (Amsterdam, Netherlands) is an independent action-oriented think tank, founded in 1998 with a public mission to make societies smarter. Predominantly focused on the Netherlands and Europe, Kennisland designs and implements innovative interventions to strengthen our knowledge society by connecting different levels and sectors to create new strategies, concepts, ideas and structures that work to provide new approaches for societal challenges. Kennisland currently works in the fields of educational innovation, smart government, creative economies, cultural heritage and copyright. Kennisland is exploring lab opportunities with the city of Amsterdam (on elderly care), Dordrecht (on youth unemployment) and Schiedam (on long-term unemployment) in cooperation with InWithForward.



#### About Hivos

Working in the field of international development, Hivos<sup>4</sup> has built up a substantial body of practice and experience on supporting civic action to make societies in the global south more open, democratic and sustainable. The organization boasts a network of over 600 civic partners (including social labs) in 26 countries and is a member of influential global networks on themes ranging from open government to women's rights. The ability to innovate is central to its mission and strategy. And increasingly, Hivos works with social labs and creative spaces to support experimentation and social innovation.

The paper 'Lab Matters' is a direct product of Lab2 and has been made possible with the support of Hivos.

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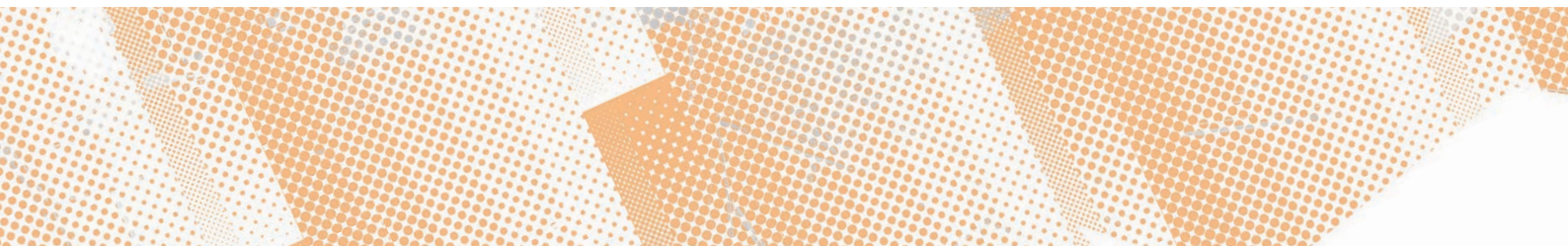
3 <http://www.kennisland.nl>

4 <http://www.hivos.org>



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# Abstract 'Lab Matters'

Social innovation labs are the latest vehicles for systemic change – for transforming the way our cities, our schools, our welfare programs, and even our economic systems run. Yet tangible results lag behind the hype. Why is it difficult to affect complex problems at a systemic level, and how could labs better prompt social change? This paper first gives a diverse overview of different lab practices. Second, it identifies and discusses four common omissions, namely that labs are falling prey to solutionism, tend to overlook the power of politics, overemphasize scaling of solutions, and underestimate the messy nature of human beings. The paper concludes with ten practical suggestions for social labs to move forward.

'Lab Matters' stems from insights, experiences, and findings gathered at the event 'Lab2: a lab about labs' (organized by Kennisland and Hivos) in which 40 practitioners from 20 social change labs gathered in Amsterdam to learn from each other and exchange ideas. In addition, we also held extensive follow-up conversations with lab practitioners, drew from our own engagement in lab initiatives, and employed insights from the available literature. The paper targets an audience with both an interest and a background in labs for social change and aims to encourage the lab field to critically engage with its practice in order to support efforts in achieving discontinuous change.



# **1. Introduction:** **Just lab it?**



The latest trend in our quest to fix the global challenges of the 21st century is to 'lab' complex issues. In short, a lab is a container for social experimentation, with a team, a process and space to support social innovation on a systemic level. These social innovation labs are popping up all over the world and are quickly acquiring star status among funders and governments. Zaïd Hassan coins the emergence of labs as a "social revolution" for its ability to tackle large challenges, such as dramatically reducing global emissions, preventing the collapse of fragile states, and improving community resilience (Hassan 2014<sup>1</sup>). The rise of labs is partially explained in the transformative promise that they bare, namely that they function as vehicles to combat our social ills by achieving *systemic change* (Boyer, Cook & Steinberg 2011<sup>2</sup>, Torjman 2012<sup>3</sup>, Westley 2012<sup>4</sup>, VanAntwerp 2013<sup>5</sup>, Hassan 2014<sup>6</sup>, Bliss 2014<sup>7</sup>). In this regard, labs do not operate alone in their endeavour, but form part of the ever expanding "family of the social", which refers to concepts and practices that rely more and more on citizens to act "prosocially", both individually and collectively (Fowler 2013<sup>8</sup>).

### Is labbing social problems enough to combat enormous complexity?

But is labbing social problems enough to combat enormous complexity? If we look at the practice of labs, examine the available literature, and analyze the challenges in our own work, we notice a tendency to underestimate the dynamics of complex adaptive social systems. This underestimation is particularly prevalent in four areas of lab practices: outcomes (falling prey to solutionism), focus (overlooking the power of politics), goals (emphasizing scaling solutions instead of ideas, values and ethics) and representation (miscalculating the messy nature of human beings). At the same time we observe an overestimation of the direct impact labs are having on systemic change. Could it be that these opposing tendencies are in fact closely related?

This dual process, of both underestimating complex system dynamics and overestimating the impact of lab practices, could be detrimental to the social

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1 <http://social-labs.org/>

2 <http://helsinkidesignlab.org/instudio/>

3 <http://www.marsdd.com/2012/02/29/labs-designing-future/>

4 <http://sig.uwaterloo.ca/highlight/what-is-a-change-labdesign-lab>

5 <http://www.marsdd.com/2013/02/27/social-innovation-labs-designing-whole-system-change/>

6 <http://labsforsocialchange.org/>

7 <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/how-social-innovation-labs-design-scale>

8 <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Publications/Publications/Social-Innovation-New-Game-New-Dawn-or-False-Promise>

change field at large, which already suffers a backlash from previously made hefty claims. An example is the role of developmental NGOs that claimed that civil society organizations were the holy grail to improve governance in developing countries (Brouwers 2011<sup>9</sup>), and that framed microcredit as the miraculous solution to economic growth (Banerjee et al. 2014<sup>10</sup>). In the field of development cooperation the consequence of these desillusions is mirrored in stringent budget cuts, more rigid planning and impact measurements and an even larger focus on economic returns. These controlling measures narrow down options rather than stimulate variations, while variety plays a key role in the emergence of new systemic interactions.

Moreover, on the level of labs, claims on achieving systemic change make labs vulnerable for critique on its outcomes, from both the general public as the institutions they might seek to change. Underestimating or even misjudging how complex adaptive systems work has negative effects on the quality of the (systemic) impact labs could deliver. It might be fair to say that systemic claims currently impair, rather than enable the work of social labs. This endangers the contribution labs could make towards a more equal, sustainable future. Thus: how can social innovation labs better brace themselves?

First we explore the roots and specific characteristics of labs (section 2: practice), identify four commonly overlooked dynamics (section 3: oversights), and suggest some ideas for practice (section 4: actions). The paper concludes with a couple of questions for the future. In this paper we draw on shared insights from our event Lab2: a two-day meeting for labs about labs (see Lab2 section in annex), our own experiences with developing lab practices, and recent writings from respected colleagues, such as Frances Westley, Zaid Hassan, Alan Fowler, Geoff Mulgan and Sarah Schulman. By offering this contribution we would like to encourage others to critically engage with the field of the social innovation and the labbed world. We feel that we stand much to gain.

