

# Lab Practice

Creating spaces for  
social change



*“The growth of social innovation labs around the world, in numbers, in status, and in impact, justifies mild optimism about our commitment to social problem-solving. Disconnected from a broader context of politics, policy, and practice, however, these labs run the risk of being frivolous adventures of short-term engagement, focused more on satisfying the lab workers’ curiosity than on contributing to lasting impact for citizens. Kennisland, having been a social innovation lab avant-la-lettre, and still at the forefront of debate and development in this realm, has identified important principles for design and management of a lab. These principles are rooted as much in design thinking, as in democratic theory. This publication is required reading for anyone interested in turning good intentions into meaningful practice through the creation of collaborative spaces.”*

*– Jorrit de Jong, Academic Director of the Innovations in Government Program and Faculty Director of the Innovation Field Lab, Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government*

*“Kennisland has again created a rich and practical account of everyday innovation in and around the public sector – guided by the sometimes messy realities of everyday life rather than abstract theory, and grounded in the refreshing assumption that citizens themselves are best qualified to interpret and transform their own lives.”*

*– Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive of NESTA*

*“Social innovation labs struggle – they may even exist to struggle – with the challenge of reconciling substantive action and potent and open reflection. Lab Practice is an important contribution for how deftly it navigates this central tension: it is at once a chronicle of the Amsteldorp lab, an exploration of the ethical, methodological, and practical considerations of labs; even a toolkit for Kennisland’s promising Feed Forward methodology. The authors start a frank dialogue between practitioners, their practice and its implications; it’s very worth listening in.”*

*– Josh Harvey, Lead, UNICEF Innovations Lab Kosovo*

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# Preface

*It's the final day of the Social Lab. A lot needs to be organised today. The atmosphere is good despite the fatigue that has begun to take its toll on the team members. They have had little sleep during the past week and have often worked on into the evening in order to process stories and to optimise the lab methodology. But it has been worth it: today, part of the final result will be presented during the neighbourhood marketplace and barbecue!*

*- Team member Amsteldorp*

The sun is shining in the streets of Amsteldorp; a small residential neighbourhood in the east of Amsterdam. We are sitting on the main square in the shade of a large tree. Every morning at 9.30 am, for two weeks straight, we have come together as a social lab team with the aim to learn how to come up with new answers to the question: how to grow old better in Amsteldorp? This question of 'how' is becoming more and more urgent in times of an ageing population and diminishing public resources, while the Netherlands is in the midst of decentralising care facilities from the national to the municipality level.

The social lab team consists of people from [Kennisland](#), civil servants from the local municipality, professionals from local well-being & health care organisations and citizens. Our day is made up of conversations with local residents, storywriting, and checking these stories with the storytellers and the organisations (i.e. police, housing corporation, local supermarket) they mentioned in their stories. During our daily team meeting on the square we reflect on the previous day and make plans for the days to come. We reflect on how it was to spend time in Helen's apartment at the care home, how we framed our conversation with the police about elderly security, and how we negotiated a tense situation with a neighbouring resident.

Although we entered the community as strangers, after a couple of days we feel comfortable in the neighbourhood, almost part of it. The team keeps growing and we need to borrow extra chairs from the neighbours to fit all the members during the daily get-together. We get invited for lunches, organise neighbourhood barbecues and borrow Henk's mobility scooter to circulate flyers in the narrow streets of Amsteldorp.

Setting up a social lab in a neighbourhood with real people, real issues, real stories is adventurous; for us, the municipality and the local residents in Amsteldorp. A lab in which citizens, civil servants, professionals and policymakers search for new approaches for pressing issues. A lab that offers new perspectives and action points for a better

## Quotes

All quotes in the left-hand column of this publication can also be found on the [blog Team Amsteldorp](#).

functioning public sector. A lab that provides the opportunity for experimentation, reflection and learning on various levels. A lab that will find follow-up as the local municipality and the housing corporation feel encouraged by the possibilities that started to emerge, both in the neighbourhood and in their employees' offices.

This publication gives an account of our experiences in Amsteldorp. The lab in Amsteldorp is a follow-up of the international conference [Lab2<sup>1</sup>](#) and the publication [Lab Matters](#) in which we explored social labs as a vehicle for transforming social systems. Since Amsteldorp we have set up more social labs in Dordrecht and in Nijmegen on the topic of co-creating public policy with youngsters. In these two medium-sized cities we keep improving Feed Forward, our self-developed lab approach that finds its origins in our work in Amsteldorp. These labs run for about six months together with motivated teams that add smart practices and ideas that respond to emerging questions in the field.

The late [Helsinki Design Lab](#) once wrote: *“Trailblazing is about going out of your way to make your path legible. That means always leaving a few lanterns floating on the water to share not just where you went, but how you got here”*. This is why we keep questioning our lab matters publicly, the ‘how’ and ‘for/with whom’. We stay eager to increase our understanding of social, sustainable change, to improve our work practices to create better outcomes for citizens on the ground. We are excited to share our learnings with all who strive towards social change.

Thank you Amsteldorp, for your hospitality, for the lessons learned and for the adventure.

Marlieke Kieboom, Chris Sigaloff and Thijs van Exel

### 1 Lab2: a lab about labs

An event jointly organised by Kennisland, Hivos and InWithForward held in April 2013 in which 40 practitioners from 20 social change labs gathered in Amsterdam in a meetup aimed at promoting critical engagement of social innovation lab practitioners for the purpose of reflection and knowledge creation. Read a review by Sarah Schulman in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) and the paper [Lab Matters](#) by Marlieke Kieboom. Following Lab2 a worldwide network of lab practitioners has organised meetings in [Copenhagen](#), [Toronto](#), [Singapore](#) and [London](#) (forthcoming in July 2015).

# Abstract

## A public sector for inclusive societies

In the face of fast moving, global, often elusive developments, national governments and their counterparts (public sector<sup>2</sup>) find it eminently challenging to innovate policies and public services to answer pressing societal needs. More and more on and offline innovations are becoming available, changing the way we acquire knowledge and the ways we connect to one another. Economies are stagnating in one place while rapidly growing in the other, changing the directions of money flows and migratory patterns. Moreover, social and economic inequality are on the rise, allowing certain people to thrive and others to fall between the cracks. How do we make good policies, conduct sound research, develop the best services, and train civil servants and professionals to engage with citizens in new ways? Vice versa, how do we re-engage with the state as citizens? These questions are posed all over the world and are the subjects of numerous European innovation calls.<sup>3</sup>

In the Netherlands the debate about public sector innovation takes shape on national and local levels. Politicians talk extensively of the “participatory society”<sup>4</sup>, or the “do-democracy”<sup>5</sup> as a new form of living and working together, while within local government

## 2 Public sector

In this publication we refer to governmental organisations (civil servants and policymakers in ministries, municipalities) and semi-governmental organisations (professionals in education, health care, well-being etc.) using the umbrella term “public sector”.

## 3 European innovation calls

See for example [Insite Project](#). Insite Project (2011-2014) was a Coordination and Support Action in the FP7 Framework. The Action consisted of an ongoing conversation among scientists, policymakers and distributed policy organisations about how to change the way European societies organise transformation processes.

## 4 Participatory society

Verhoeven, I. & Tonkens, E. (2013). [Talking Active Citizenship: Framing Welfare State Reform in England and the Netherlands, Social Policy and Society](#), 12, 415-426.

## 5 Do-democracy

Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations) (2013). [Kabinetsnota Doe-Democratie](#), 09-07-2013.

Amsteldorp resident



*“At the moment I feel vital, but I don’t know how I will manage when that’s no longer the case. I have no children and the family I have lives outside the city. There’s no one in the area that I could call if something happened to me, but I’ll manage, believe me. I’ll just take the bus or a taxi to the hospital.”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

and semi-public organisations there is much talk of “the change” or “the transition”. This includes the decentralisation of central government tasks to the level of local government. The Dutch public sector is currently shifting human and financial resources to devising new measures and organising this transition. In practice this means setting up “social neighbourhood teams” (multi-disciplinary teams of professionals working on healthcare and well-being in neighbourhoods), training professionals in stimulating the *Eigen Kracht* of citizens (the Dutch equivalent of Strength-Based Approach)<sup>6</sup> and cutting back on government services. Not surprisingly, this has led to a great deal of tension, concern and debate over job losses and cutbacks.

However, a focus on new (institutional) measures will not necessarily innovate the established order. If change is primarily reasoned from institutions, it might run the risk of becoming a mere brave attempt to repair an inherently broken system. If citizens are indeed expected to take on a much greater role in shaping their own lives, if they can no longer rely on the authorities for support, then we require a new, more inclusive relationship between citizens and the state. How can we arrive at such a new relationship, with new practices and better outcomes on the ground?

### **Social innovation labs as fuel for innovation**

A new relationship can not be realised from a drawing board. Change takes shape in practice and begins with people and their stories. What do they aspire to in life? What enables them to thrive and to what extent are they willing and able to contribute to society? Their experience, ideas and knowledge within their own social environment form a starting point for a new, broader story in which they forge a new relationship with the public sector. In this way the public sector could gain a new face, a renewed mentality, a new tone of voice, and a modernised decision-making process. But how do we work towards such a new reality?

One method which is internationally spreading, is a social innovation lab (sometimes also called a public sector innovation lab, hereafter referred to as a social lab). Social labs are hailed, even hyped, worldwide as vehicles for transforming the way our cities, our schools, our energy supply chains and welfare programs run. The concept of the social lab is derived from experimental labs in universities and technology companies which form the bedrock of technological innovation. Social lab practices do not take

### **6 Eigen kracht**

A term derived from the Family Group Conference (FGC) with which one refers to the expectation that families themselves take responsibility for solving problems with the help of their social network.

place in a closed, controlled environment but in a temporary, confined but nevertheless inviting space at the heart of where things really happen (homes, families, neighbourhoods, communities, districts). A social lab is run by a multidisciplinary team consisting of citizens and employees from institutions: professionals, (local) government officials, policymakers. Various methods are employed to expose and discuss realities and myths. Along the way new insights, behaviours, interactions and perspectives for action emerge; in this way, a new reality unfolds of its own accord.

### Developing new methodologies and practices

Despite its promising narrative, the realm of lab practitioners is sparse of critical thought and struggles to find learning spaces to improve its practices and deepen its knowledge. One way to learn together in a deep and meaningful way is by just doing: going out into the field and actually starting a social lab based on prior experiences and inspiring practices<sup>7</sup>.

In Amsteldorp we put effort in developing, prototyping and improving our own approach, Feed Forward. Feed Forward, short for Feedback to go Forward, is a way to open up traditionally expert-driven practices like research, policymaking and innovation methodologies to people. In simple, guided steps the lab team and citizens together create and interpret the stories of citizens' lives and their experienced challenges. As a follow-up the lab team chases emerging thematic threads up to institutional levels. As they move forward, the written or filmed accounts of the encounters are all published on a public blog that serves as a constant eye witness; an evidence-based story database. The unexpected meetups between previously disconnected stories and disconnected people give rise to a new narrative that consciously abandons its old patterns. A new narrative that ultimately prompts new actions and behaviour in making public policy and public services that are better connected to lived, social realities. Simply because the new narrative is created together.

### 7 Inspiring practices

Our Social Lab in Amsterdam was among others inspired by the work of Sarah Schulman ([Inwithforward](#)), who was visiting scholar at Kennisland in 2013.

The square for informal meetings





# Lab Matters

In 2014, Kennisland published Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories – a paper that aims to move beyond the current lab hype and deepen our discussions by asking ourselves tough questions. What happens within the 'black box' of social innovation labs? What works, and what doesn't, in pursuit of systemic impact and social change? Lab Matters touches upon four fundamental themes that seem to remain under-emphasised in our writing, thinking and actions:

- **outcomes:** we seem to be falling prey to solutionism in believing that technocratic solutions lead to systemic change
- **focus:** we tend to overlook the power of politics by perceiving labs as neutral spaces
- **goals:** we over-emphasise the scaling of solutions while we under-emphasise scaling of mindsets, ideas, values and ethics
- **representation:** we have the tendency to cover up the messy nature of human reality by seeing humans as happy-go-clappy post-it-sticking enthusiasts

To fuel future lab practices, others' and our own, we concluded the paper with ten practical scenarios that could support social labs in moving forward. Reference: Kieboom, M. (2014). Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories, Amsterdam: Kennisland. A summarised version of Lab Matters appeared in Social Space in 2014.

*“Today, I paid a visit to Mrs Gerritsen. I’d heard that she used to visit the Amsteldorp community centre but that she hadn’t been seen there for some time. I was curious as to why she no longer visits the place. It takes quite a while before I hear some movement behind the door: ‘Who’s there? I’m not about to open the door, you know!’ After I told her what we as Team Amsteldorp are doing, I can still detect a note of suspicion in her voice. That’s understandable; at the age of 85 you better be wary.”*

*– Team member Amsteldorp*

### **Better outcomes on the ground in Amsteldorp**

In the summer of 2014, Kennisland established a social lab in the district of Amsteldorp in collaboration with the municipality of Amsterdam around the topic of healthy aging. During the lab, the normally deserted square at the centre of Amsteldorp was transformed into an informal meeting space, while the small office of a social housing corporation served as a temporary workspace. The approachability and proximity of the lab encouraged local residents to join and support the lab team of local government officials, professionals and Kennisland staff. The lab gave participants the ability to create new interactions and thus to take new initiatives.

The social lab brought previously untold stories to life, stories of how people want to grow old better and of the gaps that exist between the living environment of residents and the world of the system of care and welfare. The lab showed that the residents of Amsteldorp were not so much interested in (material) solutions to their problems but rather wished to avoid being seen as (nothing more than) “care clients” in need of help from the authorities. The residents of Amsteldorp let it be known that they most of all wish to be independent and that they desire the freedom to choose whether or not to be part of a community and to participate actively. Within this community they look for ways in which to contribute, to learn together and to work together to push forward new initiatives. The lab also showed that factors other than care, such as housing and mobility, play a leading role in the way people experience growing old. In addition, the lab demonstrated that public service roles in the care system could be redefined: for example from that of a “normal” social housing corporation to a “social outpost” in the community. This suggests that professionals and civil servants are in need of learning new technological and social skills to reimagine and reshape their work in the public sector.

### **Lab dilemmas, loose ends**

This publication explores the possibilities of a social lab as a promising vehicle for sustained innovation, both in the living environment of citizens (society) and in the public sector (the facilitating system). However, dilemmas and loose ends remain. Therefore, we are eager to learn about our experiences with the lab community, academia and others who are keen to move societal challenges forward.



