

# SOCIAL SPACE

PERSPECTIVES  
SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS  
INNOVATION IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION  
ON THE WILD SIDE

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LIEN Centre for Social Innovation  
SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY



Administration Building,  
81 Victoria Street, Singapore 188065



+65 6828 0821



[liencentre@smu.edu.sg](mailto:liencentre@smu.edu.sg)



[www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg](http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg)



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LIEN Centre for Social Innovation  
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# LAB MATTERS

## CHALLENGING THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION LABORATORIES (A SUMMARY)

Social innovation labs are currently lauded as the vehicle for transforming cities and social systems. For the practitioner though, the question remains: how do we move beyond the hype to deeper discussions on lab practice? **Chee Soo Lian** from *Social Space* sums up the ideas in the original paper by **Marlieke Kieboom** (Kennisland), and highlights the issues behind “labbing” social challenges for systemic change.



"How can we make knowledge useful to support people's innovative practices? That is Kieboom's encompassing question. In practice she designs new research methodologies and learning infrastructures for teachers, civil servants and professionals. She enjoys writing about her work to stimulate reflection in the social innovation field. She has an MSc in Anthropology (Utrecht University) and an MA in Conflict and Governance (Simon Fraser University).

*This summary has been reviewed and edited by Marlieke Kieboom.*

The paper, “Lab Matters” is the direct result of the exchange at Lab2: A Lab about Labs—an event jointly organised by Kennisland<sup>1</sup> and Hivos.<sup>2</sup> In April 2013, 40 practitioners from 20 social change labs gathered in Amsterdam in a convention aimed at promoting critical engagement of social innnovation lab practitioners for the purpose of “discontinuous change.”<sup>3</sup>

“Labbing” has indeed become the trend in finding solutions for today’s world problems. Behind the idea of labs is the promise to “transform” the situation and combat ills existing in the established system. Yet, the question remains: How practical are labs in negotiating the intricacies in social problems?

Implicit in the question are two processes taking place in tandem: “underestimating complex system dynamics” and “overestimating the impact of lab practices.”<sup>4</sup> Together, they can bring about negative effects on the quality of impact that labs can bring. On the one hand, there is a serious underestimate of the complexities in four areas of lab practice:

- 1) Outcomes, where too much emphasis is put on solutionism.
- 2) Focus, where the place and power of politics is overlooked.
- 3) Goals, where scaling solutions override ideas, values and ethics.
- 4) Representation, with miscalculation as regards the messiness of human nature.

On the other hand, the expectations of the direct impact of labs on transformative change tend to be overestimated and could be more measured.

How then can we support social innovation labs in moving their practices forward? The article seeks to

- understand the unique practice and principles of labs;
- identify the dynamics frequently ignored; and
- offer suggestions by considering the future of labs.

### LABS: PRACTICE AND PRINCIPLES

The presence of labs can be seen in the growing number of social innovation (SI) labs, SI journals, SI networks, guidebooks and toolkits and funders made up of corporations, philanthropists and government (particularly in the US, the UK and Canada).



Lab2 by Kennisland, CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)

There are several reasons behind the appeal of labs:

- Problematic situations such as exclusive decision-making, inequality in the socio-economic sphere and the depletion of natural resources globally need to be addressed.
- There is the call for discontinuous change, for the purpose of reinstating a new structural order.
- A viable alternative to minimal disruption is needed when the opportunity for change arises.
- Labs exist as spaces for experimentation and innovation.

Labs have been aptly defined as a “container for experimentation.”<sup>5</sup> Its process begins with taking on a problem, working on it outside the context of an ailing system, approaching end-users for collaboration, then prototyping through design and systems thinking together with end-users and stakeholders, testing prototypes in various appropriate situations, and finally scaling to bring about systemic change to the existing structure.

The set of operating principles behind the workings of labs include

- showing through findings and action research activities;
- using the needs of end-users to steer and guide process;
- focusing on complex problems at a systemic level;
- questioning or bringing about improvement in institutions;

- creating new methodologies to bring about the change process;
- gathering a team from different disciplines comprising both experts, end-users and stakeholders; and
- scaling solutions for transformative change.

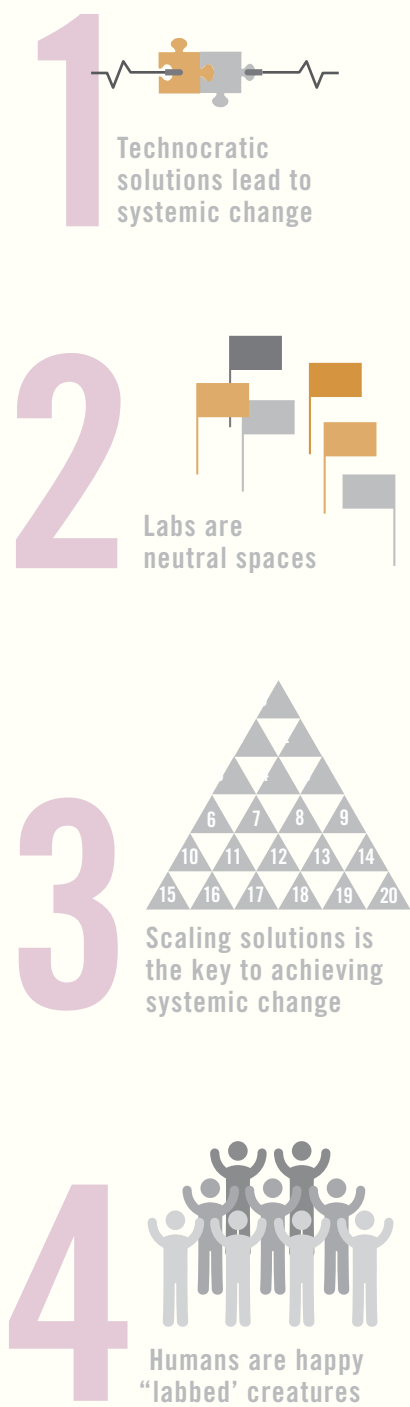
In practice, different combinations of these principles are seen in different labs. As Vanessa Timmer, a Lab2 participant, succinctly puts it, “No two labs are the same and no two participants entirely agree on what a lab is.”<sup>6</sup>