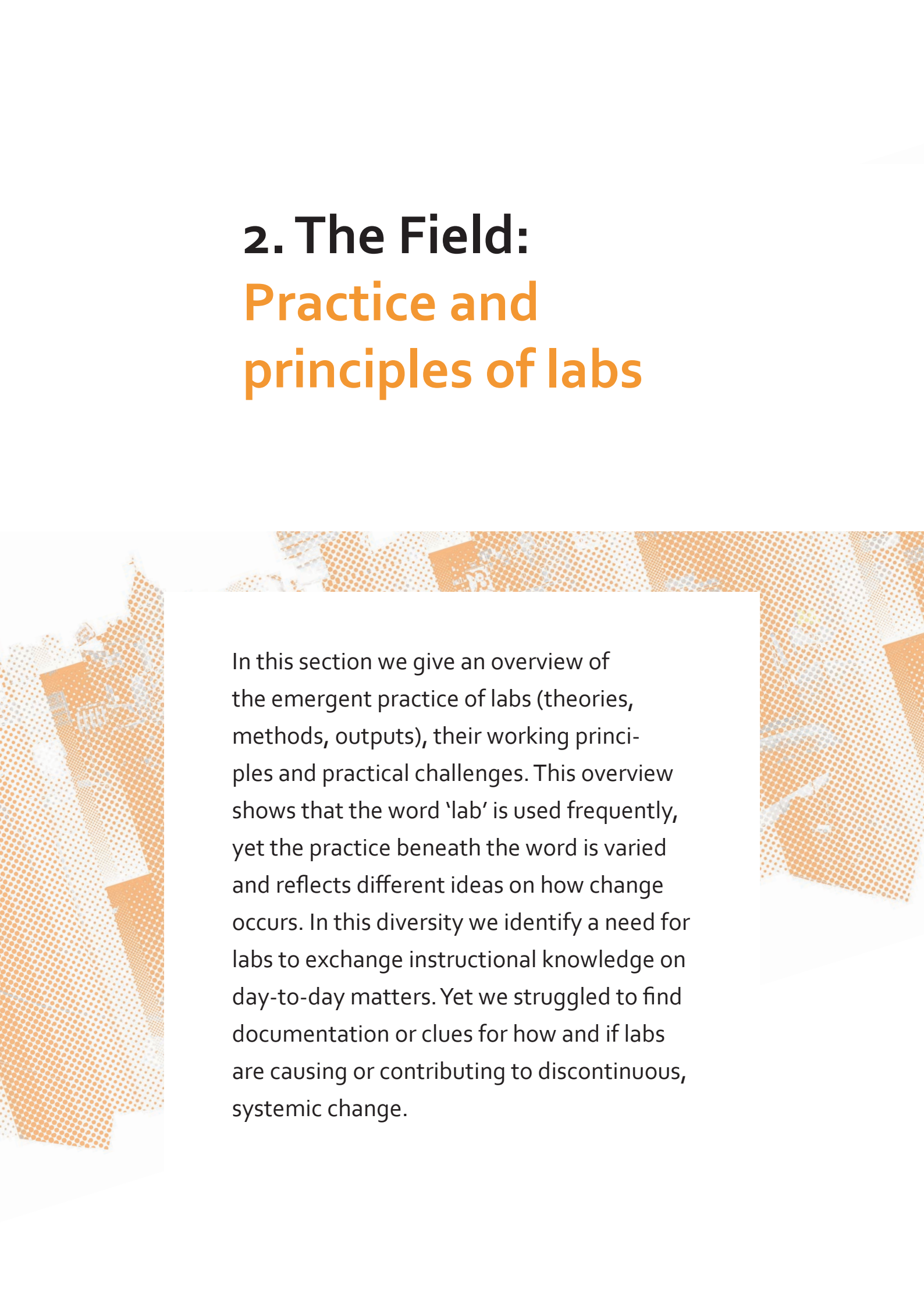
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9 <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Civil-Society-Building/Publications/Synthesis-studies/When-Civics-go-Governance>

10 [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2250500](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2250500)

## 2. The Field:

# Practice and principles of labs



In this section we give an overview of the emergent practice of labs (theories, methods, outputs), their working principles and practical challenges. This overview shows that the word 'lab' is used frequently, yet the practice beneath the word is varied and reflects different ideas on how change occurs. In this diversity we identify a need for labs to exchange instructional knowledge on day-to-day matters. Yet we struggled to find documentation or clues for how and if labs are causing or contributing to discontinuous, systemic change.

## Fertile lab grounds

Why are labs growing in popularity? Labs can be seen as part of an emerging 'social innovation movement'. Besides the uprising of social innovation labs, there are new journals ([Stanford Social Innovation Review](http://www.ssireview.org/)<sup>11</sup>), networks ([Social Innovation Europe](http://siresearch.eu/social-innovation)<sup>12</sup>, [Social Innovation Exchange](http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org)<sup>13</sup>), competitions ([European Social Innovation Competition](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/innovation/policy/social-innovation/competition/)<sup>14</sup>, [Naples 2.0](http://www.euclidnetwork.eu/projects/current-projects/european-social-innovation-naples-20.html)<sup>15</sup>) insightful guide books ([Guide to Social Innovation](http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/10157/47822/Guide%20to%20Social%20Innovation.pdf)<sup>16</sup>, [The Open Innovation Handbook](http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/assets/features/the_open_book_of_social_innovation)<sup>17</sup>), and tool boxes ([The Social Innovation Toolkit](http://www.socialinnovationtoolkit.com/home.html)<sup>18</sup>, [Do it Yourself Toolkit](http://diytoolkit.org/)<sup>19</sup>). Logically this field is attracting a steadily growing number of funders, ranging from large companies ([BMW](http://www.bmw-stiftung.de/en/about-us/)<sup>20</sup>, [Hitachi](https://social-innovation.hitachi.com/en/)<sup>21</sup>) to philanthropists ([McConnell Foundation](http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/en/programs/social-innovation-fund)<sup>22</sup>, [Rockefeller Foundation](http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/innovation-complex-world)<sup>23</sup>), and even governments are tapping in. Canada has just announced its first minister of 'Social Development and Social Innovation'<sup>24</sup> and a one billion dollar endowment fund<sup>25</sup>, Barack Obama launched the [Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation](http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/sicp)<sup>26</sup>, while David Cameron has fully embraced the discourse on [social impact investment](http://blueandgreentomorrow.com/2013/06/06/david-camerons-social-impact-investment-speech-full-text/)<sup>27</sup>. The field of social innovation has become a full-fledged sector with its own dynamics.

The roots of this emergent practice stem from a certain fatigue of limited and insufficient institutional repertoires that do not challenge, for example, undemocratic decision making, socio-economic inequality and unsustainable use of natural resources ([Moulaert 2013: 2](http://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781849809986.00008.xml)<sup>28</sup>). The "innovation society", with its traditional models of innovation, like narrowly framed technical models, conventional public sector policies and market-led innovation, seems to have

11 <http://www.ssireview.org/>

12 <http://siresearch.eu/social-innovation>

13 <http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org/>

14 <http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/innovation/policy/social-innovation/competition/>

15 <http://www.euclidnetwork.eu/projects/current-projects/european-social-innovation-naples-20.html>

16 <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/10157/47822/Guide%20to%20Social%20Innovation.pdf>

17 [http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/assets/features/the\\_open\\_book\\_of\\_social\\_innovation](http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/assets/features/the_open_book_of_social_innovation)

18 <http://www.socialinnovationtoolkit.com/home.html>

19 <http://diytoolkit.org/>

20 <http://www.bmw-stiftung.de/en/about-us/>

21 <https://social-innovation.hitachi.com/en/>

22 <http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/en/programs/social-innovation-fund>

23 <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/innovation-complex-world>

24 <http://www.newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2013/06/don-mcrae-sworn-in-as-new-minister-of-social-development-and-social-innovation.html>

25 <http://humanservices.alberta.ca/social-innovation-fund.html>

26 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/sicp>

27 <http://blueandgreentomorrow.com/2013/06/06/david-camerons-social-impact-investment-speech-full-text/>

28 <http://www.elgaronline.com/view/9781849809986.00008.xml>

run its course (Lane 2014<sup>29</sup>). In practice this entails that we do not solely need incremental solutions that continue to lean on a reluctance to imagine alternative practices. What is needed is discontinuous change: change that displaces an established structural order for something new. This discontinuous change is hard to achieve, as we need to resist and subvert something Roberto Unger<sup>30</sup> recently labeled as the “dictatorship of no alternatives”. According to Unger, “Every time there is an exogenous shock, an opportunity, a change induced for example by the evolution of technology, the tendency is to accommodate the change, or to realize the potential in a form that least disturbs the predominant [neo-liberal] interest. This is what one might call the path of least resistance. The task of the progressives in general and of the social innovation movement in particular, is to create an alternative to this path of least resistance.” Unger thus stresses the importance of support for alternatives by enabling and stimulating the mobilization of a multitude of small-scale innovations, which he recognizes as “little epiphanies that exist all around the world that represent down payments to transformative possibilities.”