# Corrie and Dirk

Corrie (72) is slowly becoming less mobile as a result of a hereditary illness. She has spent 20 years in a wheelchair. Her husband Dirk has limited mobility as a result of a stroke. For Corrie, independence means most of all not becoming reliant on others: "For me, growing old well means that I can do my groceries myself, that I can go for coffee, lunch and to the bridge club and that I can live independently together with Dirk. I could call my daughter, but I'd rather not. My illness is hereditary; I always took care of my mother, pushing her wheelchair. My husband and children sometimes complained that I wasn't always there. I don't want others to go through the same. If I have the flu then of course I'd call, that's different, but asking for help on a regular basis is not an option for me." Corrie visits the VU Medical Centre on a mobility scooter regularly without problems. She is offered all sorts of services, such as occupational therapy adaptations at home such as handrails in the hallway. The rehabilitation specialist often mentions options that would help her, but Corrie prefers to avoid these for as long as she can live without them. Independence is the most important thing, although she certainly feels as if she is "being looked out for". Perhaps she is being offered too much, she thinks. "But when you're asked to say what you need yourself later, how will you know what is available?"

Read more about Corrie and Dirk in this [blog post](#).

# Reading guide

In **chapter 1** we give contextual insights on the Dutch public sector.

In **chapter 2** we elaborate on how and why a social lab is a promising way of facilitating innovation.

In **chapter 3** we show what our joint exploration in Amsteldorp revealed. Which sticking points between the world of the system and that of reality were exposed by the social lab and which new perspectives for action does it offer?

In **chapter 4** we describe how we set up, run and end a social lab.

**Chapter 5** concludes with loose ends and meaningful insights for the future which we hope will be the subject of further discussion.

In the **epilogue** we publish two letters in which a resident from Amsteldorp and a policymaker involved in the lab's work tell their side of the story. They explain in their own words what the lasting value of such a temporary social experiment is.



1.

The public sector  
in the Netherlands

From January 2015 onward, the Dutch government has decentralised responsibilities to municipalities. The municipalities' new responsibilities in the social domain include three specific areas: (1) services for people in need of long-term care, (2) youth policy and (3) work & income. Apart from a shift from top-down 'blueprinting' to designing tailor-made, bottom-up services, these decentralisations are also expected to generate a significant increase in efficiency, while municipalities need to fulfill a much larger set of tasks. Consequently, a new 'playing field' has emerged, which includes both existing and new stakeholders. Meanwhile, this development coincides with emerging global trends. There are increasing (online) opportunities available to citizens with which to organise in an ever more decentralised way. As a consequence, the role of government becomes less evident - which does not mean that governments are no longer necessary. Society is becoming ever more fragmented, while economic and social inequality continues to grow: between rich and poor, between well-educated and less well-educated, between those with strong networks and those who are lonely.<sup>8</sup>

The public sector, now more than ever, has the responsibility to preserve equal access to our public resources, such as education, welfare and healthcare. The latest report of the European Commission "Social Policy Innovation: Meeting the social needs of citizens" (2015) stresses the importance of quality social services in this new playing field: *"Social services are a fundamental element of social protection systems as they provide support to mitigate different risks that an individual can face during his/her lifetime. Services that are enabling and integrated are essential for promoting a social investment approach and to reduce the risk of poverty and exclusion. Access to quality*

## 8 Social inequality

Piketty, T. (2014) Fragmenting society: Capital in the Twenty-First Century, Harvard University Press.



Daily lab team meeting on the square

*services is an essential pillar of strategies to enable individuals to successfully reintegrate into the labour market and society.” But how do we set out to reform and create better services?*



## The welfare state under fire

The English economist Beveridge wrote an influential report in 1942, later known as the Beveridge Report, in which he laid the foundations of our current welfare state. In order to tackle the five greatest social challenges – the five giants (Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness) – he devised a set of measures, financed through taxation, to be taken by government. Despite the enormous success of these measures, which were also introduced in the Netherlands in 1943 by the Van Rijn commission and which formed the beginnings of the Dutch welfare state, Beveridge realised that he had made a mistake: his starting points had missed out the role and capacity of citizens themselves. Although he remained a supporter of a strong state with responsibility for many services, he believed that more space, opportunities and stimulation should be provided for people's own initiatives; such initiatives would often have no monetary cost but would contribute greatly to the happiness and well-being of people. For Beveridge, the welfare state was a means to arrive at a more durable and social society and not an end in itself. By the end of his life, he had lost faith in this means. Despite the fact that the welfare state has given an enormous boost to the prosperity and welfare of people, 'giant problems' have arisen. Inequality has increased, people have become very dependent upon the government, the costs of running the welfare state are becoming unaffordable and countless new problems have arisen that defy sectoral boundaries, including illnesses such as obesity that are poorly dealt with in our specialised welfare state. Read more about Beveridge on the website of [Participle](#).

*“I won’t end up stuck in an armchair, that’s not what I’m going to do. When I can’t keep up with it anymore, I’m not going to stay here in this house. I want to see people and have fun, I don’t want to be alone.”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

The dilemma of attempting to manage centrally while connecting with a society that is organised in a more distributed way is not a new tendency but one that has existed since the Second World War.

Dutch society, once so rigidly organised as a result of the pillarisation system, became more and more individualised, while our welfare state became subject to economic pressure. In an attempt to connect public services with these new relationships within society, the government embarked upon a more market-based approach at the end of the 1980s, creating “products” for “customers”. This resulted in deep public criticism: the idea of society as a “marketplace” for products from central and local government, with such terms as “efficiency” and “yield”, did insufficient justice to the public nature of these services and to the engagement and motivations of people.

Today, more hybrid forms of governance practices and institutions put social networks at the heart of the process of developing and implementing public services via more distributed forms of policymaking. The ideal is not to see the citizen as requiring care or as a passive consumer but as a participating partner alongside government, social organisations and market players. Since the *Troonrede* (the Dutch King’s annual speech) of 2013, this image has been reflected in the Dutch public debate: society should move towards a “participatory society” in which networked citizens are no longer consumers but co-producers in implementing policy, making use of their own vitality. The participatory society is in fact a moral appeal to citizens made with the intention of generating greater involvement in public affairs. This is backed up by the idea that the government, in the face of escalating costs, can retreat still further as citizens rely more and more on their own capacity.

In order to be successful, participating members of society, citizens in a “participatory society” must above all be networked. And it is here that the participation discourse runs into problems. The terms and conditions of the participatory society are determined by the government and its public bodies, while responsibility for the success of these lies with citizens. As Hilhorst and Van der Lans (2014) demonstrate: this reasoning is the snake that bites its own tail. Not everyone is equally well networked, and not everyone can or wants to become so. As soon as a “*hulpklant*” (care customer) says: “*I have no one, I see no one, no one can help me*”, both the care provider and the “customer” are still faced with the

*Dirk is angry. After having been promised three times within two weeks that he will be called back, he still has not been called about the repair of his mobility scooter. Dirk doesn't want to be dependent upon care agencies, but he doesn't think much of the whole participation story either. "At first they institutionalised everything and now that is being reversed. I have no problem with arranging things with neighbours or acquaintances, but not when it comes to things that I'm really dependent upon, such as mobility. The service tells me I need to repair my scooter myself. But if I could repair my own mobility scooter, then I wouldn't need it in the first place!"*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

same question: what now?<sup>9</sup> The room that does exist to actively participate and contribute (for example through voluntary work) is narrowly defined and leaves little space for people's own ambitions with regard to how they would like to contribute to society.

This participation trend can be recognised in the stories we have heard in Amsteldorp during our social lab. Front line professionals see the negative effects of the participatory movement: it requires considerable capability, both mental and in terms of action, from those requiring care, capability that is not always present. Amsteldorp residents mentioned that they find themselves unable to express their requirements articulately, or that they are ashamed of having to rely upon their families, or that they are afraid that too much will be asked in return.

The vision and the way of working of the present participation discourse therefore runs the risk of being unsustainable or not being orientated towards the future. An international movement around innovation in the public sector is becoming increasingly active resulting in various publications, reports and new interventions, such as new teams and funds to catalyse innovation<sup>10</sup>. Also, in the Netherlands there is a need to experiment and learn, especially since the looming decentralisations offer opportunities to innovate towards a new relationship between the public sector and society. The opportunity exists not just to redesign the public sector on paper and geographically, but to start with people's everyday lives. How can we ensure people do not run the risk of falling between the cracks in the system and what can be done to prevent this?

There is enough reason for a new story, new visions and most of all for the development of new realities. How can we start taking steps? For this, a new space is required for experimentation, together with a new set of work practices. One practice that is emerging is that of the social lab.

## 9 What now?

Hilhorst, P. & Van der Lans, J. (2014). *Ik heb niemand, ik zie niemand, niemand kan me helpen* (I have no one, I see no one, no one can help me), De Groene Amsterdammer, 41.

## 10 Funds

See the Nesta report: "[i-teams: The teams and funds making innovation happen in governments around the world](#)".

## 2. Social labs for societal change

*“What I found so special about the lab was the fact that we were all part of a learning process. There was no expert; we were all partners. That really made it a valuable practice.”*

*– Local government official, team member Amsteldorp*

Following our own interpretation of an international trend<sup>11</sup>, a social lab is a temporary space for experimentation and reflection where citizens, professionals, civil servants and policymakers can, in their own reality, seek out where the challenges lie and where new forms of collaboration can arise with which to tackle social issues. A social lab actively seeks out innovation at the edges of existing systems, patterns and relationships so that current realities and differences become visible and can be discussed. In this way, participants are able to reflect on established patterns and trends that are taken for granted, the established order is exposed and mutual relationships become eligible for discussion. This makes a social lab a place for variety and for conflicting logic, in which an interactive process allows practices for a new, desired future to be tried out. It is a place where doing, researching and learning go hand in hand.

In our vision a lab need not continue endlessly; in fact, it is preferable if it does not. It should not become a new institute, with growing interests and hunger for money to become an independent player. Its function is to provide a protected, facilitated and temporary environment in which to create movement within existing (political) interests, structures, behaviours, rules, patterns, cultural beliefs. Therefore, a lab is neither an end in itself nor a new player there to stay. As soon as new insights lead to new actions and interactions, and these actions are able to continue independently, the work of the lab is done.

Although temporary, this space is certainly not without obligations. A social lab is not a simulation separate from reality, such as may take place in a technical or medical lab. It is not closed off from the outside world, but it is in fact part of the real world. Everything that occurs in a social lab influences reality, both in a positive and in a negative sense, which makes it very real in its consequences. The tensions, conflicts and emotions that come about are real! This means that establishing a lab is not something to be taken lightly. All those involved must be ready and willing to face the challenge. This type of commitment cannot be imposed, but must arise intrinsically as a consequence of a shared interest in moving forward.

## 11 International trend

Other literature references to social innovation labs: [Social Laboratories Ltd.](#), [Helsinki Design Lab](#), [MaRS Solutions Lab](#), [University of Waterloo, Laboratories for Social Change](#).

## 2.1. Why a social lab?

Social issues are closely linked with one another as part of a complex web of mutual connections. A social issue that at first glance appears straightforward is often much larger and usually has roots in other (cultural, historical, political) issues. It is quite obvious to make the link between the topic of crime and a group of persistent reoffenders and hence to such issues as migrant families, access to education, poverty, abuse and domestic violence. A park full of drug addicts leads us towards a long history of inadequate psychiatric care and difficult family histories. The effect that such complicated, stubborn societal challenges can trigger may take different forms: either it results in a paralysis that manifests itself in doing nothing, or it causes a reflexive urge to tackle the problem immediately without sight for the complex context. The latter response on a governmental level then often lands somewhat fractured into existing public bodies, with policymakers and civil servants residing in different departments: work & income, living, youth & care, security.

*“I miss an accessible meeting place, a place where people can meet one another without obligations.”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

Where this reflexive urge takes hold there is usually no shortage of (both qualitative and quantitative) research and knowledge. But how has this knowledge arisen? Was it an expert, parachuted in to quickly collect a few statistics and jot down a report, or a motivated civil servant who has formulated policy on the basis of a single site visit, representing in his own department? What is the practical usefulness of this knowledge in the face of stubborn reality? Reports do not generally offer new perspectives for action or practical support in complex contexts.

A social lab, however, could provide an alternative response to these dilemmas. Firstly, it is aimed towards a type of inclusive knowledge production that does justice to the variety and complexity of society. It involves a process of research and policymaking in which everyone, from public administrators to citizens, adopts an open, curious attitude so that a common spirit of exploration emerges between researchers, citizens, professionals and policymakers with the objective of arriving at new perspectives for action. Moreover, it is not limited to producing collective knowledge as part of a research process; it also leads to trying out new practices. By creating a common space for experimentation, a sense of mutual ownership develops on its own terms.

## 2.2. Basic work principles of a social lab

What, on the basis of our practical experience in Amsteldorp, are the valued work principles of a social lab? We will describe three of these basic work principles here. In chapters 3.3 and 4 we devote more attention to the way in which we translate these principles into social lab practices.

### **A lab is open and inclusive**

In contrast to traditional Research & Development labs (where expertise, supervision and a closed environment are crucial), the walls of a social lab are as porous as possible to allow public negotiation. In practice, this means that everyone should be able to be co-designer of the lab and that it matters where and with whom one begins working on a societal challenge; the perspective on a problem from a professional point of view differs, for example, from that of a citizen of Amsteldorp. It also means that stories produced in the lab are put online on a publicly accessible blog while the lab is operative.

### **A lab is focussed on research and action**

A lab must invite investigation and must also encourage the transition to action with new people and in different work forms than which already exist. We assume that there is no one single truth as regards to a societal issue but rather a multiplicity of perspectives. This means that we cannot only work with dry statistics and fixed models. Instead, we make use of action research and stories, since these create the space and conditions in which everyone involved may contribute to social innovation. This is necessary to transit from diverse thoughts into a plethora of actions.

### **A lab takes place outside**

A lab must do justice to the complexity of the outside world: “only variety beats variety”, said William Ross Ashby. In practice, this means that a social lab cannot exist simply as an entity contained within the four walls of an office, but that it takes place in the



real world, where complexity and difference reign, where processes are chaotic and tensions and arguments arise. This means that learning and doing are closely linked and that they cannot be separated into closed, static phases of research, learning, prototyping, improving and scaling.

## Team Amsteldorp

2 weken lang zoeken Kennisland en de gemeente Amsterdam naar verhalen van bewoners van de buurt. Hoe is het om er te wonen? Is het een wijk waar je zelfstandig woont, of een buurt waar je samenleeft? Wat houdt 'zelfstandig' in? Volg ons hier! Of bezoek ons op Buitenrustpad 11.