In this view, it is no wonder that labs gain *raison d'être* as they embody an attractive alternative to existing pathways: labs are spaces for experimentation with innovative approaches. They resonate a transformative promise that challenges our thinking and behavior in systems, and their safe havens offer their staff and participants a sense of control. But how do labs cause discontinuous change, and for whom? And what are the outcomes of these efforts? For these questions we will have to return to the practice of labs, namely what they do, how they operate, and what their outcomes are on the ground.

## Diversity in lab practice

Social labs go beyond a two-day event, or a one-week crash course. In short, a lab is a container for social experimentation and the following description is how the lab concept (on paper) roughly works. One takes a large societal problem (such as an ageing society), reaches out to collaborate with the affected end-users (i.e. elderly people, caretakers), and does so in an experimental learning space outside of the dominant, failing system. One co-creates prototypes with the end-users and other stakeholders in the system (i.e. service providers, policy makers) by the means of design- and systems thinking and tries

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29 [http://www.insiteproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Social-Innovation-Manifesto\\_INSITE.pdf](http://www.insiteproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Social-Innovation-Manifesto_INSITE.pdf)

30 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBfPa\\_FiExI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBfPa_FiExI)



out several prototypes in their relevant context (i.e. in an elderly home). This process should create the perfect blend to create new solutions, which can then be scaled to change systems, in the hope to eliminate the original problem.

From our discussions with the participants of 'Lab2: a lab about labs', in which 40 practitioners from 20 social change labs gathered in Amsterdam to learn from each other and exchange ideas, and the literature on these topics, it became evident that lab practitioners aspire to arrive at *new solutions* by following a set of working principles:

1. Show, not tell: research, networking, designing, experimenting, and learning are activities to do, not to study extensively from paper.
2. Take end-users as the leading experts: the needs of the end-user are steering the direction of the work process to make sure the solutions are covering their needs.
3. Focus on systemic social problems: Instead of focussing on fixable, difficult problems (like building a bridge over the river), one focuses on challenging hairy, complex problems such as climate change, ageing societies, depletion of natural resources.
4. Improve or challenge systems: target institutions, such as governments, by developing new solutions to cause 'systems to tip'.
5. Develop new change methodologies: using ethnographies and visualizations, prototyping, based on design-thinking and complexity thinking to facilitate the change process.
6. Assemble a multidisciplinary team and work in collectives: i.e. a core team of researchers, facilitators and designers, accompanied with a collective 'from the system': end-users, service providers, policy-makers to make sure one resembles a 'real system'.
7. Work to reach scale: scale solutions to affect systems.

## 2. The Field: Practice and principles of labs

However, practice shows variations or combinations in using and interpreting these working principles. For some labs, this container is a physical space outside (in independent “war-rooms”<sup>31</sup>, like the late Helsinki Design Lab<sup>32</sup>) or inside the system (e.g. in an elderly home, like the Borg Innovation Lab<sup>33</sup> or in a government building, like MindLab<sup>34</sup>), while for others its a facilitated process (One Earth<sup>35</sup>), or a space with a team and a process (Mindlab, InWithForward<sup>36</sup>). Some labs focus only on public sector innovation (see this visual map made by Parsons<sup>37</sup>), while other labs focus on social innovation in general or thematically. Geographically, labs are emerging all over the world, but in different places, spanning from Latin-America to South-East Asia to Europe<sup>38</sup>. Their names also vary: design-lab, change lab, social innovation lab, hub, hive, social tech lab, social R&D, do-tank and living lab. Additionally, the practice beneath the word ‘lab’ is varied and reflects different methodologies (i.e. user-centred design, working backwards, positive deviance) and assumptions about how change occurs (Schulman 2014: 32<sup>39</sup>). For example, 27e Region<sup>40</sup> believes change starts with civil servants; Family by Family (TACSI<sup>41</sup>) believes change started with families; the late Helsinki Design Lab believed change started with a small group of experts; One Earth believes change starts with a large group of stakeholders; and li-lab<sup>42</sup> and Afri-labs<sup>43</sup> believe change starts with social (tech) entrepreneurs. Therefore, each lab delivers different outputs, such as a new mobile application to report election violence (Ushahidi<sup>44</sup>), a means to file taxes (Mindlab), a low-cost affordable toilet (HCD-i-lab Cambodia<sup>45</sup>), or a new kind of neighbourhood community (T+Huis<sup>46</sup>). Furthermore, most labs were not financially independent, but received one or more grants from international foundations (Gates Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, McConnell Foundation, NGOs (Hivos, BRAC<sup>47</sup>), government bodies (national departments, regional entities) or interna-

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31 <http://www.fastcodesign.com/3028471/google-ventures-your-design-team-needs-a-war-room-heres-how-to-set-one-up>

32 <http://helsinkidesignlab.org/>

33 <http://www.openlivinglabs.eu/livinglab/borg-innovation-living-lab>

34 <http://www.mind-lab.dk/en>

35 <http://www.oneearthweb.org/>

36 <http://inwithforward.com/>

37 [http://nyc.pubcollab.org/files/Gov\\_Innovation\\_Labs-Constellation\\_1.0.pdf](http://nyc.pubcollab.org/files/Gov_Innovation_Labs-Constellation_1.0.pdf)

38 <http://www.sigeneration.ca/home/labs/>

39 <http://centres.smu.edu.sg/lien/social-space-20132014/>

40 <http://blog.la27eregion.fr/>

41 <http://www.tacsi.org.au/>

42 <https://iilab.org/>

43 <http://afrilabs.com/>

44 <http://ushahidi.com/>

45 [http://www.ide-cambodia.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=2&lang=en](http://www.ide-cambodia.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63&Itemid=2&lang=en)

46 <http://www.t-huis.info/>

47 <http://www.brac.net/content/social-innovation-lab#.U15lhazSxdI>

tional institutions (Unicef, World Bank).

This diversity of labs is evident among its participants, as became clear when Lab2 participant Vanessa Timmer (One Earth) scribbled down in a letter at the end of the event: “This is still a diverse and emergent field. No two labs are the same and no two participants entirely agree on what a lab is.” While we see attempts of convergence in the literature and practice (Tojрман 2012), we argue that the real value of labs lies in reports on the mix that is found in and between labs. It is important to foster this diversity, rather than seeking unity or sharpening boundaries of what is or isn’t a lab. If we understand systemic innovation as a means of jumping out of existing structures, beliefs, or ways of organizing, and we aim to do this in interaction with people (hence social innovation), then we argue that stimulating diversity, radicality and disruption could raise the potential to create the discontinuous change that we are seeking. At Lab2, lab practitioners mentioned that they face multiple challenges in their day-to-day practice and expressed a need to further explore such matters in follow-up network meetings:

1. How to reach and engage the end-user in the work process?
2. How to manage a good lab?
3. How to assemble and contract a good team?
4. How to scale out and/or up?
5. How to develop effective methodologies, for example for prototyping?
6. How to arrange funds and become financially independent?
7. How to arrange a mandate from the system, e.g. government bodies?
8. How to position a lab: inside or outside a dominant system?

In addition to working on overcoming practical matters, how are our lab projects leading to structural, institutional, systemic change?

## Labs struggle to define their systemic impact

Despite the richness of the lab practices, genuine good intentions and valuable products and services they have produced, we could not recognize lab practices that are an effective means to a larger end, namely better functioning, or even brand new systems that enable people to live 'better' lives, both now and in the future. The Lab2 labs experienced difficulties in formulating their strategies towards achieving systemic innovation, and consequently struggled to define the systemic results they had obtained. Indeed, teachers in our Kennisland project 'Education Pioneers' have created social innovations in their own schools, but the innovation space remained exclusive to participants in the lab project. It was also difficult to ascertain whether their pupils benefited from the innovations, or whether teachers had altered overarching institutions (i.e. new national school policies, new ideas for education beyond schools). Similarly, some auditing firms in the Finance Lab changed their procedures, but the overarching financial culture surrounding the firms remained to operate oppressively.



Another example is reflected in the following quote of Lab2 participant Daudi Were (Ushahidi), who developed a tool for monitoring electoral violence in Kenya:

“Listen. In my country, people love politics, but all we have are bad elections. What we have developed in our lab is a tool that might solve the problem of bad elections. But what should be solved really, is our problem with bad institutions ... That’s a whole different game. Just labbing that problem ain’t enough. Because once outside the lab, I am dealing with people. And their ideas, their interests. Managing relationships, that’s my job really. And I tell you. It’s the most difficult thing.”

In addition to these identified challenges, well-reasoned accounts in literature still need to be developed. Zaïd Hassan praises that labs produce new sorts of physical, human, social and intellectual capital to challenge complex problems (2014: 24<sup>48</sup>). Although Hassan’s work has provided tremendous insight in lab practices, his presented case studies on their own do not provide solid leads that show that labs altered systems on an institutional level. It’s simply not enough to illustrate with one example of how one company (Unilever) shifted its sustainability policies because they “were heavily influenced by their longstanding participation in the lab.” (2014:23). This claim underestimates the power of the sustainable food movement that started in the seventies, and especially the general pressure of the consuming public for more sustainable products. The same problem applies to his second case. It is insufficient to account lower malnutrition rates in the Indian districts of Maharashtra to the Bhavishya Lab just because the lab happened to operate in those same districts (2014:78).

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48 <http://social-labs.org/>



From her experience in Lab2, Sarah Schulman comes to the same conclusion in her SSI-blogpost<sup>49</sup>:

“For all of their activity and intent, it still remains unclear whether labs are altering the dominant systems, and are actually enabling a different set of outcomes on the ground.”

One logical explanation for this conclusion is that labs are a recent phenomenon in our social realm, while systemic change may take decades to reappear in our social structures and institutions. Yet despite this observation, we believe there are different dynamics at play which result in little systemic change and tend to be overlooked.

These four dynamics are discussed in the next section.

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49 [http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/a\\_lab\\_of\\_labs](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/a_lab_of_labs)

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands



In this section we argue that lab practices show a misjudgement or misinterpretation of the dynamics of complex adaptive systems. This is mirrored in four areas of lab practices: outcomes, focus, goals and representation. Instead, if labs do want to contribute to discontinuous change, it would be helpful to not fall prey to the solutions trap, to better acknowledge the power of politics, to focus on scaling ideas, to share and spread values and principles instead of solutions, and to better anticipate on the messiness of human nature.

## Questioning assumptions

If labs do not (yet) affect systemic change, we need to uncover the reasons for this. One way forward is to better articulate their common assumptions about how systemic change works, and for whom such a change should work. In our research, four assumptions surfaced that seem to remain under-emphasized in our writing and thinking about lab practices. We have coined them as: the *solutionism trap*, the *political blind spot*, the *dictatorship of scale* and the *human post-it celebration*.

### 3.1 The solutionism trap

The first assumption we question is that technocratic solutions lead to systemic change. Fueled by the practice of design-thinking<sup>50</sup> the social innovation paradigm, in which social innovation labs are anchored, holds the strong assumption that problems can be fixed and that direct solutions are readily available. We notice the omnipresence of this line of thinking in the lab field. “[A lab is a] creative environment that employs proven and repeatable protocols to seek disruptive, potentially systems-tipping solutions”, writes Tojman (2012:1). In this line of thinking, it is a common belief that labs need to target systemic challenges at “a root cause level” (Hassan, in Nesta 2013<sup>51</sup>) by “exploring root causes of systemic social issues, and developing specific lab approaches to deal with these problems” (Public Policy Forum Canada 2013: 3<sup>52</sup>). Root causes are (unfairly) technically formulated: i.e. malfunctioning institutions and policies, a lack of cooperation, poverty. This is reflected in the way we combat root causes: one can create ‘to-do lists’ to create systemic action: constitute a diverse team, design an iterative process, and actively create systemic spaces (Hassan 2014: 109). But solutions are most evident in the production of labs: more affordable toilets, better mobile applications, and new tools to monitor election violence. And the list is growing.

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50 <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/are-behavioural-science-and-design-building-blocks-innovation>

51 [http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/systemic\\_innovation.pdf](http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/systemic_innovation.pdf)

52 <http://www.ppforum.ca/publications/change-labs>

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

First, this solutionism rhetoric seems based on a thin view of how complex systems adapt and move. A complex adaptive system could be understood as the structuration of human society. In the view of complexity theory systems are not mere confined entities or institutions, nor are they an accumulation of relationships that act as individual static entities. Rather they are interdependent and interconnected patterns of action and values that involve many entities and in which people learn from experiences. It is understood that these learning experiences feedback to future interactions to improve the effectiveness of each



Photo: 'Lab 2' by Kennisland (CC BY-SA)

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

adaptive change we create (Rihani 2002: 133-134<sup>53</sup>). Metaphorically speaking systems act like a house that magically expands with each door you open. Steve Johnson explains this imaginary house<sup>54</sup>: "You begin in a room with four doors, each leading to a new room that you haven't visited yet. Once you open one of those doors and stroll into that room, three new doors appear, each leading to a brand-new room that you couldn't have reached from your original starting point."

When taking a technocratic outlook on this metaphorical house, we typically tend to look inside the house to find keysets that open every door. In this we forget two interesting assets of this imaginary house. One is that each room is a result of contextualized outcomes. This means that in one room, doors may open due to an abundance of time, money and creativity while elsewhere the key may consist of a lack of those same resources. Second, we overlook the dynamic of interdependent and interconnected patterns that interacts with opening and closing doors. If one door is opened, a door in another room closes, but one cannot precisely see or predict where or when doors open or close elsewhere (remember there are walls in there!). In contrary with a medical or technical test lab, in the social realm it is not possible to completely control for an environment for 'good' dynamics to unfold.

In trying to understand a complex social system this way, then poverty, malfunctioning institutions and inequality are in fact intermediate causes that are being produced by the feedback loop dynamics of a larger system. Yet root causes can be found in improper couplings, or disconnects of systems. Alan Fowler (2013: 27) shows an example of an improper coupling that causes economic ills – such as volatility and inequality. "It could be argued that a root cause lies in perverse incentives associated with debt-driven growth, allied to the paradox of marketing which incites 'dissatisfactions' in order to sell commoditized remedies." Fowler shows that pinning down root causes of societal problems with meta-effects is a difficult and contentious exercise that is highly imbued with ideological and value-based premises. "Social innovations that challenge the sanctity of marriage as exclusive to the reproductive relationship between men and women would probably have to deal with a root cause in axiomatic/religious disputes about the meaning and nature of 'family'."

In practise, systemic change is a daunting exercise. Let us provide another example: our food system. Our global food system is connected to the way we

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53 <http://www.globalcomplexity.org/rihaniz.pdf>

54 <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703989304575503730101860838>



### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

use our land and treat our animals, the way we trade and retail food, and all the way up to how we cook in our kitchens, and how we value personal health and the status of global ecosystems. Systemic failures in our food system are portrayed in domains such as human health (obesity) and our environment (depletion of natural resources). A systemic shift, or reconnect, would require a behavioral and organizational shift of all actors involved: the way health and sustainability is valued by consumers, the way farmers grow crops, the way retailers present food in our shops, the way transporters move our foods, the way policy makers regulate, and so on.



However, technocratic solutionism seems to be the quintessence that currently drives humans in response to the problems we face in society. But simplifying systemic change is not the worst part. More importantly, reasoning through solutional thinking is blocking our sights on strategies to achieve change on a larger scale. Solutionism is detrimental to the discontinuous change we seek, as solutions are often just a mere product of existing structures, and in turn, they consolidate those. This default is also detected by Evgeny Morozov who sees 'solutionism' as a dangerous intellectual tendency<sup>55</sup>. In his view solutions are incremental improvements in systems that fail us, to "end up being OK with doing things just a little bit better". He thinks that by overly focussing on solutions, we lose momentum for radical innovation. With radical innovation Morozov means a type of discontinuous change, in which we do not hide behind a reluctance to imagine alternative practices of organizing ourselves, in which we are intolerant to change that protects forms of social organization in favour of fundamental economic interests. Thus we should not find key sets to existing doors in the magic house, but we should escape the metaphorical complex house and build a new one.

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55 <http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2013/05/evgeny-morozov-technology>

## 3.2 The political blind spot

Building on the previous assumption, we need to deconstruct a second assumption: that social innovation practices are a-political practices. As shown above, one may conceptualize or frame labs in pragmatic, technocratic terms. However, in reality we espouse a set of values, which are political in nature, but are very often not made explicit. This was also observed by Lab2 participant Anna Lochard (27e Region) after closing the event: "I tried to bring the question of the political visions of our organizations up, but it is obviously a concern that is both really French and linked to our action in the public sector. I would love the other labs to realize that they are acting also politically and that social innovations methods are not neutral, but it is probably easier to avoid those questions if you don't have to deal with it directly."