LATEST



### Zorgmijder of autonome burger?

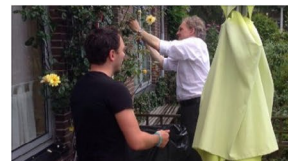
In gesprek met de GGD over een ingewikkelde case in Amsteldorp

 marli\_k  
Jul 30, 2014



### Last en overlast in Amsteldorp

Gesprek met een consultant overlast van een woningcorporatie



### Professionele vrijwilligers of vrijwillige professionals?

dilemma's van de participatiesamenleving



### Als ik niet naar links kan, ga ik naar rechts

Gesprek met mevrouw Smit

Examples of stories on our [Medium blog](#)

## 2.3. Behind the numbers: why organise a social lab in Amsteldorp?

*“To the east of the Weespertrekvaart canal and between Hugo de Vrieslaan, Gooiseweg and Drieburg sport park lies Amsteldorp. This garden suburb consists of the Wetbuurt neighbourhood and, to the north of the canal, Tuindorp Amstelstation. The Wetbuurt has a small, historic centre, built around 1900, which is surrounded by houses that mostly date from the 1920s and 1950s. Tuindorp Amstel train station, built between 1947 and 1948, was the last of the garden suburbs of Amsterdam to be realised. Just as in other similar developments of that era, the density of habitation is low as a result of the approach taken to planning; there are around 35 dwellings per hectare. Amsteldorp is a real residential neighbourhood with plenty of green space and facilities for sport but with little economic activity and almost no shops. The population totalled 2630 in 2013 and will change very little in the coming years. The district council has focussed a lot of attention on Amsteldorp. Particular attention is being given to care for the elderly, to a new play area and a new building for the primary school.”*

From: De Staat van Amsteldorp 2013 (The State of Amsteldorp 2013, publication of the municipality of Amsterdam).

This statistical report deals with the topics of population, housing, economic activity, services, work and income, youth and education, quality of life and security. The report makes continuous reference to the situation in Amsteldorp in relation to other districts within the municipality of Amsterdam.

*“Do you see those two containers there? I put them in front of the door at night. Oh, I’m so afraid! They broke into my house twice!”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

### **The State of Amsteldorp 2013 states that:**

- Amsteldorp is dominated by small, rented, social housing. Almost half of the dwellings form part of the cheaper rental housing stock. The proportion of elderly people living in the neighbourhood is relatively high and the proportion of residents over 65 will continue to increase in the coming years.
- The neighbourhood is also characterised by a high proportion of residents with a low level of formal education and a high proportion of native Dutch residents, although the latter proportion is decreasing.
- The number of minimum income households is slightly higher than average and, in contrast to the national trend, this figure is increasing. However, it must be noted that the number of young people in the neighbourhood growing up in a minimum income household is below average and is decreasing.
- Residents are satisfied with their neighbourhood and give it an average score of 7.9 (out of 10). Quality of life indicators for urban degradation, social cohesion and security are all better than average. Regarding social cohesion in Amsteldorp: “The figure that residents give in the report for social cohesion in the neighbourhood rose slightly from 6.5 to 6.7 between 2010 and 2012. This figure is higher than the average for Oost (5.9) and Amsterdam (5.7).”
- Relatively few children and young people live in the neighbourhood. Few residents experience youth troublemaking. The number of school dropouts in the neighbourhood is average.

As a result of the relatively vulnerable socio-economic and demographic composition of Amsteldorp, the risk exists that people will be negatively affected by recent public sector reforms and cutbacks, such as cuts in elderly care.

Policymakers from the district council admitted that, despite the positive figures on, for example, social cohesion, they nevertheless had concerns about the area, especially regarding the elderly: there are many residents of a relatively advanced age, residing in social housing with low incomes. The policymakers expressed that in this situation statistics may not be enough to understand what is happening in an area or, with regard to a social issue, to know how to act. In what way will people continue to live their lives in the coming years? What are the possible consequences when there will be less

care provided by the state and what can be done to ensure people do not fall between the cracks of the system? This is why we went looking for the stories and experiences of growing old better in Amsteldorp *behind* the numbers.



## Social cohesion

The term social cohesion is not unproblematic. Since the 1980s it has been the subject of heated discussion. The political scientist Sophie Body-Gendrot warns against an overly positive view of social cohesion (2000: 82): “Social cohesion is seen as a goal, but also as a necessity when it comes to ‘local, good governance’”. Body-Gendrot believes that seeing social cohesion within a collective as a “necessity” leads to tunnel vision and a situation in which people who set about seeking solutions together are praised excessively for their initiative. Those who do not organise or whose contribution is minimal are automatically ignored or even disparaged. It is exactly this exclusion that, in the opinion of Body-Gendrot, obscures the true power relationships and responsibilities because those who live in perilous circumstances are themselves held responsible for their plight (2000: 80; see also Ferguson 1997: 132). This way of thinking also fails to do justice to individual empowerment strategies. We therefore wish to be aware of the danger of one-sided interpretations of social cohesion and participation. We would ideally like to learn how people really direct their lives and organise themselves.



# What is the truth?

I read in a number of blog posts that some residents of Amsteldorp find the neighbourhood unsafe. There is talk of drug abuse, urban degradation, a large influx of people with a background of psychiatric problems and inadequate maintenance of public spaces. The neighbourhood is even referred to as the waste pit of Amsterdam. This surprises me, since as someone familiar with the objective data and statistics for Amsterdam I do not recognise this picture in many regards. In the recently published research report *“Wonen in Amsterdam”* (Living in Amsterdam), a very different picture emerges. This report, which is produced every two years by the municipality of Amsterdam, includes a large-scale survey of Amsterdam residents about their experiences of living in the city and gives a good picture of the quality of life in particular neighbourhoods. The figures from the 2013 report show that Amsteldorp scores above average in comparison to the rest of Amsterdam. The average report figure for Amsteldorp is 7.8 out of 10. This fact illustrates the clear discrepancy between the picture that some residents have of the situation in their neighbourhood and the reality of what is actually happening. This does not reduce the validity of the perceptions and experiences of residents. However, we can make a better assessment of the value of these on the basis of the available statistical material. I think that it is important to discuss a number of important points with one another. These two worlds need not exist in isolation. Instead, the statistical material becomes qualitatively better through the colour given to these figures by the experiences, stories and perceptions of residents.

– Team member Amsteldorp

Read the full blog post [\*“Wat is waar?”\*](#) (What is the truth?)

# 3. Outcomes of the social lab in Amsteldorp

*“For the last two weeks I have been following the lab from a distance via the stories of my colleagues and on the blog. It is surprisingly easy for an outsider who is not directly involved with the lab to stay up to date with how the team collects knowledge, learns and interprets dialogues. It exposes the learning curve of this experiment very effectively.”*

*– Local government official,  
municipality of Amsterdam*

Amsteldorp’s social lab resulted in new connections and new initiatives that show how new interactions between citizens and the system may look like and develop. The experience in Amsteldorp also led to developing and learning about innovation methodologies: generating stories through Feed Forward proved to be a clear added value of a social lab. Stories show where friction exists between policy and practice. Stories make it possible for residents to meet new people, to proceed towards action, to develop new plans in unexpected places.

In this chapter we show how a social lab generates knowledge and results for better outcomes:

- In the domain of citizens: how residents of Amsteldorp “can grow old better”.
- In the domain of the system:<sup>12</sup> how organisations can more effectively organise “growing old better”.
- In the methodological domain: how generating knowledge and collaboration between citizens and the system can be better organised.

## 12 The system

We define ‘the system’ here as the collective term for all governmental and semi-governmental organisations.

# Lab statistics

60 published stories ([see blog](#)), 40 conversations with 19 residents recorded, 5 conversations with housing corporations, 5 with the municipality, 4 with welfare organisations and 7 with volunteers and volunteer organisations. The remaining 20 were reflective fieldnotes describing experiences and insights of the lab team.

## 3.1. For citizens: new relationships and initiatives in the neighbourhood

*Mr Özal says that he likes to have an easily accessible meeting place in the neighbourhood. He would certainly go there to talk with others, drink coffee, read the newspaper or play games. Besides that, he would love to see some shops return to the neighbourhood. However, they must be affordable. He found the shops that were here until recently too expensive.*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

One of the most important results of the lab is that it has acted as a catalyst for existing initiatives and for new ideas from and for citizens. By bringing people together on the basis of shared interests, ambitions and relationships, new initiatives arose in Amsteldorp such as:

- The idea of starting a pop-up store in one of the empty shop units of the local housing corporation. This idea was already present in the heads of several residents but received a boost through the lab. It provided a promising alternative to the fact that there are few shops in the neighbourhood; elderly people must walk considerable distances or take a bus or taxi to the shops.
- Aside from leaflets, the telephone and the office of the municipality, there are few opportunities in the neighbourhood to speak with professionals or with the municipality. Residents therefore organised a neighbourhood walk, if necessary with a mobility scooter or walking frame, as a regular activity: residents take professionals and local government officials around the neighbourhood in order to show them its better and worse sides.
- There is a lack of an easily accessible meeting place where everyone is welcome. The square next to Buitenrustpad and Manenburgstraat where the lab took place was revived: it has been renovated (this took place during the social lab) and is once again being used by residents as a meeting place. Residents would like to continue talking to the municipality about the social function of the square for young and old alike.

*“I’d like to have a place in the neighbourhood where you can meet people casually and easily, a bar or something like that. There also used to be an odd jobs team here, which was great. You could ask for their help with minor repairs. Now that the team has been cut I don’t really know who I could ask to replace something like the cord of my sunshade.”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

*“The woman next door keeps an eye on me: we have a ‘window blinds agreement’. I have a remote alarm to keep around my neck but I never use it. She just checks every day if I put my blinds up. If I don’t, she comes over to see if I’m OK. That’s the agreement.”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

- Within the neighbourhood, and at the Open Hof, the local care home, a desire exists to make the Open Hof more open for the neighbourhood and to create more contact between young people and the elderly. The marketplace that took place during the lab generated ideas for this, for example a new meal service. After the lab finished Het Hoekhuis, the joint community centre, started a new service on sunday evenings in which two-course meals are cooked and served to residents in the neighbourhood.
- Some people, including older people, feel the neighbourhood is unsafe. The police expressed a difficulty in personally reaching elderly people via formal ways: spreading leaflets and organising informational meetings. After connecting a citizen and the police in a conversation at the district police station, a new idea came up. Why not make better use of the strong social cohesion and gossip culture in Amsteldorp? People in Amsteldorp keep a close eye on one another, whether or not this is wanted. Although as yet no clear initiative has arisen to do so, we prototyped the ‘public gossip couch’: a couch on the public square where people can meet each other and the police man to talk about security issues in the neighbourhood.

During the social lab, new relationships developed: between citizens themselves, between citizens and agencies and between citizens and us as a facilitating organisation. What was most striking during the lab was the enthusiasm and willingness of residents to take part, to take the initiative and to do new things. Residents helped and augmented the lab team continually: by filming other residents, making their garden furniture available, helping with organising neighbourhood barbecues and contributing to the discussion during lab meetings. They also brought us into contact with previously unknown residents in the neighbourhood and went with us to collect new stories, to make the stories visible and known.

*“In the past, we literally stood with our back to the neighbourhood. But that has now changed. We are once again standing with our face towards the outside world. How do we make contact and how do we get people through our door?”*

*– Employee Open Hof, Amsteldorp*



## 3.2. For the system: organising better support

*“People talk a lot. The local health service doesn’t work, the Care and Nuisance Hotline doesn’t work - mistrust of the authorities arises. It feels like some sort of ‘bulk-perception’. The gap is too big, people feel powerless and call everything ‘municipality’. A lab brings people together and works positively in creating perceptions of municipalities, services and residents.”*

*– Team member Amsteldorp*

As professionals and local government officials entered the field with an open question (“What is it like to grow old in Amsteldorp?”), the stories of the residents exposed what the system could do better to support residents more effectively. These stories exposed a stubborn reality, one littered with obstructions that hold back change. One example of this is the dominant conception that each side has of the other (of “the citizen”, of “the care agency”, “the municipality”), an impression that people are not always aware of having but which nevertheless stands in the way of progress.

By following the stories, starting points emerged from which to remove barriers. A policy official accompanied a resident and a Kennisland employee to the police station. In the district agent’s interview room we heard his story about improving the security of elderly people living alone (who are often vulnerable to deception by charlatans on the doorstep). The district agent admitted that it is difficult to reach vulnerable older people: *“Every year we distribute 2000 leaflets and organise meetings. But at these meetings I always meet the same people: a fixed club of ‘free sticker and coffee pensioners’ looking for badges and bags. How do I get beyond the front door of that vulnerable group that we are not reaching?”* The district agent praised the resident’s initiative. A spontaneous brainstorming session about how lonely elderly people could be better reached took place in which suggestions were investigated such as setting up a ‘safety ambassadors network’. As a result of this, the picture that the resident had of the police changed and the agent learned what it is that really drives residents, where they would like to take responsibility and what they can expect from the government.

This is an example of how one story can lead to new stories and thus to new perspectives for action. During the social lab in Amsteldorp, three clear indications arose as to how the system (social policies, public services) could support residents better and more effectively in their desire to grow old well.

*Although Agnes is dependent on formal agencies and professionals in the care sector, she says that she prefers to keep control over her own life. Her house and voluntary activities contribute to a feeling of autonomy. However, due to the large amount of care that Agnes receives, care providers categorise her as 'not independent'. Their different perceptions are both correct, but beg the question of what being independent actually is about: the person requiring care feeling in control, or the number of hours of care required?*

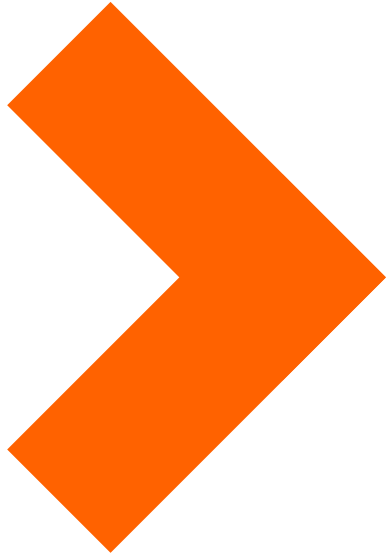
*– Team member Amsteldorp*

### **Opportunity 1: Bridging the gap between what people get, want and can do**

In Amsteldorp, a gap appears to exist between the services that are offered to people on one side and what people can and want to do themselves on the other. Although a wide range of care is offered, the human touch is often missing. Elderly people in Amsteldorp indicated that what they find most important is to be independent and that they do not necessarily require the (material) services that are offered to them by the authorities. These services are in fact more likely to contribute to a feeling of being “in need of care” than to allow them to remain as independent as possible.

What does this finding mean for the role of policymakers and service providers and professionals in the social realm? They are the people who must navigate between the system and society in terms of policy and new services, the people who must choose between doing something and doing nothing, between holding on and letting go. When those in need of care refuse help, the system is geared towards taking action, offering help or taking over responsibility for care, even in the case of a man structurally refusing (material) help; what he wanted most of all is to remain independent.