The quest of labs for evidence on solutions 'that work', obscures another, better question: what works for whom? If change is the product innovation processes must deliver, then we should ask ourselves: whose change is it anyways?

Let us continue to use the metaphor of the imaginary house, but now not only with rooms, doors, and keys, but also with people in them. In our metaphoric representation, groups of people are not equally distributed over the rooms, nor are their keysets. Some groups of people reside in beautiful rooms and can easily open doors because they have access to a set of keys (i.e. money, creativity, and education), while others are confined in dusty, dark rooms, without keys. This (unequal) distribution of access and resources in the imaginary house is a direct outcome of an ideological view on how to organize society. Prior to this state, certain people with particular values and ideas have triumphed over others who were less powerful. Those who ideologically conquered were those who built the institutions, laws, and regulations that support and facilitate their hegemony. In this view, social change is understood as an assemblage of ideas put to action in order to move a certain status-quo to a new equilibrium. In our case it would mean moving from a neo-liberal societal view to envisioning a new way of organizing our society more equally and sustainably.

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

The functioning of an emergent system is most present in places where a reluctance to change is expressed. One might think of visible street protests here, but one can also look at the more static, invisible dynamics. Take a look at the way our banking system still runs. Even after it showed its first signs of collapse in 2008, Reuters reports that bankers' bonuses have jumped 15 percent last year to the highest level since the 2008 financial crisis and were the third largest on record<sup>56</sup>. The bankers' world seems to be a well-functioning system, where some species survive by parasitizing on other species. The groups in the well-equipped rooms have an interest to stay there and to maintain the institutions in place.

In other words: there are no such things as bad systems, which can be transformed into good systems. Rather, we argue that there are systems that function very well for some people and not so well for others. However, labs continue to believe that they can occupy neutral rooms in the magic house, where lab-orants can play a brokering role, or at least provide a neutral space in which to get 'the whole system in the room', to address the functioning of 'bad systems'. We can see this idea popping up in the rhetoric of labs: "Labs offer a neutral space dedicated to problem-solving in a highly experimental environment." (Tojрман 2012:9). Or with the late Helsinki Design Lab, where the offer of a neutral ground for new ideas is celebrated as part of successful lab stewardship (Boyer et al. 2013: 20<sup>57</sup>). The website of Mindlab beams a similar message: "We are also a physical space – a neutral zone for inspiring creativity, innovation and collaboration." Unicef's Lab It Yourself Guide<sup>58</sup> (2012:1) even goes so far to state: "There is no ego in the concept of a lab".

This perceived neutrality is not a desirable asset for labs to own as it is deceptive. By denying their own political character, they depoliticize their own roles as political players. Labs also decide who's in and who's out by deciding whose problems need addressing. For example, labs must choose which problems to address: a flourishing countryside through better youth employment opportunities by improving state youth employment policies (27e Region); healthier families by targeting the hygiene industries' production chains (HCD-i-Lab Cambodia); or thriving families by redesigning child-protection services (TACSI). In these cases, choices need to be made concerning 'the (end-)users', i.e. the persons who ultimately benefit from the efforts of the lab. For example: enabling families to thrive (TACSI), enabling pupils and teachers to improve their education environment (Kennisland), creating better future perspectives

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56 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/12/us-usa-bonuses-idUSBREA2BoWA20140312>

57 <http://www.helsinkidesignlab.org/pages/legible-practises>

58 [http://www.unicefinnovationlabs.org/?page\\_id=463](http://www.unicefinnovationlabs.org/?page_id=463)

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

for school drop-outs (IMI), improving the health of poor people (HCD-i-Lab Cambodia), improving democracy for citizens (Ushahidi), and enabling a safe hood for neighbours (T+Huis). In this process, labs define end-users as those that are 'in need' of goods, and this is a political act.

In recognizing this, we propose to think through two aspects. First, one needs to realize that in making a distinction between saving or helping 'poor or vulnerable' victimized people (e.g. slogans like: "preparing the poor and vulnerable for digital jobs"<sup>59</sup>), one simultaneously impeaches the 'rich and powerful' system-operators (e.g. service providers, policy makers), and constructs the lab-worker as the 'neutral saviour', thereby detaching him or herself from the system in which he or she operates. Bruce Nussbaum justly wonders whether social innovation in that sense is any different from the paradigm we see in development cooperation: "Are designers the new anthropologists or missionaries, who come to poke into village life, 'understand' it and make it better - their 'modern' way?"<sup>60</sup>. History has taught us what happens when the West sees itself as the developed champions of innovation and regards the "backward Rest" as people who failed to innovate (Fougere and Harding 2012<sup>61</sup>). Does this process not just consolidate existing power divisions?


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59 <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/preparing-poor-vulnerable-digital>

60 <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian-design-the-new-imperialism>

61 <http://www.tandfebooks.com/doi/abs/10.4324/9780203120972?isOnline=false>

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands



In addition, it is not productive to depict people as either winners or losers. We cannot deny the political economy of labs: the vast majority is dependent on the same kind of funding structures as other organized efforts for change, such as donor grants and government subsidies. This factor makes it particularly difficult, if not impossible, to propose radically different ideas, especially to the party who funds it. For example, Reos' sustainable food lab is sponsored by Kelloggs<sup>62</sup>, while Mindlab is funded by the Danish government. This will make the offered outcomes largely dependent on the structures that are accepted by donors, and thus has the potential to limit the ability for labs to seek discontinuous change.

In order to be effective in its outcomes for discontinuous change, it is not an option for labs to be a-political. It is therefore important to think in mere contexts, and points of view in which people suffer or benefit from systemic goods and failures. We recognize that this is a disheartening exercise. Getting 'the whole system in the room' is not only practically impossible, but also proves to be a difficult practice if one even gets 'parts of the system in the room'. The reality is that parties who fundamentally disagree do not have incentives to participate in lab activities.

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62 <http://reospartners.com/sites/default/files/Change%20Lab%20Case%20Study%20-%20SFL.pdf>



## 3.3 The Dictatorship of Scale

The third assumption is that scaling solutions is the best way to achieve systemic change. As found in the mission statements of MaRS Solutions Lab<sup>63</sup>, D-Lab<sup>64</sup> and Unicef Innovation Lab Uganda<sup>65</sup>, labs are focussed on aiming for the best possible outcome if they create global impact by scaling solutions to reach systemic change, either by themselves or in cooperation with social entrepreneurs<sup>66</sup>. The core human value driving the scale reflex is honorable, namely to equally and widely distribute the social and economic value of 'good innovations'. But in practice, the word 'scale' often refers to *scaling out*: efforts of organizations to replicate and disseminate their programs, products and solutions to affect more people and cover a larger geographic area. To go back to the complex house metaphor: instead of opening new doors, they want to build skyscrapers with endless stories on top of the existing house.

Yet again, scaling out is detrimental in seeking discontinuous change. In their SSI-review blog post academics Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair<sup>67</sup> juxtapose scaling and continuous innovation and describe its dynamic as a counterintuitive manner: "Once an organizational innovation has succeeded in building a robust model for delivering needed products and services, subsequent scaling requires much incremental refinement, routinization, and standardization. Scaling thus requires focus and a commitment to the current operating model. On the other hand, continuous innovation is grounded in increasing the variance of ideas and experiments, challenging the status quo, and thinking and acting in fundamentally new ways." However Seelos and Mair then continue to frame scaling primarily as an organizational challenge, as "organizations are able to match the size of wicked problems" and deem organizations only successful in scaling if they manage the "dual pressure of scaling the innovations of the past to achieve and demonstrate predictable impact today and exploring uncertain innovations for tomorrow." In practice this careful balancing act was recognized by a Lab2 participant Josine Stremmelaar (Hivos Knowledge lab): "When you are in a lab you have this space to reflect on strategies for scaling up. It is more free and loose and hopefully more critical. If you are in an organization that wants to scale up, it becomes more difficult to keep that type of critical thinking because of the increasing vested interests one organization might build."

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63 <http://www.marsdd.com/aboutmars/partners/mars-solutions-lab/>

64 <http://d-lab.mit.edu/scale-ups>

65 <http://www.unicefinnovationlabs.org/?p=292>

66 <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/about-tilburg-university/partnerships/tilburg-social-innovation-lab/>

67 [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/innovate\\_and\\_scale\\_a\\_tough\\_balancing\\_act](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/innovate_and_scale_a_tough_balancing_act)

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

But if scaling is solely perceived as *an organizational challenge to scale solutions*, it yet again falls victim to solutionism and endangers discontinuous change. First, this type of scaling obscures that effectiveness of a solution depends on a blend of contexts and people's values. Second, the interests of single organizations or enterprises often move away from the social challenges and the end-users they originated with. Third, this type of scaling is particularly blind for the new inequalities it creates and could thereby provide a dictatorship of solutions people don't want or need. After all, most labs tend to be operative in a supportive context of a stable, economically rich, rule-bound state with relative predictability in institutional behaviors and accountabilities. Learning from the field of development cooperation, we know that we cannot rely on the presence of such conditions in just any social or geographical context. In relation to this claim, Alan Fowler argues that in order "to be of practical use, laboratory designs and simulations must be able to factor in and test against sustainability variations in system-relevant contextual variables." (Fowler 2013: 31<sup>68</sup>).

Westley and Antadze (2010: 3<sup>69</sup>) acknowledge that social innovation efforts of scaling out is not enough in order to be effective on a systemic level. One needs to *scale up* to affect everybody who is in need of the social innovation on offer, and address the larger institutional roots of a problem. We contend that the function of labs could be even more narrow, namely to publicly discuss and question the larger paradigm in which inequalities were able to manifest. Labs could play a role in contributing to a new climate of ideas. A contribution to new ideas can be done in several ways (see section 3 for ideas) but it remains debatable whether scaling social solutions in the shape of products and services is necessarily part of a lab's endeavour.

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68 <http://hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Publications/Publications/Social-Innovation-New-Game-New-Dawn-or-False-Promise>

69 [http://www.innovation.cc/scholarly-style/westley2antadze2make\\_difference\\_final.pdf](http://www.innovation.cc/scholarly-style/westley2antadze2make_difference_final.pdf)

## 3.4 The Human Post-It Celebration

The fourth assumption is rather bold, yet simple: we would like to challenge the image of humans as happy-go-clappy-post-it-sticking enthusiasts. This one-dimensional portrait of humans recurs again and again in the communication and representation of labs. In this case Kennisland is guilty as charged. People look happy<sup>70</sup>, lab places look creative and inspiring, the brochures show people effortlessly working together<sup>71</sup>, workshop card decks look graphically splendid and inviting<sup>72</sup>, the social innovation jargon radiates a sense of co-creation and endless possibilities<sup>73</sup>, and some designs illustrate an almost surreal oversimplification of social reality (take a look at this picture of India<sup>74</sup>). If there is success, one takes the stage in TEDx style allure<sup>75</sup>, where the audience gets drugged with tempting fixes. To us this image of innovation does not resemble how this world actually turns, nor does it reveal the non-linear innovation process or the messy nature of actual human behavior. The reality is that the world outside the happy lab is merciless. How many times did we not throw a phone into the corner of the room after yet another disappointing conversation with someone who gun fired a new idea? How many times did we not cause fights, and put in efforts to ease them? How many times did we not lie awake at night thinking we had created an awful innovation monster?

In those moments we are confronted with mankind, who does not fit the description of the kind, labbed creature who sticks up post-its in all the right places. Instead, we experience that humans are irrational, messy beings who flaunt unpredictable behavior and who find it eminently hard to venture out into the vast unknown and adapt to new situations. Rather, it is much easier to follow the masses, to accept a new authority if one's values are upheld, and to ignore potentially good outcomes for the unknown 'other'.

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70 <http://2013.kl.nl/#23>

71 <http://enginegroup.co.uk/work/kcc-social-innovation-lab>

72 <http://www.servicedesigntools.org/content/65>

73 <http://ow.ly/woTDx>

74 [https://centres.smu.edu.sg/lien/files/2013/11/SocialSpace2013-2014\\_PradeepGhosh.pdf](https://centres.smu.edu.sg/lien/files/2013/11/SocialSpace2013-2014_PradeepGhosh.pdf)

75 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/30/we-need-to-talk-about-ted>

### 3. Oversights: four omissions in the labbed lands

Or as Dutch columnist Rosanne Hertzberger once put it bluntly<sup>76</sup>:

“Humans. Those filthy, snorting, aggressive, horny, confused, irrational herd animals, who pray to God and want to out-argue others, always”.

This particular take on human behavior, which we regard as realistic, is not included in the way we communicate lab practices to outsiders. We also wonder whether the actual form of lab practices (e.g. workshops, out-of-the-box design sessions) service to overcome encountered predicaments sufficiently (including cooperating with stubborn colleagues, shouting bosses, or outright war). In other words: we might be able to talk the talk, but how does it make us walk the walk? We thus argue that an unrealistic portrait or representation is not helpful, as it does not contribute to the way we think and act about, and in, the outside world. It perpetuates the idea that change is an easy, colorful and joyful process. But when we envision a soldier with a joystick pointing its bullseye at his moving target to get his drone ready to fire a rocket in a faraway desert, and envision the organizing system behind it, we instinctively know it is not. Behavioral studies show that organizations who have vested interests to lose, in particular people with high positions in these organizations, display risk-averse behavior (studies cited in Galley et al. 2013: 11<sup>77</sup>). Faced with uncertainty, they are less likely to adopt innovations and more likely to deliberately obstruct the flow of new ideas, while people with little to lose are more likely to be early adopters. Innovations tend to naturally follow this path of least resistance, and therefore do not automatically alter structural inequalities and distribute the economic and social values in a new and improved way. Thus: we could better prepare ourselves for typical human behavior at all times. Or as our Lab2 colleague Remko Berkhout once put it: “The revolution will not be flip charted”.

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.rosannehertzberger.nl/2013/11/25/hautain-medium/>

<sup>77</sup> <http://mowatcentre.ca/public-service-transformed/>



## **4. The Action:** **New scenarios for practice**

How can we strengthen our lab practices?  
This section introduces ten possible scenarios  
for labs to explicitly address the omissions  
mentioned in the previous section.



At Lab2 there was a great need to exchange instructional knowledge on how labs are run, covering issues such as assembling teams to financing the lab, developing methodologies, and developing personal skills. One question seemed to be particularly prevalent: how to maintain a radical, creative, and sustainable lab that operates in a world that is large, complex and volatile? This challenge was later also framed by Geoff Mulgan as a classic 'radicals dilemma': "If [labs] stand too much inside the system they risk losing their radical edge; if they stand too far outside they risk having little impact<sup>78</sup>." Besides portraying ideas for personal, practical, methodological and managerial issues, the lab-orants present at Lab2 provided each other with suggestions to engage better with different stakeholders (the lab practitioner, the end-user, the stakeholder, the lab-researcher and the lab-funder). We have bundled these ideas and combined them with content found in literature, conversations and our own thinking. They aim to counteract the mentioned omissions and sketch the different scenarios for lab stakeholders to overcome these oversights.

### 1. What if labs ... design and scale better processes instead of solutions

If we assume that there are no solutions for complex problems, or no solutions that can work for everyone, it seems that we have a problem. The idea of 'no solution' feels uncomfortable and unnatural to us as optimistic, creative human beings. So what can labs do? Instead of developing solutions in terms of new smart products, we argue that labs could focus their efforts on redesigning the way we are organized in institutional processes. Because, as Mulgan writes, the full value of innovations may only be reaped by reshaping the architecture of the system: how money flows are organized, the way knowledge travels through society, the way we educate ourselves, and the way we set targets on the boundaries of health and social care, criminal justice and employment, environment and business (Mulgan 2013: 19). Thus the alteration of processes might have far greater leverage to change complex adaptive systems than solutions as they offer a chance to revisit and redistribute existing power blocks. Examples are new procurement procedures, decision-making and policy-making structures, laws, or smart evaluation and feedback methods, and so forth. In practice this means for example not only designing a completely new service to support struggling families, but dually challenge the way a city's policy for families is developed. This includes challenging the way research is executed and

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78 [http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/social\\_and\\_public\\_labs\\_-\\_and\\_the\\_radicals\\_dilemma.pdf](http://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/social_and_public_labs_-_and_the_radicals_dilemma.pdf)

translated to actions, the way stakeholders are interacting, the way finances are distributed, the way decisions are made, and by whom. From funders this would require for example to adjust their funding proposal forms, and to lower pressure on tangible outcomes like smart mobile phone apps, tools and affordable toilets<sup>79</sup>. In building these processes, solutions take on a different and equally important role: they are prototyped visualizations of how a potential future would look like, and how interactions would change in the face of building new processes, structures and systems.