# The help refuser

One of the most enlightening moments during the lab was a visit to an older man who had been without warm water for more than half a year. His house was very dirty. Nevertheless, things are going relatively well for him: he visits the care farm three times a week, he inconveniences no one and he is monitored by various agencies. The question arose as to whether we should do something. Direct intervention is a natural instinct, but in doing so we would be neglecting the wishes of this man himself. He is known as someone who refuses help, someone who most of all wishes to do his own thing and who does not value the advice of others. On the other hand, a social norm exists as regards to acceptable living conditions. Who must take responsibility in this situation? The authorities, or this man himself? And how do we arrive at a sustainable new reality in place of knee-jerk reactions with short-term results?

Read more about this in blog post ["the help refuser"](#).

The social lab used such stories as a means to show that more attention could be devoted to learning how to get to the ideas and opinions of citizens themselves, how to listen carefully to what they want and need, instead of imposing a ready-made package of services. The professionals who took part in the social lab indicated that this new way of working changed how they see their own role. They showed this during the lab by immediately changing their mode of action. Instead of acting towards a solution on hand, they started to research the case systemically. However, this means a new set of skills and tools should be developed that assist professionals and policymakers in this new reality. How to do good research? How to have an insightful conversation from person to person?

# disconnects

1 week Team Amsteldorp

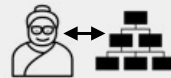
60 stories from residents, professionals and policymakers

Inventory of broken connections > *disconnects* between **desires and reality**, between **residents' living environment** and the **world of the system** and between **organisations**.



Disconnects between my current situation and my wishes

- "I want all sorts of things but I don't really know how"
- "I would prefer to be totally independent but I do require care"
- "I'd like to meet other people but I don't know how"
- "I want different things in my life and in the neighbourhood but I don't know how to make that happen"
- "I want to meet people but I don't want to be bound up or tied down"
- "I would like to receive help, but I don't want to ask for it or be a burden to others"
- "I like living here, but I do feel unsafe in the neighbourhood"
- "There are many opportunities to initiate things in the neighbourhood, but I don't know how to start them alone"
- "Groups always keep forming, which leads to others being left out"
- "I would like to be involved with clubs, but I don't like gossip"
- "I accept help from neighbours, family and volunteers but by doing so I am hampered in doing things myself"
- "I feel unsafe in the neighbourhood, but I feel comfortable at home"



Disconnects between me and organisations

- "I'm offered care that I don't need, such as physiotherapy"
- "Too many people with problems are being housed here, and that's not good for the neighbourhood"
- "I only get help if I know what to ask for - but I don't know exactly what I need or how to ask for it"
- "When I complain, no one calls me back"
- "I have no idea who I'd contact if I needed help"
- "I'm afraid of reprisals if I complain"
- "It would be great if someone cooked for me, but I have no intentions to eat at the Open Hof"
- "According to the agencies I require care, but in fact I want to be independent"
- "If I have to move to a ground floor apartment because of my health, I'll end up paying a lot more rent"
- "There's trouble here in the evening but the police won't even come to check"
- "I'm able to build up an informal network, but I'm not able to approach formal agencies if I need something"
- "All sorts of things are offered to me, but I don't appreciate all this interference"
- "I don't want care, I want human contact"
- "Those who are most vulnerable are treated the worst by the agencies"
- "The police don't reach enough people over 80, while in fact this is the group that is most affected by deception at the door"



Disconnects between organisations (formal and informal)

- "Residents' initiatives receive insufficient recognition from professionals"
- "The Open Hof wants to be open, but in fact it is closed"
- "To get things done as a residents' initiative, you have to professionalise more and more and conform with the requirements of professionals agencies"
- "The collaboration between organisations in the neighbourhood is not good and information is not shared sufficiently"
- "How can you remain a flexible network and still be a meaningful player?"
- "Financing in the care system is perverse: declaration on the basis of hours present (AWBZ and DBC)"
- "The *Meldpunt Zorg & Overlast* (Care and Trouble in the Community Hotline) sometimes feels overly bureaucratic"
- "Professionals within the municipality trust in the transition but don't know what is going to happen, nor what it means for them"
- "There is a need for more volunteers, but the bureaucracy around volunteering is increasing"
- "As a professional, I would like to do more than I am permitted to and am able to within the existing frameworks"

During the lab we went looking for broken connections (disconnects), which we discussed with citizens and professionals. Disconnects are the gaps that emerge between desires and reality, between the living environment of citizens and the system world and between organisations. The table above shows an overview of these disconnects.

*Not everyone is interested in the activities of the citizens' initiative Amsteldorp Actief. Either they don't feel like taking part, they don't like these activities, or they don't know that they exist. However, these are not the only reasons not to join. The active participants are not just participants, but are above all a group in which gossip takes place and where written and unwritten rules exist. At the coffee morning, for example, new residents hardly ever attend. "New visitors are sometimes not allowed to sit at the table of those already present". A regular core group exists of which some residents are part, whereas others are not. In these kind of initiatives, inclusion also leads to exclusion.*

*– Team member Amsteldorp*

## **Opportunity 2: Focus on strong *and* weak ties**

The generally accepted definition of a "healthy" society is one in which strong ties exist between people. This is praised from within government under the term social cohesion or social capital<sup>13</sup>, and establishing new interactions is stimulated. This is also the case in Amsteldorp. The neighbourhood is praised for its strong social cohesion, and the citizens' initiative Amsteldorp Actief is often cited as an example of "how things should be done". The welfare organisation Dynamo and the community centre Het Hoekhuis also offer a wide range of (voluntary) services that older residents can make use of, such as coffee mornings and help with finances.

# Amsteldorp Actief

Amsteldorp Actief (Amsterdam Active) is a citizens' initiative in Amsteldorp that is often cited as a good example of the participatory society. Amsteldorp Actief organises coffee mornings for the elderly and a project to keep gardens clean and tidy. Thanks to a collaboration between them, the East district council and Dynamo (the local welfare organisation), a shopping car rides through the neighbourhood so that elderly people can visit local supermarkets. Amsteldorp Actief has recently begun meeting in the renovated community centre "Het Hoekhuis".

People who make use of these services and who are associated with these organisations are predominantly positive about them. However, such tight networks also have downsides. Strong ties (*inclusion*) also result in social exclusion, by way of gossip and rejection. Also, a form of "cultural selection" exists in Amsteldorp as a result of the fact that welfare initiatives are generally organised by senior ladies of native Dutch origin, with activities that appeal to their own cultural (age) group such as Biodanza and knitting workshops. The neighbourhood also has a large number of residents from ethnic minorities. However, these groups do not mix, underscoring the fact that racism and discrimination exists, and is a recurring and important topic for both native Dutch residents and those from ethnic minorities.

## **13 Social capital**

Such a tight network produces a lot of social capital: a high level of trust exists ('everyone plays his or her part, so I will too') | and there is a rapid and lively exchange of means of assistance and information. Through social influence, the group adopts positive behaviour and "rules" from one another. Burt, R. S. (2000). Structural Holes versus Network Closure as Social Capital, University of Chicago and INSEAD.

*“Many people are obliged to rely on themselves; they have a limited social network. At the same time, they do not readily accept the help of organisations. Getting past the front door is difficult. Besides that, people themselves are expected to sound the alarm when something goes wrong. But do they actually do so? And what do you do when people don’t want any help?”*

– Employee Care and Nuisance Hotline

The lab in Amsteldorp showed that focussing on stimulating strong ties is too one-sided. There will always be people who cannot or do not wish to be part of networks. In this way, they do not come into contact with the ideas, information or means of support offered by a network. At the same time, this also means that their voices are hardly heard or are neglected entirely if you do not go actively looking for their stories. On the other hand, people with strong ties within a group share the same sources of information and ideas and can as such end up in a closed circle in which nothing new ever occurs. While it is also possible that via weaker ties (non-organised, informal activities) people can come into contact with different ideas and means of assistance: the connections between individuals that do not form part of a (social) network.<sup>14</sup>

The social lab serves as a place where strong and weak ties can be discovered and as testing grounds to answer the question of how new policy and new services can create new connections on the basis of weak ties. In Amsteldorp, a start has been made with a number of new weak and strong ties between organisations, - for instance, by highlighting the role and value of the area manager Georg (“Sjors”), making a social network map of formal and informal organisations and initiatives, and between individual residents - for example by injecting new life into the square as an accessible meeting place.

In addition to *disconnects*, we also went looking for new ways of bridging gaps during the lab. We refer to these as *triggers*. The following page shows the placemat in which we show how we could bridge gaps between experienced situations and desires, between citizens and institutions and amongst institutions.

#### 14 Strong ties / weak ties

Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) explains more about this theory: Granovetter, M.S. (1973). The strength of weak ties, American Journal of Sociology, 78 (6), 1360-1380. His theory is summarised succinctly in this illustration. See the illustration in his original article [here](#).





## triggers

1 week Team Amsteldorp

60 stories from residents, professionals and policymakers

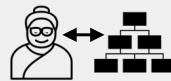
Inventory of broken connections > *disconnects* between **desires and reality**, between **residents' living environment** and the **world of the system** and between **organisations**.



Building bridges between my current situation and my wishes

Assumption: Too little personal contact with neighbours leads to ignorance about the other and consequently to negative speculation. Getting to know one another better creates a basis for mutual understanding and solidarity and makes it easier to take action and to initiate new interactions.

- Highlight the strategies for action of other residents as sources of inspiration (story bank with the help of children)
- Offer new experiences (e.g. by artists)
- Offer coaching by other residents
- Make it easier for people to get to know one another (story bank, informal meetings, neighbourhood discussions, positive gossip)
- A dog for everyone (see for example OPOEH online)
- Stimulate people to set up activities (for example with an incentive system)
- Create informal meeting places in the neighbourhood
- A café / pop-up shop run by residents for residents including traineeships/internships
- A new role in the neighbourhood: the *Go-Between* (an independent connection maker)
- Street representatives
- A neighbourhood table with agenda and neighbourhood committees
- A neighbourhood newspaper produced by residents
- A marketplace to match demand and supply
- Create a new neighbourhood story for Amsteldorp
- An Amsteldorp Neighbour guide
- Introduction for new neighbours: what can / would you like to contribute to the neighbourhood?
- An odd-job service team



Building bridges between me and the agencies

Assumption: People often don't get what they want and often get what they don't want as a result of the excessive distance between them and organisations; these organisations are insufficiently aware of people's stories, motivations and desires. By bringing agencies closer to the people they will be better able to provide made-to-measure services.

- Make the people behind the agencies visible
- 1 telephone number for all questions in all areas, 1 office in the neighbourhood and a dynamic overview of all formal and informal networks (social map)
- A buddy system: more "experienced" residents help others with questions about welfare and care
- Articulation of questions: formulate the right (care) question with the help of young people)
- 'Open Hof more open': more attractive and 'breaking through stigmas'
- Better communication and guidance of placement policy in the neighbourhood
- Sjors+: effort and recognition for the outpost of the neighbourhood
- Attracting new volunteers: simplify the procedure
- Exemption from (service and insurance) costs if you take responsibility for tasks such as keeping gardens or the street clean and tidy
- Cease offering certain services
- Have agencies work more in collaboration with social entrepreneurs, residents, etc.
- New finance mechanisms such as crowdfunding
- Work on the basis of satisfaction checks (set up and carried out by residents) instead of complaints
- Look at *positive deviants* - where things are going well, such as the Indische Buurt



Building bridges between organisations (formal and informal)

Assumption: Organisations often work at cross purposes and cannot work together effectively due to differences in professionalisation. Facilitating the exchange of knowledge between organisations (formal and informal) ensures mutual understanding and better collaboration.

- Create a social network map with all organisations present in the neighbourhood (formal and informal)
- Swap jobs for one day per year
- Safari for professionals (visiting neighbourhood initiatives, including in other neighbourhoods)
- Training on the basis of each other's experience
- Bring various organisations together in a dialogue in order to check and discuss each other's assumptions
- Regular discussion between all those involved in the neighbourhood
- Establish an accelerated test bed for area strategies
- Arrange meetings where informal and formal networks meet each other
- Support informal networks in standing on their own feet (for example by giving advice on setting up an organisation)
- Create openness about money flows
- Have professionals visit and accompany residents' initiatives
- Relax privacy legislation to allow more information about residents to be shared between formal and informal organisations
- Home alterations by landlord as standard
- Give housing corporations proportional responsibility for district care teams (currently often not treated as important)

### Opportunity 3: ensure that there are fewer clear-cut (professionalised) roles in the system

The lab demonstrated that the public sector has become very good at differentiating services that provide answers to various challenges in society in the areas of housing, mobility, security, care for the elderly etc. There is a service for almost everything, an organisation or a professional with a strong focus on new tangible solutions. Elderly people in particular (who are sometimes illiterate, unfamiliar with IT or who have mobility problems) can experience difficulties finding their way in this system. Professionals indicated that they felt so restricted by the frameworks imposed by policy and by fixed rules that they missed the human touch and also the freedom to approach societal issues as a whole (from, for example, a focus on 'housing' to 'living together socially'). Volunteers who have taken over professional tasks often feel discouraged by the need to comply with professional conditions. They work more and more *alongside* professionals which gives rise to the dilemma of who needs to adapt to whom<sup>15</sup>. The professional believes that his or her professionalism must play the dominant role in the contracting process, while this can at the same time have negative consequences for the volunteer, who may feel that he or she is not taken seriously. How can we stimulate active citizenship while imposing professionalisation?

#### 15 Whom?

Van Bochove, M., Tonkens, E. & Verplanke, L. (2014). *Kunnen we dat (niet) aan vrijwilligers overlaten?* (Can('t) we leave that to the volunteers?), The Hague: Platform 31.