## 2. What if labs ... spread ethics and ideas instead of solutions

Lab2 participant Juan Casanueva (Social TIC lab<sup>80</sup>) phrased it eloquently: “We better invest in scaling principles and knowledge, instead of investing in replicating models and methodologies.” Values influence our beliefs and beliefs influence our behavior: it makes us prefer one action over another, or one idea over another<sup>81</sup>. To acknowledge this interactive relationship between values, behavior and actions, we could challenge ourselves to become more explicit about our underlying values, assumptions, principles and ambitions that constitute ‘living a good life’. If they become more tangible, and prove their value in practice, labs could sharpen and extend their ethical work principles by sharing and documenting new ways of thinking. One suggestion is to permanently embed a researcher in a lab team to document and share reflections on ongoing developments in- and outside the lab. Because the core strength of labs might lie in their ability to frame and reframe issues, to determine who gets to comment on that issue and its solutions; and, ultimately, to embed the results into a cultural practice, belief, or ethos. The latter, as argued by academic John Gaventa (1980, as cited in Gibson et al. 2013<sup>82</sup>), may be the deepest form of ‘impact’ a social change initiative can have. If labs become better at ‘framing issues’ and creating awareness of these issues, then they might become more effective power players.

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79 <http://inwithforward.com/resources/spread-and-scale>

80 <http://socialtic.org>

81 <http://valuesandframes.org/handbook/6-implications/>

82 [http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/to\\_get\\_to\\_the\\_good\\_you\\_gotta\\_dance\\_with\\_the\\_wicked](http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/to_get_to_the_good_you_gotta_dance_with_the_wicked)

### 3. What if labs ... connected with like-minded movements

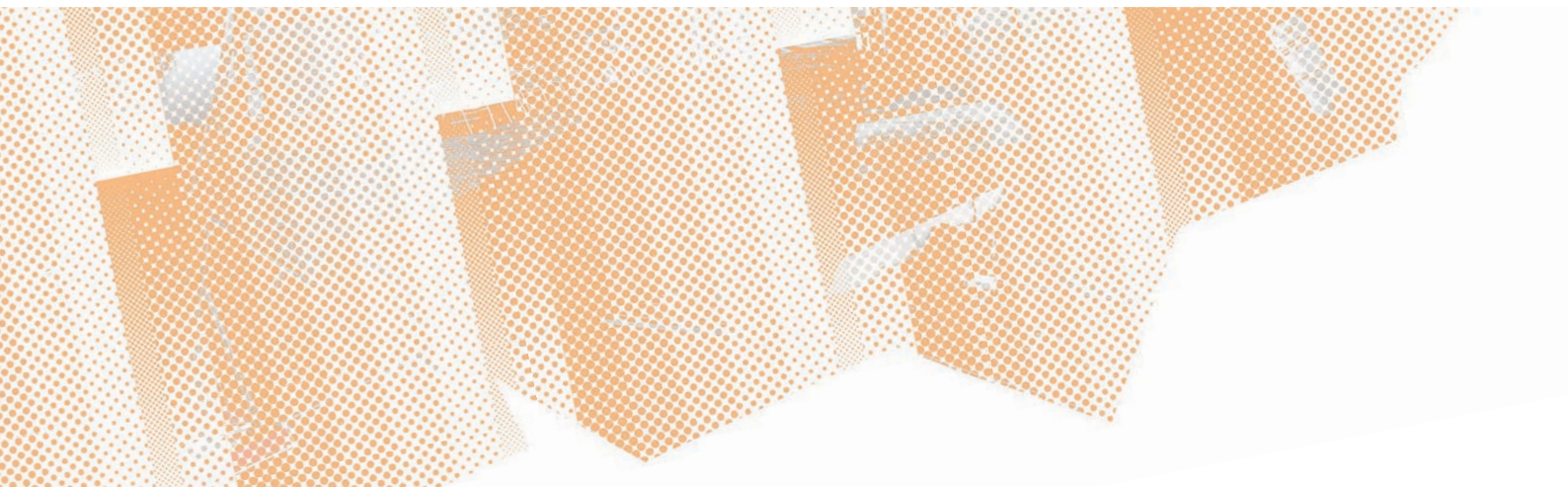
Solutions divert our attention away from scaling efforts that align elements in a system over a shared set of assumptions to cause paradigm shifts. A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in a shared idea in society, an alteration of a powerful thought, often based on unstated assumptions that inform our deepest set of beliefs about how the world works, or ought to work (Meadows 1999:17). Two examples of shared sets of assumptions are: “enslaving people is wrong” and “gender-based discrimination is not accepted”. Hence the capacity to innovate will depend on who is part of your alliance (Leadbeater 2013:49). In practice this means we need to debunk public or individual assumptions to further understand with whom to align over which common values, beliefs and actions, and to connect with those actors to gain momentum and mass support for paradigm shifts. For example by connecting with parties with similar interests who are working on thematically similar complex problems as the respective lab, such as a food lab collaborating with the larger sustainability movement or a women’s lab associating itself with the domestic workers’ union. Other potential ways of becoming more embedded within and connected to a lab’s surrounding environment is to seek further media coverage and enhance popular writing skills to engage an audience beyond the social innovation crowd. We realise that this is an arduous effort and not easily available for social labs that consist of small teams. However, focusing on the development on such alliances may bear more fruits than following existing trajectories that leave labs isolated, rather than connected within their socio-political contexts.

### 4. What if labs ... become more politically aware

The challenge for labs does not lie in acting like saviours to the poor and vulnerable, but lies in developing political gravitas outside the lab to detect where and when outcomes of actions in the system stop or start flows (of finances, of people physically moving from A to B, of knowledge and ideas). Leaving politics out is not an option for labs. Instead, it is much more productive to be equipped with good debating skills, to develop methodologies that could initiate and steer disruptions, and to constantly engage/disengage and associate/disassociate with situations that occur in their work settings. It would also be of value if lab practitioners and funders develop and use methodologies to see the dominant power relationships in place and to recognize their own roles and views within such hierarchies. If we don’t, we run the risk of reaffirming or fortifying existing power relationships.

### 5. What if labs ... were better networked, especially geographically

In between labs there is a need for an infrastructure to exchange instructional knowledge with others who work in similar environments or in other segments of society. Here we are not referring to a more in-depth understanding of what labs need to do or not do, but we are referring to the construction of an infrastructure that allows us to think better through lab practices and challenges to support their future actions. In this process it is important to connect globally, for example with 'low legacy environments': environments that are not burdened with success and institutions to safeguard success. As Marco Steinberg (ex-Helsinki Design Lab) writes: "Europe and the US are places to look at if you are interested in improving yesterday's solutions. Chile is a place to look at if you are interested in inventing tomorrow"<sup>83</sup>. Or Zambian Lab2 participant Lukonga Lindunda (Bongo Hive<sup>84</sup>) recalls: "There might be more scaling possible in places without strong existing institutions because there is not the same push-back from the status-quo residing in old institutions". The downside (and risk) is that without existing working institutions and regulation systems, there is no guarantee that things won't continue on a negative trajectory of increased inequality leading to social (and ultimately investment) instability. Maybe this is where the exchange of labbed knowledge can be of mutual value.



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83 <http://snowcone.fi/blog/2013/10/12/week-7-8-the-question-of-redesign-in-boston-santiago>  
84 <http://bongohive.co.zm/>

### 6. What if labs ... were more financially independent

If labs are more capable of diversifying their funding and acquiring funding that is 'free' from requirements, monitoring and regulation, then the possibilities for change that is discontinuous and independent of existing systems increase. It would be fruitful if labs could better negotiate with funders on issues, such as the start-up phase. Labs often start with iterative processes, which are characterized by trial and error practice, high levels of uncertainty and failure, and no revenue generation. This means for example to 'not overpromise the lab', to lower expectations, and to de-focus from expecting immediate results. It would also be helpful to negotiate working principles, particularly issues surrounding freedom and trust. Freedom in terms of the ability to spend resources on topics that labs deem important, even though those items or investments were not previously mentioned in project plans. And trust in the ability of labs to decide for themselves that their investments or other actions are worth their efforts and resources. In this respect a single focus on outcomes and outputs through rigorous measurements and evaluations confines ways of operating and could hamper the velocity of progress.