## From residents' initiative to professional organisation?

What began with two active, enterprising ladies who wanted to do something for their beloved neighbourhood and who were brimming with smart, practical ideas, has led to subsidy arrangements, rules and volunteers who must report to agencies. The idea behind Amsteldorp Actief was that various activities could be initiated under

*“Providing appropriate care to vulnerable older people is difficult, says Karin. “Helping someone out of their current situation involves a huge amount of effort. It’s easy to say ‘we’ll put volunteers on the job’. That happens a lot nowadays.” Karin has her doubts about this. Sometimes real specialist care is needed, including in situations where this is not immediately apparent. Trust is also essential. “One single encounter with someone who does not mean well and they’ll never accept help again.”*

*– Employee, welfare organisation Dynamo*

this umbrella, projects for the neighbourhood that would be run by residents. From the beginning it was a great success. It began with the project SOEN (clean, neat and tidy), subsidised by the municipal waste facility. Extensive research in the neighbourhood with the project I&C (Information and Communication) quickly showed that there was a lot of demand in the neighbourhood for measures to tackle loneliness and for help at home and in the garden. This led to the establishment of the project *Groene Vingers* (Green Fingers), which offered help to people unable to maintain their gardens themselves, the project *Buurtgesprekken* (Neighbourhood Conversations), which literally involved having conversations with people with or without a cup of tea, and the *Koffieochtenden* (Coffee Mornings), organised in Het Hoekhuis, which were intended to stimulate people to leave home, either with or without assistance. There proved to be a great deal of demand for activities and no lack of volunteers. It also turned out to be important that volunteers receive a small payment for their time and that they feel valued. One project led to another, and so the network grew. The founder sighs: “We were obliged to become a *stichting* (foundation). We discussed this a lot, but in the end we decided not to do it. I started doing this because I like starting things up, not so that I could run an organisation. As Amsteldorp Actief is not a foundation, we are financially dependent on external parties and must adhere to certain procedures. The bureaucracy that this creates puts off volunteers.” Read more of the blog post [\*“Professionele vrijwilligers of vrijwillige professionals?”\*](#) (Professional volunteers or voluntary professionals?)

Amsteldorp Actief is a volunteers’ club that has offered a variety of services in the neighbourhood for many years. They are seen by the municipality of Amsterdam as a good example of the “participatory society”, but this success has led to ever increasing pressure on the organisation to professionalise. For instance, volunteers of the *Flowers project* were obliged to first register with welfare organisation Dynamo before taking part. In addition, Amsteldorp Actief was obliged to become a foundation in order to receive finance. The founders were not enthusiastic about this; after all, it was not their intention to run an organisation. As a result of this, Dynamo<sup>16</sup> now acts as a coordinator for Amsteldorp Actief, making the volunteers’ organisation less independent and in control. This case demonstrates the dilemma faced by citizens’ initiatives: the system

## 16 Dynamo

Read the [Volunteer policy of Dynamo](#) (2013, March).

requires that such networks become professional organisations with all the consequences associated with this, while an important characteristic of citizens' initiatives is in fact that they are loose, self-organising networks that operate on the basis of the logic of people instead of the logic of the system.

Strict job descriptions are another consequence of "professionalism". For example, a district nurse must restrict him or herself to care duties while home care workers take care of cleaning. This leads to missed opportunities. The lab showed that a lot more becomes possible if this strict division of duties is loosened up. By not simply acting as a professional with a job description, but instead as a person (with more of a human element, common sense and logical thinking), it becomes possible to unite multiple roles and tasks at once. The local housing corporation gives local manager Georg the space to play a social role in the district alongside his role managing housing and gardens. Georg is, after all, a very accessible point of contact. He has a lot of empathy with people and is in the area almost every working day, either in his office or riding through the neighbourhood on his scooter. This means that he sees and hears a lot and that he can, where necessary, facilitate connections between residents in the area and between various care services. How could Georg fill his role as a social outpost even better? Are more "Georgs" necessary in the future? And how can this not only be the task of (and thus financed by) one organisation but of numerous?



It is necessary to formulate new perspectives with regard to the professional framework of care providers in the area. This must not occur by assessing people on the basis of a *zelfredzaamheidmatrix* (a self-reliance matrix<sup>17</sup>) – which is currently the standard procedure – but by actually talking to people and by seeing them in all their diversity. This lab has made a contribution to this. New connections have arisen between the various (care) professionals in the area and informal organisations such as Amsteldorp Actief. The lab team noticed that people generally tend to frame situations negatively in terms of social challenges, which seems to lead to (passive) grumbling and complaining. What if there would be an “age well centre” instead of the existing “Care and Nuisance Hotline”? After the lab ended the lab team presented the experiences and outcomes to “front-line professionals” in the Amsteldorp community centre as a means to combat fragmentation and professionalisation of tasks and services.

### 17 Self-reliance matrix

The *Zelfredzaamheid-Matrix* (Self-reliance Matrix) is an instrument used by practitioners, policymakers and researchers in (public) health care, social services provision and related fields to determine the level of independence and self-reliance of their customers.



Shooting photos with your neighbours

## 3.3. Learning and developing new innovation methodologies: introducing Feed Forward

Despite its short duration, the experiment in Amsteldorp generated a wealth of knowledge about the ability of a lab to facilitate new connections between society and the public sector. It proved possible to do research and find hunches for making policy in a more collaborative, inclusive and distributed practice. On the basis of our experiences in Amsteldorp, Kennisland developed a method for collecting, publishing and interpreting stories in order to come to action. We refer to this method as Feed Forward.

### **What is Feed Forward?**

Feed Forward is short for Feedback to go Forward. The process of generating, organising and interpreting stories together serves as feedback for undertaking action in the future, therefore: Feed Forward. In guided steps the lab team and citizens go out in the field and together create and interpret stories of citizens' lives and their experienced challenges. As a follow-up they chase emerging dominant threads up to institutional levels. As they move forward the written or filmed accounts of new encounters and insights are all published on a publicly available blog. The blog serves as an eyewitness of past happenings, as a research database, as evidence. All active members of the lab team, from policymakers to citizens, are encouraged to write their own blog posts, thus stimulating reflection and discussion on different interpretations and value sets. In between 'collective evaluations' are held: public moments in which a broader public is invited to interpret and evaluate the work of the lab team. In Amsteldorp we organised two neighbourhood barbecue markets to present our work.



# Methodological roots

Feed Forward methodology is developed by Kennisland and is currently in use in social labs in the cities of Nijmegen, Dordrecht and Amsterdam. Feed Forward as a term is not new, it is a common term in management theories and organisational coaching. With Kennisland Feed Forward finds its intellectual roots in knowledge and insights from the European research programme Emergence by Design (EU-grant agreement no. 284625, in cooperation with Martha Vahl). We also borrow from concepts in anthropology. The book 'Doing Ethnography Today' (2015, by Elizabeth Campbell and Luke Eric Lassiter) about collaborative ethnography practices provides ongoing inspiration in our work. We also learn from action research practices. What is action research? *"Action research has a long history reaching back to the work of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin in the early twentieth century. It spans approaches to collaborative research from different traditions, which share three elements: action (i.e., real-world change), research (i.e., the generation of new scientific knowledge) and participation (i.e., the collaboration of scientists with practitioners). In general, action research can be understood as the collaborative production of scientifically and socially relevant knowledge, transformative action and new social relations, through a participatory process addressing a particular question formed in the interaction between researchers and other actors. These characteristics make it an interesting approach for interpretive and critical policy analysis and closely related to dialogical approaches therein. (Dick 2004, Greenwood and Levin 2007, Reason and Bradbury 2008, Kemmis 2010)."* Excerpt from article: Julia Maria Wittmayer, Niko Schöpke, Frank van Steenberghe & Ines Omann (2014): Making sense of sustainability transitions locally: how action research contributes to addressing societal challenges, Critical Policy Studies.

*The fruits of a social lab are, among other things, a multiplicity of stories. Most subjects in these stories are not new: [...] Can it then be said that the social lab has produced nothing? On the contrary. Firstly, it shows how important it is to regularly monitor how policy is unfolding in practice, how important it is to begin from the perspective of the resident and how important it is to keep a close eye on the possible gaps in the system. Fresh eyes can offer new perspectives.*

*– Government official, team member Amsteldorp*

In taking these steps, unexpected meetups between previously disconnected stories and disconnected people give rise to new narratives that consciously abandon their old, dominant patterns. Bringing together people and reinterpreting stories towards a new narrative ultimately prompt new actions and behaviour in making public policy and social services that are better connected to lived realities. Simply because the new narratives are created together. As such, Feed Forward goes beyond the mere individual researching, recording and understanding of a situation as is usually the focus of traditional ethnographic studies. In this way, Feed Forward becomes a continuous, collective “knowledge negotiation” through which change and innovation are generated.

### **Why Feed Forward?**

Feed Forward is a way to open up traditionally expert-driven practices like research, policymaking and innovation methodologies to people. Existing power structures generally produce knowledge that is requested by those who have the means and the position to do so. An example of this is the policymaker and/or service provider who commissions researchers from a university (or research agency) to research the effect of a certain policy on, for example, residents. The residents are consulted, but rarely do they see the results of the research exercise. They are also unable to interpret these results themselves or subsequently contribute to the development of new services. A more democratic, inclusive method of producing and analysing knowledge can help to break through existing power structures. Feed Forward allows all involved to become researchers of their own practice.

### **Use of stories**

In Amsteldorp we published close to 60 blog posts, of which 20 were stories from citizens, 20 were stories reflecting conversations between citizens and organisations and 20 blog posts contained reflective field notes on the innovation methodology and team progress. To us one of the most surprising results found was that stories can act as a powerful instrument in innovation processes. Firstly, it proved possible to simply highlight and reflect the invisible intelligence of people: telling someone else’s story, the story that you could never have thought of yourself. Stories answer questions that we could never have imagined ourselves asking and leave space for surprises, ambiguities, variety and normative statements. Stories as a way to produce knowledge in policymaking is not current practice in public administration and civil servants,

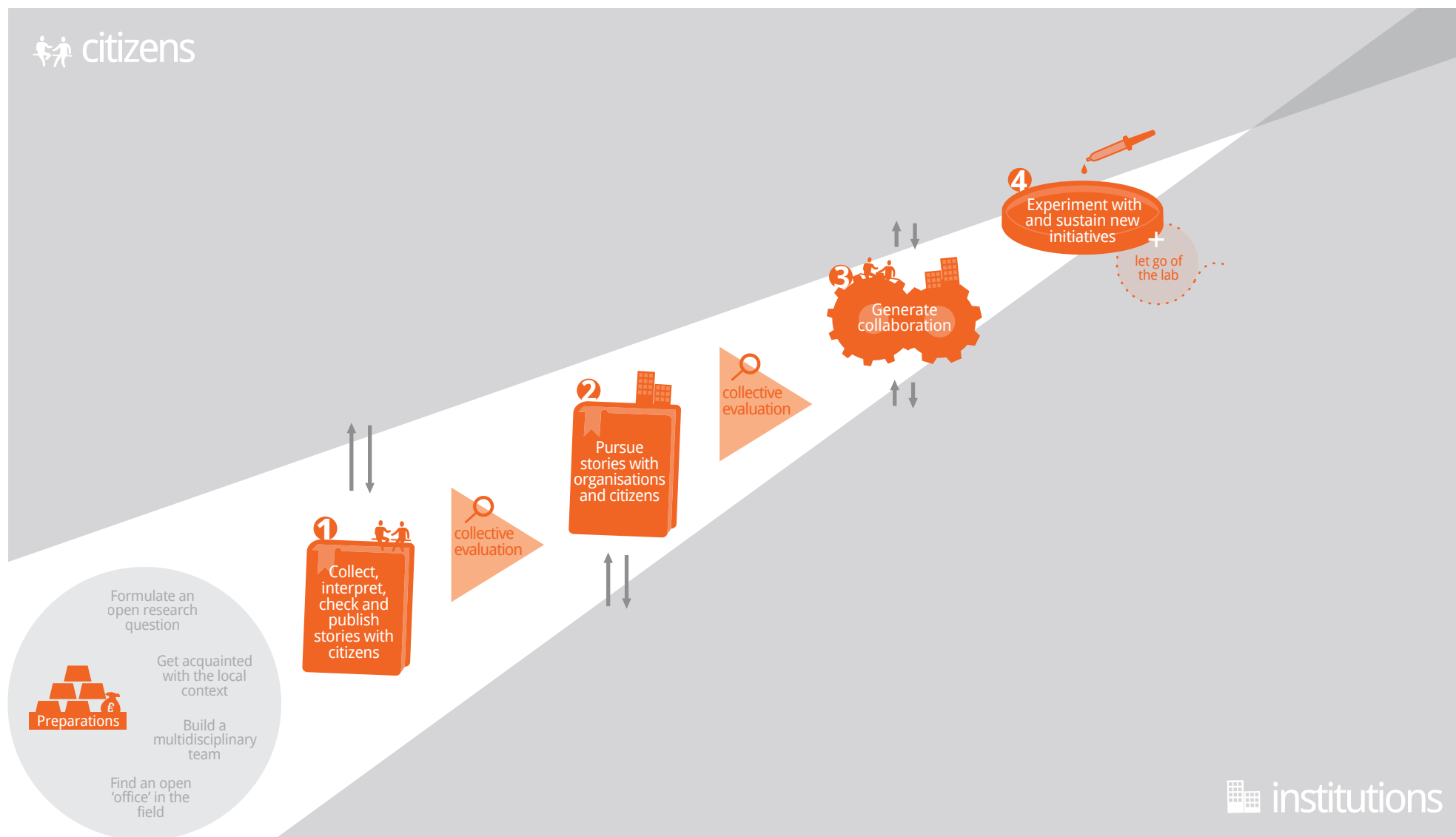
professionals and policymakers reflected that they found it refreshing to generate knowledge themselves, moving beyond looking up previously produced knowledge of scientists, statisticians and bureaucrats.

The second function of stories, either your own or those of others, is that seeing or reading them in a certain way can challenge your perceptions or assumptions so that new possibilities emerge. Sharing stories make new interactions possible as became evident in Amsteldorp. By hanging the stories on the washing line in the square residents started to make agreements on how they could better help each other. Stories are thus powerful relational and evaluative tools in social innovation, which can in turn generate change.



## The Feed Forward steps

The steps of Feed Forward are summarised below:



Feed forward: four steps to bring citizens and institutions together to work on societal challenges

*“Jo has an informal carer, Theo, who is 65 years old. She met Theo via the Open Hof, which she regularly visits. Theo is a lonely man with a sad story. He visits Jo twice a day, seven days a week. He makes coffee, does the dishes and they talk or watch television together. “People think all sorts of things about it. Sometimes he leaves when it gets dark and they think that he has stayed over. But they can think what they like as far as I’m concerned. Theo is not at all interested in women any more, he’s gone through too much.”*

*– Amsteldorp resident*

### **Step 1: Collect, interpret, check and publish stories with citizens**

Feed Forward starts with collecting stories from a citizen’s perspective. For this you need to first think of suitable places and settings to collect these stories. You need accessible and approachable meeting places, places where the people of your interest might be hanging out naturally. The more natural and informal the setting, the more comfortable someone will be to share their story with you. In order to create enough space and room for someone to talk you need to pay visits, arrange appointments (preferably in a place of their own choice), create room for discussion, make countless notes and if possible record conversations. We do not work with a detailed questionnaire. It is instead an open, curious and equal conversation in which the distance between the story collector and the storyteller becomes as small as possible. The conversation is not focused on collecting answers to preset questions, but more a way to trigger people to talk about what drives them. Good opening questions to get a conversation started might be ‘what does your day look like?’, ‘what did you do today?’ or ‘how do you feel about...?’.

After writing down the story using as many quotes as possible and ordering the story in a logical way, the story collector returns to the storyteller, lets them read and interpret their story, makes desired changes, discusses difficulties that may arise, and publishes the story as an online blog post. This reflective step in itself is powerful for both the story collector and the storyteller as it generates insightful and in-depth discussions on the interpretation of the written account.

### **Intermediate collective evaluation: organise and systematise emerging story threads**

When the same challenges and gaps start to recur, enough stories have been collected. In Amsteldorp this happened after about 20 stories. Then the time is right to organise a collective evaluation to identify opportunities that lie hidden in each story: firstly within the lab team and later through a collective interpretation by all storytellers in their own environment, for example during a neighbourhood barbecue. At this neighbourhood barbecue we organised many ways to make the stories literally visible in creative ways: through video, through games, through story walls. This step should also involve a reflection group consisting of a broad local coalition, from political representatives to directors of care homes. They are, after all, decision makers within the existing system. We then proceed to order the results once again and the lab team decides how stories could be best followed up.

## Step 2. Pursue stories with organisations and with citizens

The added value of the lab lies in creating and living through a new story and not just generating stories of existing lives. In step 2 we repeat step 1 but we particularly chase and follow up stories with the lab team and (where possible) with storytellers in the system. People have mentioned institutions, agencies and services in their stories that are desired or exist in reality. We single out these institutions, organisations and formal networks (from the local grocery store to the volunteer organisation and the police). The lab team then organises meetups between the mentioned actors about the emerging story threads: visiting the police together with a resident and policy-maker in order to discuss security, visiting the *Meldpunt Zorg en Overlast* (Care and Nuisance Hotline) together with a resident and a care professional to talk about supervising newcomers with mental disabilities in the neighbourhood. This step proves to be very effective in its surprise effect: parties that would normally not meet, meet up and discuss known and unknown challenges, from which new ideas for action emerge. We take great care of making the lab into an atypical experience for everyone involved, by meeting up in the local arts centre, by introducing conversation canvasses. The emerging stories are also recorded, reread by the storyteller and subsequently published.



**COMMON THREAD:** \_\_\_\_\_

**STAKEHOLDERS:** \_\_\_\_\_








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**CAN BE FOUND IN THESE STORIES:**




1	2	3

**COMMON THREAD:** \_\_\_\_\_




<b>WHAT WE'RE ALREADY DOING:</b> THIS GOES WELL: _____ _____ _____ _____	<b>WHAT WE NEED:</b> TO STRENGTHEN _____ _____ _____ _____
THIS CAN BE BETTER: _____ _____ _____ _____	TO IMPROVE _____ _____ _____ _____


**COMMON THREAD:** \_\_\_\_\_

**WHAT WE INTEND TO ACHIEVE:**

 1 _____ _____ _____ _____	 2 _____ _____ _____ _____	 3 _____ _____ _____ _____
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**WHAT WE'RE GONNA DO ABOUT IT:**

 1 _____ _____ _____ _____	 2 _____ _____ _____ _____	 3 _____ _____ _____ _____
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Sources: Ideas by Edward Bodman / Inspiration by Edward Bodman  
van: The Neuron Project 

Based on our experiences in Amsteldorp we designed canvasses to guide the conversations with 'the system' in social lab Dordrecht.

### Intermediate collective evaluation: organise and systematise emerging action opportunities

Once again, a collective evaluation is organised to order stories, to generate insights and to identify action opportunities together with residents and a broad coalition, this time focussed on extracting new and promising initiatives that have emerged from the follow-up stories. In Amsteldorp we organised an ideas market, in which the new initiatives were presented and residents of Amsteldorp were able to pitch in with ideas, connections, skills and resources.

### Step 3. Generate collaboration between organisations and citizens around new initiatives

Step 3 involves giving an impulse to new initiatives that have come about through facilitating discussions, by thinking together with the initiative owners and by creating opportunities, negotiating politically at a higher level about new initiatives and opportunities, new procedures and models for decision-making. This means prototyping possible interventions (for instance a new service or a new procedure) and collectively reflect on the results<sup>18</sup>. By setting up experiments and by 'going through the motion' together, the groundwork leads itself to the future.

How to successfully prototype innovations is a much debated topic. Prototyping and the use of design is gradually becoming an important concept in public sector innovation since it is one of the only alternatives to 'direct delivery' or 'commissioning' in which there is no room for experimentation and iteration. The power of prototyping is that it turns citizens and frontline professionals into co-producers instead of just consumers or implementors. Instead of delivering services *to* people, this way services can be co-created *with* people. By going through the process in generating new concepts commitment and a strong sense of ownership is created.

There are many different ways to prototype. You can prototype new services but also new functions, roles, interactions, behaviours etc. One can do this by setting up a small experiment such as our 'gossip couch' or a large experiment such as [Kudoz](#) in which a new service for mentally challenged people is prototyped and developed. One can prototype rapidly or slowly, cheaply or expensive, using the skills of social designers or using the skills available in your team.

#### 18 Prototyping

Running a small-scale version of a new policy, program, or service. Read the paper '[Grounded Change](#)' by InWith-Forward, or this paper '[Discovering co-production by design](#)' by Mindlab.

#### **Step 4. Experiment with and sustain new initiatives ('letting go' of the lab)**

At this stage, the initiatives and their owners find their own way and the lab gives way. The attention of the lab team turns to creating a sustainable infrastructure in which new initiatives can continue to thrive. The lab team members go their separate ways but remain active at political levels by propagating their experiences and stories in their own living and workplaces. For instance, lab team members explore the possibilities of permanently altering the way knowledge is generated in policymaking. In this step the lab team takes on a more facilitating role, and helps to find local resources to continue to prototype new initiatives that bring together previously separated worlds.

The focus is on spreading a mindset of learning and experimenting, and to practising the skills learned into people's work spaces: how does directly interacting with citizens and publishing blogs look like in daily work processes? This final step is not an easy step to take, the challenge of sustainability is best taken into account from the start. How to create local ownership, how to learn lab facilitating skills to everyone in the team, how to finance the outcomes of the lab? These issues are best taken up early, for example by embedding and training local owners in a social lab.

#### **New approach**

Two weeks was not enough time to go through all the lab steps and allow emerging ambitions to be realised in new roles, behaviour, initiatives and policies. However, it was long enough to discover that through the Feed Forward approach it was possible to deal with issues of politics, power and agency without having to strictly model knowledge negotiations and collaboration. In social innovation collaboration does not by any means model very well from one partnership to the next. A social lab offers a way to address questions such as: who is (not) organising policymaking and designing social services processes, who is (not) invited, who defines what 'quality' is, which challenges are (not) addressed and which pathways are (not) explored and why? In a way a social lab is a deeply democratised, de-expertised form of action research. In our current social labs in Nijmegen and Dordrecht we are working with 6 months periods to run through the cycle of Feed Forward.

4.

Practical guidelines  
for starting a social lab

In this chapter we give a concrete overview of the things you could do when you want to start your own social lab. However, each social lab will encounter its own dynamics and dilemmas depending on the local circumstances and context<sup>19</sup>. Taking into account the following lab elements may however provide support and guidance for your own practice.

### **Financing a lab: creating a space in between the current system and a new future**

The Amsteldorp social lab was a gift from Kennisland to the city of Amsterdam. More than just a gesture, it proved to serve an important function: it created a degree of independency from the existing logic of funding and accountability, providing ample room for experimenting and shifting of focus and ownership – all elementary to the social lab. This is not to say that all future labs must be given away as gifts, but we do want to make a strong argument for creating financial and managerial independency.

How can one create a lab's independency, while also maintaining ties with the current system so that people feel ownership over the upcoming changes? Financial means necessary for running a lab could come from numerous partnering organisations (government, service providers, civil society organisations or other local stakeholders). This approach is not free of trouble. It implies a long lobby to reach an agreement between these parties while setting up a new consortium. For example about how each party can reallocate hours for weekly lab work, but also about re-negotiating normal accountability procedures which are normally based on pre-defined targets and outcomes.

Another option is to create financial space at the government level in order to create room to experiment on the local level. At the time of writing, this option is being explored in Dordrecht, a city in the south of the Netherlands, where Kennisland partners with local parties in a social lab. The first batch of funding came from both the state (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations) and the local government, whereas the second portion is coming from the municipality alone, creating an exception to their normal funding procedures. Another option could be to distribute (de-centralise) the funding of a social lab among a coalition of parties, thus creating a new realm of ownership over the challenge and approach. This shift of ownership creates new conditions for funding and accountability.

### **19 We are not alone**

We are certainly not alone in developing new public sector innovation approaches in the Netherlands. Many municipalities are experimenting with, for instance, sociale wijkteams (district social teams) and initiatives such as *SamenDoen* (doing together). Innovative, creative district council chairpersons such as Martien Kuitenbrouwer (Amsterdam-West) are experimenting with stories as a substitute for statistics. We have seen that a movement is developing internationally, for instance [InWithForward](#) (Canada/The Netherlands), [MindLab](#) (Denmark) and [SolutionsLab](#) (Canada). Read more in: [Lab Matters](#) & [Lab Craft](#).

“There is a lack of support for mentally ‘vulnerable people’ who are placed in the area.”

– Amsteldorp resident

### Deciding where to start: begin between statistics and stories

Social issues that can be seen from multiple perspectives and which show contradictions, from within the *system world* (municipality) but also from within the *living environment* (residents), can benefit greatly from a temporary impulse. The combination of a sense of urgency and a lack of clear perspectives for action ensures a collective willingness to do something. But how to find such a place? During our preparatory discussions we met with Broer and Joke - the *participatiemakelaars* (participation brokers) from Amsterdam-East district council<sup>20</sup>. They pointed us to Amsteldorp based on their knowledge of statistics and stories they had encountered.

Statistics paint a picture of Amsteldorp as a relatively well-off neighbourhood, while these same statistics also reveal large numbers of senior citizens, a high proportion of social housing and weak local commerce (see chapter 2). Their own experiences as participation brokers in the neighbourhood also led to ask themselves: what are things really like for older people in the area? And how well does the care system respond to this? We prepared by speaking to active residents’ initiatives and welfare organisations as well as people on the street. These visits to the neighbourhood gave various interesting but also contradictory perspectives<sup>21</sup>. In the opinion of those living in Amsteldorp, the quality of life in the area is not at all great for groups such as elderly people. People expressed that they feel unsafe and lonely, there are no shops or cosy cafés and, instead of social cohesion, they spoke of a strong (negative) gossip culture. These findings were interesting conversation pieces for us when starting the social lab.

### Defining the research question: formulate an open question

Defining the starting question with which to approach the social challenge is crucial and quite difficult; the question may become too limited or too broad. One can ask a range of questions, each revealing a particular perspective or a vested interest of the questioner, for instance a desire to cut back expenditure, or a desire to know how people could be better organised. However, most of these questions very quickly become a reflection of the status quo representing the logic of the system. At the beginning of a lab, it is therefore important to formulate questions as openly and neutrally as possible, but always from the perspective of the ‘end user’.

### 20 Presence

The participation broker and the area manager from Oost/Watergraafsmeer district council are often present in the neighbourhood, either cycling, walking, talking or listening. They regularly talk to residents at home in their living rooms, in community centres or cafés about subjects of importance in the neighbourhood and most of all about initiatives designed to strengthen the neighbourhood.

### 21 Perspectives

Read our blog post about the *buurtschouw* (neighbourhood survey) and the report about the “*jatspel*” (a dice game) morning and coffee with elderly residents.

How to define such an open question? In Amsteldorp we negotiated with the municipality about starting questions. Through conversations we moved from institutional questions like: “How can existing care facilities better match elderly needs?” to: “What does it mean to grow old well in Amsteldorp”, to “how can people grow old better in Amsteldorp”. We finally chose the last question since “better” leaves more room for subjectivity in the eye of the beholder.

### **Building a team: put together a multidisciplinary team and do preparatory work**

A societal issue typically belongs to no one in particular, but has negative effects on a group within society. However, this group is often not in the (socio-economic) position to have strong agency over its fate. How to make sure this dynamic is not reflected in a social lab’s work?

We learned that a lab team should somewhat reflect the social reality in which the societal challenge resides. In Amsteldorp we started with a multidisciplinary team: policy-makers and civil servants from Oost district council, from the Work and Income service, from the GGD (local health service), Kennisland staff and two interns with backgrounds in film-making and anthropology<sup>22</sup>. Ideally, citizens are part of the team from the start. In Amsteldorp they became gradually part of the team as the lab evolved and grew over time. It proved to be important to have a core team with people that felt committed throughout the entire duration of the lab and who had a mandate from their own management to experiment and to learn. In addition, the team can accommodate some variation: not everyone, professionals and residents alike, was able to take part every day.

Besides this team we invited administrators and local politicians that represent the coalition of backing partners to be part of a ‘learning circle’. They are crucial to make sure the outcomes of the lab are pledged over the long term and create backing for when innovations create unrest. Ideally, a facilitating partner who can offer guidance to the coalition is involved to keep an eye on the feedback loops as this is something that is easily forgotten in the midst of intense lab work days. The ‘learning circle’ was invited on numerous occasions to reflect and give follow-up to the outcomes of the lab.

#### **22 In an ideal world**

In an ideal world, we would also have had members of active residents’ organisations and service provision agencies, but there was insufficient time to mobilise such a broad coalition. However, we currently do this in the social labs in Dordrecht and Nijmegen.

In order to create a functional lab team it is necessary to brief and train team members well in advance. In Amsteldorp there was not much time to properly select and train people. As a result, some lab members were not acquainted with the digital technology we used to get our blog up and running, or had to learn during the lab how to conduct insightful conversations with citizens and professionals. In our current labs we have developed a fieldwork guide for the social lab on which we base a series of preparing workshops. In these workshops we practice with an open, investigative attitude in conversations<sup>23</sup>. We learn about digital technology, we make collective amendments to conversation canvasses and practice with gathering, recording and verifying stories. During a lab a recurring team meeting offers an opportunity to discuss and to align expectations regarding the creative process and to check assumptions about the social issue being discussed.

### 23 Fieldwork guide

The fieldwork guide for Amsteldorp contains an introduction to Amsteldorp, an explanation of the lab method, the research questions and assumptions, a practical overview of the methodology with regard to carrying out conversations and reporting stories and information about research ethics.