### 7. What if labs ... were more responsive to human behavior

To better understand social innovation processes, and design for them, we can learn more from the field of political or behavioral science to understand how people may take decisions and under which circumstances people may be risk-averse<sup>85</sup>. This could provide further insight into how we can build occupational cultures that are more open to experimentation and more tolerant of risk<sup>86</sup>. In order for us to deal more effectively with situations in which complex group and power dynamics are at play, it can be fruitful for lab practitioners to learn other skills that move beyond the design domain. More emphasis on negotiation skills can, for example, facilitate lab practitioners to engage in a critical dialogue, handle resistance from others, and resolve conflicts.

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85 <http://www.behaviouraldesignlab.org/latestarticles/nudge-unit-civil-servants-turn-behavioural-insights/>

86 <http://mowatcentre.ca/pdfs/mowatResearch/g8.pdf>



### 8. What if labs ... invested more in building innovation capacity within local communities?

Labs tend to isolate innovation projects by cultivating experimentation skill-sets within systems, such as governmental departments<sup>87</sup>. MindLab has purposely chosen not to work in end-to-end processes and has left the implementation phase in the hands of practitioners who participated in their public-policy lab projects (Bason 2012: 17<sup>88</sup>). This means that after participating in a policy lab, civil servants will need to actively engage with power politics in the high-end levels of their organizations. Yet research shows that design processes need to become part of an organizational culture in order to achieve structural behavior change. This entails that one needs to get sufficient institutional buy-in to get design thinking accepted in high-level policymaking (Design Council 2013: 17<sup>89</sup>). All of this requires a set of innovation skills to do so. Furthermore, an additional duty for labs could be to support the built-up of collective innovation capacity through creating local teams and networks within local communities to grow creative resilience to better cope themselves with system failures. This would require to better embed lab practices in society. In this way society might grow less dependent from institutions and expand possibilities to find new ways of living beyond institutions (Westley 2013<sup>90</sup>).

### 9. What if labs ... developed their own evaluation methodologies to support their practices

We currently detect a trend to focus on rigid metrics to monitor and evaluate the impact of innovation efforts, in which randomized control trial is perceived as the “gold standard” (Jonker and Meehan 2013<sup>91</sup>). However we wonder whether these activities are supportive to innovation practices? First it is difficult, if not impossible, to capture and close of a sort of dataset in a dynamic context, in which normative experiences are abound and the proof of the pudding lies in the interaction of human interactions. How could traditional, modelled research then be of value? Second the way research is performed (e.g. focus group conversations, filing questionnaires) could be experienced as disturbing to the

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87 <http://www.mind-lab.dk/en/2013/5/28/mindlabmorgen-with-geoff-mulgan>

88 [http://www.innovation.cc/scholarly-style/christian\\_bason\\_v17i1a4.pdf](http://www.innovation.cc/scholarly-style/christian_bason_v17i1a4.pdf)

89 <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/Design%20for%20Public%20Good.pdf>

90 <http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/innovation-complex-world>

91 [http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/clear\\_measurement\\_counts](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/clear_measurement_counts)

innovation practice itself. Third 'the researched' find themselves in an unequal position in relation to the researchers, who define what needs to be researched, how data needs to be analyzed and for whom. This is often defined by organizations who pay for evaluations. Yet in our experience and view, the value of evaluative research lies elsewhere. For example to keep new ideas, stakeholders and the outcomes and output of innovation processes ideologically and physically connected during an innovation process, in order to keep feedback flowing back and forth (between individuals, groups, institutions), and to see where unintended and negative consequences of innovation arise, and to exchange instructional knowledge on how to move forward. Would it be an idea if labs themselves develop their own evaluation methodologies, instead of accepting to be subjected to rigid impact measurements from external parties that reside in traditional institutions?


### 10. What if labs ... prototyped new organizational models

Instead of diluting and widening practices to expand one's impact, labs could also choose to deepen their practice and focus on embedding their practices in the systems they seek to change. This means going outside the lab (or not even have a lab at all) and spending lengths of time with everyone who is subject to the processes, procedures or institutions one seeks to change. For example, in the Kenyan Ushahidi, lab practitioners spent time with public authorities (courts, politicians) and prompted conversations about the acceptance of other types of judicial evidence, such as video clips, rather than solely obtaining written statements. However, as the InWithFor lab rightly mentions, embedding practices and spending weeks with end-users takes enormous amounts of time<sup>92</sup>. This would also require us to rethink about the business models of labs, as the old consultancy model (paid by the hour, dependent on upfront funding for projects) does not suffice for the type of discontinuous change we are seeking<sup>93</sup>. Thus one could say labs are also in need of organizational change from within.

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92 <http://inwithforward.com/resources/hunches>

93 [http://cdn1.inwithforward.com/documents/Biz\\_Model\\_Overview\\_March14.pdf?mtime=20140403121521](http://cdn1.inwithforward.com/documents/Biz_Model_Overview_March14.pdf?mtime=20140403121521)



## **5. Conclusion:**

**Labs matter, but  
our matter can be  
better**

## 5. Conclusion: Labs matter, but our matter can be better

Labs matter because they are new and promising spaces to reshape the public realm and improve the quality of our lives in the 21st century. In delivering daring perspectives and unconventional partnerships and ideas labs can transcend incremental change and enable our society to move towards what Steven Johnson calls, “the adjacent possible”. This is “a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which the present can reinvent itself<sup>94</sup>.” The adjacent possible future is achieved by actual exploration: “the boundaries of the adjacent possible grow as you explore them. Each new combination opens up the possibility of other new combinations.” This is why labs grab our interest: they operate as experimental concepts in which we learn by doing.

But “can social innovation practice contribute to help us move beyond the Innovation Society and its endogenous crises? Or is social innovation destined to be a marginal phenomenon, supporting rather than supplanting the Innovation Society, offering a teacup to bail out the Titanic?”, wonders David Lane (2014:4<sup>95</sup>). In this paper we have identified four blind spots in terms of their outcomes, goals, focus and representation that somewhat obscure the positive aspects that labs can offer in terms of impact and external engagements. If labs want to become truly ‘socially innovative’ at a systemic level, with the intent to influence the distribution of economic and social values that stem from innovations, then we need to become better at designing smart structures that alter the usual path of social diffusions. We need to move beyond a path of least resistance towards one in which we actively find and promote alternative paths that challenge or transcend prevailing interests. Such a shift raises a lot of questions that argue the nature and functionings of labs. Could labs become more ‘permeable’, both in their own practices and in reaching out to society? Could labs have more porous walls, in which they can level the operations within a lab to developments which occur outside the lab? Furthermore, are papers like this the best way to spark conversation or do we need to create other mediums in which we can critically engage with ourselves and each other? Is systems thinking the best knowledge framework to work in? Is convening labs the best way to learn? How could we challenge the ways in which we network and learn?

Kennisland, together with Hivos, SIX and other interested partners, would like to enrich this type of conversation with other lab practitioners by critically reflecting and facilitating deeper learning about the concept of labs with other

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94 <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703989304575503730101860838>

95 [http://www.insiteproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Social-Innovation-Manifesto\\_INSITE.pdf](http://www.insiteproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Social-Innovation-Manifesto_INSITE.pdf)

## 5. Conclusion: Labs matter, but our matter can be better

labs, while practicing with our own experiments. In this effort we welcome and invite others who want to support and contribute to this effort, by studying the field more critically and by linking progressive thinkers, frameworks and methods globally. Let us conclude with a Lab2 goodbye letter of our 27e Region Lab colleague Anna Lochard:

“Dear colleague,  
It’s a shame that you had to leave so early yesterday night. The second day was even better than the first though. It’s striking to see how we turn around the same questions over and over again: governance, money, documentation, impact measure, recruitment. If anybody had a clear answer, we would have noticed by now, but it is still interesting and inspiring to see how others manage those questions, even without a real answer. But it is difficult to be ‘meta’ without someone from the outside to ask the obvious questions: Why a lab? What are the other ways to innovate? Is it a fashion trend? How can we explain what we are doing on a very simple way, even to my grand mother? What is a definition of a lab? We all began as if those questions were solved, which is not the case from my point of view.”



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Marlieke Kieboom  
[mk@kl.nl](mailto:mk@kl.nl)