## Checking our assumptions

We continuously tested our assumptions about Amsteldorp by writing them down on a poster in the lab office. These are the assumptions we started with:

- The strong social cohesion in the district of Amsteldorp means that older people have a safety net that helps them to grow old independently: Amsteldorp embodies the much dreamed of “participatory society”.
- Strong social networks help people to grow old independently, if they are able to make use of them.
- Strong social cohesion also means social exclusion.
- Despite the large number of services offered and all the laws and measures in place, some people end up falling between the cracks in the system. These people are invisible.
- Independence plays a crucial role in growing old qualitatively well in Amsteldorp.

# Tips for an effective, energetic lab team

- There can be no lab team without citizens, residents and end users.
- Begin a communication network via, for instance, Slack or WhatsApp. This stimulates open communication immediately.
- Give attention to low points, celebrate high points.
- Expect commitment from the lab team members; they should request leave from their managers.
- Keep the lab management lean with little overhead, just one meeting per day in which to assess progress (are we reaching the right people?), organise topics, discuss issues and advise each other.



# Conversation grid

<b>Name:</b> <b>Email/Phone:</b>	<b>I take with me:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Tool for note taking <input type="checkbox"/> Camera <input type="checkbox"/> ...	<b>I have made public:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> My intention <input type="checkbox"/> Public blog <input type="checkbox"/> Anonymisation
<b>General: about 'aging well' in Amsteldorp</b>	<b>Ideal: about 'aging better' in Amsteldorp</b>	<b>Reflection: paradoxes, loose ends, contradictions</b>
<b>Tips for new contacts / follow-ups</b>	<b>Great quotes!</b>	
<b>Organisations/networks that were mentioned:</b>	<b>Details environment + person</b>	<b>Tips:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Be quiet, listen <input type="checkbox"/> Pose open questions <input type="checkbox"/> Delay judgement <input type="checkbox"/> Ask examples <input type="checkbox"/> Question! <input type="checkbox"/> ...

Example of conversation grid we designed and used to collect field notes for stories in Amsteldorp. The conversation grid is part of the fieldwork guide that we develop for social lab teams.

# Guiding story format for writing a good blog post

0	Catchy title and name of author, date, place
1	<b>Context:</b> describe the context & setting in which the conversation took place: the atmosphere, the location, how someone came across, the things that were said to introduce one another
2	<b>The reality:</b> describe the reality of storyteller, with the help of quotes, photos and anecdotes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the storyteller's version of "living well"</li> <li>• What are the resources that facilitate to live well according to the storyteller? Name services, informal networks, organisations, own actions and initiatives</li> <li>• What are the identified 'disconnects' that do not help in "living well" according to the storyteller?</li> </ul>
3	<b>The ideal:</b> describe how a better version of "living well" would look like, with the help of quotes, photos and anecdotes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What kind of ideas does the storyteller have to improve existing behaviours, services, formal/informal networks that could better support the storyteller in living well?</li> <li>• According to the storyteller, what kind of new behaviours, formal and informal networks, services could be designed that could better support the storyteller in living well?</li> <li>• What would the storyteller like to do him/herself to improve his/her situation?</li> <li>• What kind of support would he/she appreciate?</li> </ul>
4	<b>Reflections:</b> what struck you in this story? Close the story with insights of both the storyteller and yourself, the story collector <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are difficulties, contradictions, paradoxes in this story?</li> <li>• What are clear clues for follow-up?</li> </ul>

To write a blogpost we have developed a story format that can help team members to order field notes and write a story that captures the social reality of the storyteller, in this case citizens.

*The meeting immediately starts with an update about yesterday. A 2.5 hour discussion took place with professionals about their vision for the area. An interesting observation during the conversation was that many professionals see Amsteldorp as a homogeneous community (of older people), while the stories from the area paint a much more varied picture of the community. A list was also prepared of people who still needed to be spoken to and subjects that still needed to be discussed. The list of conversations represents our challenge for this week.*

*– Team member Amsteldorp*

### **Finding a location: a temporary, open and attractive “office” in the field**

The lab cannot exist without a social setting in the neighbourhood itself. This ensures that the lab is open and accessible for everyone. If the social challenge concerns care for the elderly, then the lab cannot take place on the 10th floor of a municipal office building.

How did we go about? In Amsteldorp, we found a physical location in which to base ourselves with the help of the housing corporation, namely their own local office. It became our temporary office, with a welcome sign on the outside wall that stated: Team Amsteldorp: welcome! From this location, we organised meetings with as low a barrier to participation as possible for those we knew and did not yet know in the area in order to ask them to work and think together with us. The golden rule of the office was: be outside whenever you can! We set up an open table from 3 to 4 pm every day on the square outside and organised two neighbourhood barbecues.

## **Important for a successful lab**

- A housekeeper. Lab days are intensive – every day one person is responsible for chores, food and drink.
- An A3 printer, paper and ink.
- A designer for visually clear designs.
- A reliable internet connection.
- A materials budget for ad hoc purchases, from a washing line to renting a barbecue.
- Laptop, pen, notebook and camera.
- Public online blog with new stories every day.

*“We kept on testing best ways to meet people and made mistakes. For example, we thought elderly people would really like to meet us over what we thought was a traditional elderly drink: egg nog. We sat there with our egg nog and the elders made fun of us: Egg nog, ew! Just like us, they really preferred cold lemonade in the sun! It was a good confrontation with our own assumptions.”*

*– Team member Amsteldorp*

## **Organising feedback: feedback loops for collective interpretation**

As mentioned earlier, a lab involves a new type of knowledge production, one in which everyone can contribute and give feedback at any given moment. In this way, the lab is not simply an initiative of experts, but a process that is sustainable, which has broad support and which can continue once the lab has officially ended. Such an inclusive type of knowledge production will not emerge by itself. Conscious moments and concrete, visual methods must be incorporated in order to invite and organise feedback (for example a local market, a local theatre piece, a mobile art installation, a neighbourhood walk, a living room discussion, a film or a documentary).

Amsteldorp has taught us that feedback is ideally organised and connected on at least three levels:

### **1. Within the team**

Within the team we created daily meetings that served as a moment for discussion, feedback and space for each other's experiences, concerns and frustrations on each day of the lab. In this way the whole Amsteldorp team could contribute by sharing tips, strategies and ideas. We wrote openly about our experiences on our blog every day.

### **2. In the neighbourhood, with residents**

We organised regular moments in the area where the social lab took place in which we invited the whole neighbourhood to give feedback on ongoing results. Online, we used the blog to immediately share as much as possible of our work with each other and with residents and other interested parties so that people could react immediately where necessary. Offline, we organised neighbourhood barbecues in Amsteldorp as a way of bringing people together in an accessible way. During these barbecues we presented stories from the lab in various creative, visual ways: in films, on a washing line hung with stories and in a game. Residents also made films themselves with the help of a professional filmmaker<sup>24</sup>.

In this way, residents were able to gain an insight into the work of the lab and to let us know if we were on the right track or not. The material itself also generated new insights. However, what was much more important was that people met one another

### **24 Filmmaker in the team**

In Amsteldorp the filmmaker is Jochem Smit, who is directly included as a social lab team member.

*When I asked if they could name something that was going well in the neighbourhood, the silence was deafening. But then the ladies erupted. “Nothing is going well in this neighbourhood, son. We’ve been living here for more than 15 years, and it has been a complete mess here for ages.” I tried another approach. “Since nothing is right here in this neighbourhood, what would you like to see changed?” As one lady sat shaking her head vehemently, another expressed the collective thoughts of the group. “You tell us, son, we’ve given up hope long ago, sorry.” My belief that we could note a few interesting desires here disappeared completely.*

– Team member Amsteldorp

and saw with their own eyes where they could or could not contribute. This created new energy and led to the formation of new initiatives. This was not always easy, the team had to find creative and positive ways to deal with sometimes challenging feedback. It helped to present the stories and red threads in a clear and ordered manner. The interpretation of these results was facilitated by the lab team, not decided or guided by them. They take on the role to support others (like residents) in interpreting the results and learn to have a non-judgemental attitude.

### 3. With the broad coalition

Collective organising, interpretation of and feedback on (interim) results must not only involve residents but also “the system”. In this way, collective and political engagement with the social issue (and with tackling it) can be created efficiently. In Amsteldorp, we set up a reflection group beforehand that was able to observe us and give advice at pre-planned moments. A reflection group can consist of administrators (for example from a care group), local politicians or a local council committee chairperson. In Amsteldorp, we organised an *ideation day*<sup>25</sup> with this reflection group once we had allowed our first results to be collectively interpreted by residents and others at the neighbourhood barbecue. On the basis of this, we identified a number of *triggers* and *disconnects*<sup>26</sup>, for which we sought out depth and focus with the reflection group. The reflection group was also invited to join us at crucial moments, such as the closing barbecue, so that they could experience for themselves what a lab could bring about. From the reflection group we asked to join us in the common lab-team attitude: open, learning and non-judgemental.

#### 25 Ideation day

A co-creative working process in which new insights and ideas are generated.

#### 26 Triggers and disconnects

*Disconnects* are gaps that emerge between wishes and reality, between the environment in which people live and the world of the system and organisations. *Triggers* are the opportunities that arise in practice to bridge these gaps. See page 34 for an overview of disconnects.



*Mrs De Vries attaches a lot of importance to being independent. This goes back to her youngest days and is something that was also very clear to her husband. As such, she does not intend giving up her freedom easily. Of course she sometimes worries about what will happen if her health deteriorates or if she is alone and afraid at home. However, in such instances she simply gives herself a stern talking to, “Pull yourself together, you silly cow”, I tell myself. That helps. ‘It makes no sense to worry so much, it’ll get you nowhere’.”*

– Amsteldorp resident

## **Ending a social lab: stepping out and letting go**

The saying goes that endings are far more difficult than beginnings. This is also the case for social labs. Although the social lab has been framed as a temporary space, it is not easy to determine how long temporary should be. When is the right time for the lab team to step out and to leave the follow-up to the locals? How do you ensure that the partners are ready enough to take matters in their own hands? During the last phase of a lab it is essential to start letting go and facilitate others instead of taking the role as process leader. However, the shift from instigator to facilitator is not easy. In Amsteldorp we ended after two weeks because of sheer time constraints. In Dordrecht and Nijmegen we have six months, but it feels like we could easily stay a couple more to get ‘the system’, all the organisations, on board properly. It is hard to give a concrete time frame. However, be geared towards letting others take over and keep your exit in mind from the start. In practice this means to let others take ownership over organising events, let others learn how to collect and write stories, let others take control where possible.



5.

Lab dilemmas:  
loose ends and  
future insights

Can social labs be new spaces in which to work towards a public domain with better outcomes for citizens in the 21st century? Offering challenging perspectives and unusual forms of collaboration can, by way of small steps, lead to what the scientist Steven Johnson calls the *adjacent possible*: a zone of close development, a sort of shadow future at the edges of the existing system in which a map can unfold with numerous trajectories via which the present can transform. The *adjacent possible* is a place for experimentation in which doing, thinking and learning<sup>27</sup> go hand in hand.

The social lab is not, as previously stated, an island separated from the real world. A social lab is a careful balancing act between causing enough upheaval and attention to create change, while not risking becoming assimilated or alienated by the status quo. This means working together with existing social and political networks, cultures and beliefs, while also faring in the wake of emerging opportunities. For example: if an organisation does not grant a social lab team access to their network of citizens or “care clients”, one can ask how the organisation would then want to engage with you, while you also look for other ways to be in touch with citizens, for instance by hanging out in more public places.

In our recent experiences (in Amsteldorp, but also in the cities of Dordrecht and Nijmegen) we have encountered various struggles while innovating with both systems and societies. Struggles that have to do with operating in a political field with strong stakes and dominant power relations. Hence facilitating a lab successfully means becoming extremely competent in managing the frictions that arise while trying to

## 27 Doing, thinking, learning

Johnson, S. (2010, 25 September). [The Genius of the Tinkerer](#), The Wall Street Journal.



innovate within the existing conditions. It means learning, trying and failing. Every social lab creates new loose ends and new dilemmas which we must resolve. In this section we describe a couple of the dilemmas we have encountered while running a lab. Dilemmas which we hope will be the subject of debate in the international lab community.

### **Innovating research practices in an academia-dominated system**

A social lab is an attempt for more democratic, inclusive knowledge production and analysis. *Feed Forward* allows all involved to become researchers of their own practice to ensure research outcomes that better support innovators and for innovators to make better use of research. This implies a change in the way research is done and viewed and a change in research output. This is a daunting task in a world that is dominated by traditional research which is focused on producing sound, evidence-based “objective knowledge” in peer-reviewed journal articles<sup>28</sup>.

We think it is important to democratise and open up (academic) research production chains and find new ways to not only spread knowledge, but to open up knowledge production chains, and become more creative in presenting research output. What would a didactic version of this publication look like? A debate about the role of research for social innovation is needed. How to divert currently available research resources towards the development and exchange of new research methods which support innovation processes on the ground?

### **Requiring new work cultures that are not supported by the status quo**

A social lab requires new ways of working from all those involved in designing new policies and social services: questioning risk-averse behaviour, venturing out to use new forms of ICT, practising new conversational skills. Although lab team members are supported and trained, it becomes quickly apparent that the lab's ways of working are very different from regular jobs. Not only is it different, it is often even exactly contrary to standard rules and procedures. A practical problem is the use of ICT in order to communicate with people outside of their own institutions. In many cases new work platforms such as [Google Drive](#), [Dropbox](#), [Slack](#), [Wunderlist](#), [Mural.ly](#), [Trello](#) or [Medium](#) are not even available to employees of government institutions simply be-

#### **28 Articles**

See Popper, K. (1992), *The logic of scientific discovery*, London, Routledge, and Rosen, R. (1991). *Life Itself: A Comprehensive Inquiry into the Nature, Origin, and Fabrication of Life*, New York, Columbia University Press, in: Kieboom, M. & Vahl, M. (2014). *Social Innovation and the magic of experience. Emergence by Design - D. 3.2: Case study Education Pioneers*. Amsterdam: Kennisland.

cause their ICT systems are outdated, or because they are not allowed to download new applications. A more difficult challenge is that lab team members encounter tensions when explaining their work to their colleagues. Especially the open way of working, personal contact with citizens and the transdisciplinary approach give rise to questions of accountability and defensive explaining. Simultaneously working on addressing this challenge and working in the lab can be experienced as strenuous and demotivating.

What kind of methodologies are being developed worldwide to better support and propagate learning in new experimental work cultures within existing, set ways of working? How can we better learn from one another beyond the staged conference and plain texts?

### **Creating flexible ownership, finances & accountability**

In chapter 4, we briefly reflected on the importance of creating a degree of financial independency from existing institutional logic of finance and accountability when starting a social lab. However, we also deem it important to create ownership over the social lab work progress and outcomes within the current system. How to strike a balance between local ownership and financial independence while facilitating change?

At the moment our social labs are commissioned by a municipality or a consortium of different organisations. Commissioners often demand clear predefined, bullet-pointed results and exact FTEs before we even start a lab. But a social lab focuses on people's needs and creating better outcomes which are not a priori known, and along the way it often shows that resources are in the wrong place and/or misdirected. This has clear implications for evaluating and measuring societal impact as well. The way how we as a society finance and account societal innovation is so deeply rooted in current (public sector) systems that it needs to be acknowledged and addressed by the international lab community, but also beyond by people holding positions in large institutional bodies.

Furthermore, the current business model in which organisations such as Kennisland depend on a project-based consultancy model provides a tension with the intensive



*“Yesterday, stress arose once again because those interviewed were (not for the first time) dissatisfied with how we presented their stories. Tensions even emerged between residents because of one of the stories that was published on the blog. Today Chris is going to sit down behind her computer with the person interviewed to check the story and amend it where necessary.”*

*– Team member Amsteldorp*

work a social lab demands. It actually requires temporarily *being there* all the time. It means sweeping out the strict idea of a ‘9-to-5 job’. It means responding to Whatsapp messages of youth on a Monday night, it means setting up a quick crowdfund and visiting a police station to pay of a team members’ debt on a Saturday morning to avoid having her write lab stories from jail. On the other hand, constantly being there collides with the idea of establishing local ownership of the social lab. When social lab facilitators from Kennisland facilitate too much, the lab team falls flat, or members protest against rigidity. If Kennisland facilitates too little, the lab team starts floating in all directions, or members start complaining about not having a clear direction. How to be good navigator to steward this process?

### **Handling new ethical dilemmas with care**

Working in a social lab means working with people, which per definition means dealing with emotions, values and conflicts. For this reason a lab gives rise to ethical tensions. In Amsteldorp generating stories that are made accessible to everyone led to the rekindling of old neighbourhood quarrels. Sensitivities about difficult working relationships came to the surface and new disagreements about the emerging initiatives arose. One does not know beforehand if a story that is made public will be equally well received by everyone. How will those closest, such as neighbours or an employer, react? Personal damage or damage to reputations can occur. For example:

- Tension between residents: “I don’t want my story published anymore, I don’t want any more arguments with the neighbours. It leads to gossip.”
- Tension between organisations: “You can’t talk about that topic, because you’re not part of that type of work.”
- Tension between employer and employee: “I’m afraid of damage to my reputation, of losing my job.”

Another ethical dilemma that becomes visible in the lab is the fact that (paid) work is between 9 to 5, 5 days a week, while people’s lives are affected 24/7 by the societal challenges they face. How do we work with citizens while they are actually also team members? Do they get paid, how are they contractually protected as a lab team worker?

We discuss ethics a great deal within the social lab teams. Not only about when we (unintentionally) offended people in some way, but also when individuals personally benefitted: a lab team member got rid of (a part of her) debt, another went back to school, yet another got a new job. How good or bad is it if this occurs? Is it perhaps in fact a sign that we are dealing with relevant issues, issues that can sometimes be sensitive or even painful? How do other social labs deal with these tensions and sensitivities? Where does the responsibility of the lab begin and end?



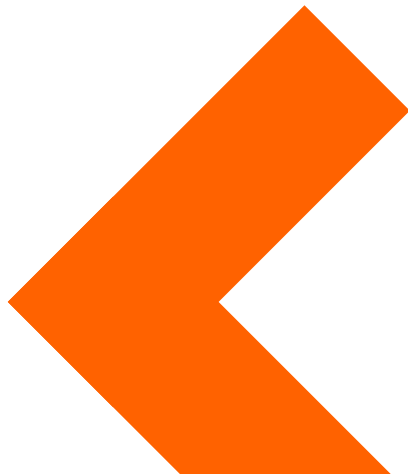
## Five points of departure as regards to lab ethics

- **Follow the “do no harm” principle:** the safety and interests of residents are always paramount. These can be protected by guaranteeing the anonymity and privacy of the storyteller. Check the story before publication, ask permission before publication, remove the story if this is requested and offer counseling in the case of disharmony and confrontation.
- **Always give something back to the area:** through public initiatives, show that you are not simply the latest of many researchers or council officials who arrives with the best intentions and then leaves again.
- **Focus on action:** don't just do research, proceed as quickly as possible to action.
- **Create public events:** keep checking findings with end users at collective moments so that energy, and also tension, has an outlet.
- **With each step, consider long-term perspectives:** the end goal of a lab is to create sustainability and to secure and protect progress. As such, emphasise the temporary nature of the lab so that dependency does not creep in.

# Epilogue

A social lab is not a solution, nor is it an end in itself. It is not the latest recipe for success. It is a possible addition to many other initiatives for improvement, such reports for civil servants, training for professionals and pilot projects for citizens. What is special about a lab is that it is a temporary space for teamwork involving researchers, civil servants, professionals and citizens. Temporary, but potentially of lasting value for everyday lives of people. This value was expressed in two letters written to the lab team by Welmoet, a policy officer from Amsterdam, and by Maria, a resident of Amsteldorp.

We leave the final word to them.



## **Letter from Welmoet**

**Subject: Thanks and all the best for tomorrow**

Dear Kennisland,

I would like to thank you for the enlightening experience of the last two weeks. I have enjoyed your open, respectful and inquisitive attitude during the social lab in Amsteldorp. I have come to know you as an enthusiastic, hard working and socially engaged team capable of creating a learning environment. The multidisciplinary approach of the municipality and Kennisland gave me inspiration, created friction in a positive sense and stimulated me to review and to refine my own opinions as regards the role of government and the care system. Thank you for this.

The fruits of a social lab are, among other things, a multiplicity of stories. The subjects of these stories are not new: The difficult collaboration between formal and informal care, the reluctance of older people to ask for help, including from their children, the fear within the neighbourhood of an influx of "difficult people", the power of residents' initiatives and the danger of group forming and exclusion, the gap between the welfare and care on offer and the diverging requirements of different residents, the lack of collaboration between agencies, how difficult it is as a resident to find your way amid the dense jungle of arrangements and institutions, how thin walls and cultural differences can lead to a lack of understanding and irritation between neighbours. These are subjects that I recognise and for which the municipality and our partners have already begun initiatives and carried out common programmes. They are subjects that can be found in the municipal coalition agreement that was signed earlier this year.

For me, this is therefore a pleasant confirmation that the

municipality has a reasonably good picture of the problems that exist. Can it then be said that the social lab has produced nothing? On the contrary. Firstly, it shows how important it is to regularly monitor how policy is unfolding in practice, how important it is to begin from the perspective of the resident and how important it is to keep a close eye on the possible gaps in the system. Fresh eyes can offer new perspectives. As an official of the municipality you run the risk of developing blind spots, just as all professionals within their own domain do. Your eyes are refreshingly sharp.

Secondly, you have planted seeds in the neighbourhood. Through discussion, new connections have been made, new residents have been reached and new initiatives have come about. You consistently devoted attention to residents' initiatives during the lab. For that you have my praise. However, the question – also your question – is: will it take root? How does the neighbourhood profit from it? Is a lab more than a pleasant summer activity for residents?

That's my critical note as regards the methodology. I think that both the residents' perspective and the professional perspective can be strengthened in your approach. Kennisland and people from the municipality collected stories from residents and tested these with the professionals. I believe that we could have involved residents in the discussions with professionals even more. We ourselves started to investigate what the situation is as regards the policy on placing "difficult people". Why didn't we do that together with residents? Why isn't a resident involved in every discussion? As Kennisland and municipality we talked to residents about the relationship between formal and informal care. That worked well. Next time I would do this even more.

I think that, had we done this, we would have made even

stronger connections and would have had a better guarantee of sustainability. During the discussion with the Meldpunt Zorg en Overlast [Care and Nuisance in the community Hotline], I think that it was good that the woman who spoke could express all her concerns and was nevertheless able to obtain a different picture of how the Hotline works there and then. By not necessarily leading all discussions but instead supporting and facilitating residents in researching it might be possible to achieve even more within two weeks. But maybe it doesn't even need to fit into two weeks. Would it be an idea to consider what could be achieved if you had the same sort of discussion one day a week for ten weeks, and if Kennisland primarily played the role of facilitator instead of taking charge?

I am very pleased that the last two weeks have stimulated me towards this sort of reflection. I would very much like to continue this discussion with you. I would in any case like to invite you to give a presentation about your/our findings to our department either at the end of August or the beginning of October (I'm away the whole of September).

All the best for the barbecue tomorrow and best wishes for the holidays,

Kind regards, Welmoet

## **Letter from Maria**

### **Subject: Reflections from Maria**

Hi Lab team,

Here's my first e-mail. It's Saturday evening and there's still a lot happening on the square by Manenburgstraat and Buitenrustpad. Last week a resident suggested giving the square a name. One of her suggestions was "the meeting place". From now on I'm going to refer to it as such in my e-mail. It's certainly shorter.

I am of course very curious about what will happen with the bench that we left behind. This evening a whole bunch of young people was sitting on it. They had dragged the bench to the place where you always held meetings. It rained a lot this afternoon and I was curious how the bench had fared. And so I went to have a look. There was a nice mix of Dutch, Moroccan and dark-skinned boys (I knew a few of them already). We talked for almost an hour, about who the square belongs to (all residents, not just older people and small children but also teenagers). Really nice. I told them what you have been doing during the last few weeks, and that I had been looking for them in order to interview them. They had been on holiday. They're great guys, I see no reason whatsoever to be afraid of them. They are fed up of all the people who complain about them. They really need a youth club, a meeting place.

They had to go (because Ajax were playing?). I asked them to put back the bench (diagonally at a 45 degree angle under the tree in the corner next to your office). They had no problem with this once I explained that if they did so it would appear as if it belonged on the square, while if left on the street (where you had originally placed it) it would look like it was rubbish to be picked up or free to take away. I'm curious if it will still be there tomorrow.

I picked up some glass and other rubbish so that it will be clean

and tidy for the younger children tomorrow. The boys started to help spontaneously. Setting a good example works much better than complaining. It was really nice, and they even gave me two bottles of cola!

I've made an appointment to drink tea on the square tomorrow with another resident, Mrs de Vries. I had just crossed the street to feed a neighbour's cat. Mrs de Vries saw me from her balcony and invited me in. It was nice to see one of the upper apartments. I'd never been inside her house. We're going to develop more things together.

This afternoon at about 3 o'clock I was walking towards Amstel station to buy a newspaper. Herbert (a resident of Buitenrustpad who comes from Ghana) spoke to me. When I said that I was going to buy a paper, he guessed it immediately: that'll be the NRC Handelsblad (correct!). He said I could have his and asked if I would come in for a cup of tea. It was nice talking to him and his girlfriend. She's apparently a very successful artist from Switzerland. She knows the hotel where my family and I have stayed when skiing since 1959. It's a small world... she has also made a name for herself in New York and has even lived there for a few years. I am surprised how many remarkable people live here.

You guys have really had quite an effect here.

Many thanks!

Maria, Amsteldorp resident<sup>29</sup>

## 29 Names

Names in this letter have been anonymised.

# Acknowledgements

Social lab Amsteldorp was a gift from Kennisland to the city of Amsterdam. Thanks for the acceptance, the engagement and the exploration necessary to ensure that work of the lab continues. Thanks in particular to Eric ten Hulsen, Hetty Vlug, Ger Baron, Liane Pielanen, Marije Bierlaagh, Tijs Roelofs, Anne-Jan Zieleman and Joke van Vliet from the municipality of Amsterdam.

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The employees of the Open Hof, Dynamo, Amsteldorp Actief, GGD, Meldpunt Zorg en Overlast (Care and Nuisance in the community Hotline), the police, Het Hoekhuis, Vereniging Ouderen Adviesraad Oost (Elderly people's Advice Council Association Oost), Zorggroep Amsterdam Oost and Ymere, who joined us at various moments, contributed to the discussion and provided support – thanks to you too for your time and efforts.

Additionally, we are thankful for the inspiration and wise lessons of InWithForward, who helped refine our thinking about labs and system innovation. Thanks as well to Remko Berkhout and Maike Popma for your advice and commentary on the content of earlier versions of this publication.

Finally, thanks to all Amsteldorp residents and hopefully see you soon!



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# About Kennisland

Complex societal challenges require new forms of innovation. In order to tackle these challenges, knowledge from the people who are directly involved is needed. The key is to mobilise and to utilise that knowledge in order to arrive at sustainable innovation. That is what we do. A smart society is a society that works together, one in which the knowledge, talents, experiences and intuitions present at all levels and in all areas are utilised to the full: a knowledge society. Our mission is to make society smarter, to put people in a position to learn and to continually renew themselves. We develop interventions, either commissioned or on our own initiative. We produce and share the knowledge that we accumulate in doing so with as many people as possible, because knowledge only gains value when it is co-created and shared.

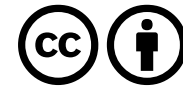
Read more [about Kennisland](#) and our work with and [about labs](#). Kennisland is currently setting up social labs in collaboration with municipalities in Dordrecht, Amsterdam, Schiedam and Nijmegen.

Are you also interested in starting a social lab yourself?  
Please contact Chris Sigaloff via [cs@kl.nl](mailto:cs@kl.nl)



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*“Pull yourself together, you silly cow, I tell myself.  
That helps. It makes no sense to worry so much,  
it’ll get you nowhere.”*

*- Wisdom from Amsteldorp (Jans, 79)*



Postcard that we distributed amongst Amsteldorp residents before beginning the social lab. Suggestions for tasks were printed on the rear (cooking, taking away rubbish etc.). In this accessible way, the social lab team tried to make contact with people and announced its presence in Amsteldorp.

*“The social innovation lab model created by Kennisland must have been a humbling and empathetic learning experience for the government officials and social innovators who had the opportunity to learn from the people they want to serve.*

*How insightful it is that one can understand issues more clearly at the quotidian level, at people’s doorsteps and around the community square. New practices brought out via this process are more responsive and humanistic.*

*The idea of social labs is not well known in Asia. I hope Kennisland’s example will inspire Asian changemakers that one does not need a big budget or go far to understand societal issues and identify better outcomes. The community has the answers.”*

*– Ada Wong, Hong Kong , Chair, Make A Difference Institute  
Convenor, The Good Lab*

*“Kennisland goes beyond the hype of social innovation labs to demonstrate how this new way of making policy can be inclusive, participatory and improve citizens’ daily realities. Documented through a journey into a social lab in Amsteldorp, the authors provide a glimpse into the social lab in action. By putting citizens at the centre, the results of labs are often surprising, illuminatory and unexpected, underscoring the relevance of policymakers getting out of their offices and onto the streets to understand what it is that citizens need and want.”*

*– Marco Daglio, Head, Observatory of Public Sector Innovation,  
OECD*