In Lab2, it was not possible to arrive at a general framework for labs achieving systemic change. In fact, there was even difficulty trying to define systemic impact of labs. Simply “labbing” challenges does not change a system that may itself be the root cause of the problem. There appears to be no single example to illustrate the impact of labs at the institutional level. To quote practitioner Sarah Schulman, “For all of their activity and intent, it still remains unclear whether labs are altering the dominant systems, and are actually enabling a different set of outcomes on the ground.”<sup>7</sup>

Some believe the uncertainty about the effect of labs lies in the fact that labs are new in the field of social change while systemic change in established structures are only evident after decades. While this explanation is valid, certain dynamics should be considered as they could be holding back systemic change.

OVERSIGHTS: FOUR OMISSIONS IN “LABBED LANDS”

The argument put forward is that there is a “misjudgement or misinterpretation of the dynamics of complex adaptive systems,”<sup>8</sup> reflected in outcomes, focus, goals and representation in lab practices. This inaccurate understanding is shaped by implicit assumptions behind systemic change. There are four assumptions that should be highlighted.



**Assumption 1**  
**Technocratic solutions lead to systemic change**  
SI labs work on some key principles. The first is the general assumption that direct solutions are accessible and issues can be resolved. This is best done by targeting a problem at its root cause, generating a to-do list, then entering the process of design which would involve assembling a diverse group for the task, designing processes that can be repeated to improve on the prototype solution, and finally, creating systemic solutions. Systems should be broken down to “individual static entities” for tweaking.

This solutionism rhetoric in SI labs reduces complex systems to static entities, yet it appears to be the standard response to social issues. What is generally overlooked is the context upon which transformative change may or may not occur, as well as “the dynamic of interdependent and interconnected patterns” created in our search for solutions.<sup>9</sup>

In looking for possible root causes of complex systemic challenges, one often lists the more tangible causes, like inequality, malfunctioning institutions and poverty. In reality, one better perceives a complex challenge as an interdependent root system of ideas, beliefs, and values that are non-singular, entangled, and contested (e.g., beliefs about family values, interpretation and meaning of history, gendered identities). In understanding system dynamics this way, inequality, malfunctioning institutions and poverty are in fact intermediate outcomes and also intermediate causes of other multiple, interdependent root causes. It is then not immediately clear what is influencing what, or who is influencing who in these relationships. Furthermore, root causes can be found in disconnects of the system or what Alan Fowler has called “wrong couplings.”<sup>10</sup>

Apart from oversimplifying, solutionism can be “a dangerous intellectual tendency” as it prevents discontinuous change.<sup>11</sup> As writer and researcher Evgeny Morozov puts it, the focus on solutions can disrupt the momentum for transformative change.<sup>12</sup>

Solutions in an ineffectual system are only “incremental improvements,” and they cause us to lose momentum for institutional change. This can lead practitioners to settle for a less valuable alternative, which is “the path of least resistance.” The result is foregoing an opportunity to bring about more radical change.

**Assumption 2**  
**Labs are neutral spaces**  
The second assumption is that social innovation practices are apolitical and labs have the ability to broker for change between parties—to replace bad systems with good ones. Yet, lab practices are closely tied to their contextual environment. “What works for whom?”<sup>13</sup> An ideology may be the cause of why the system works for one group and does not do likewise for another. Labs make the decision on *which group* to generate solutions for. That itself is not a neutral but a political act. There are two areas we can think through as we recognise this.

Firstly, through a dichotomy between those who need help and those who don't (the latter being the policymakers and the service providers involved in getting the system functioning), the lab worker is seen as playing the role of the “saviour,” detaching himself/herself from the system in which he or she operates. Bruce Nussbaum asks, “Are designers the new anthropologists or missionaries, who come to poke into village life, ‘understand’ it and make it better—their ‘modern way’?”<sup>14</sup>

Secondly, labs are often the recipients of research funding, and the implicit agenda that accompanies the financial backing has the potential to present constraints to the labs capable of discontinuous change.

To effect discontinuous change, labs *cannot* afford to be apolitical. Practitioners need to be conscious of their own political role, realise they are operating in a political field, consider the contexts in which change takes place and keep an eye on the different groups who may benefit or be disadvantaged by a particular system. This reality is often not reflected in labs.

**Assumption 3**  
**Scaling solutions is the key to achieving systemic change**  
Scaling is seen to be essential in attaining the optimum value of good innovations socially and economically. Through scaling, social innovations reach more people and cover a broader geographical area. Yet, scaling links us back to the problems solutionism can create.

The fact that systemic challenges are contextual is also obscured when scaling solutions. The fact remains that a blend of contexts and people's values *is necessary* for solutions to work. Scaling is often seen through the lens of “solutionism,” and when organisations scale, they tend to steer away from the end-users they began with. Practitioners need to be better at scaling ideas and principles on the one hand, and paying attention to local subtleties and preferences on the other hand.

Finally, scaling solutions may not be in alignment with the principles of social innovation. Scaling can only be carried out in the framework of the existing system and this implies that the status quo has to be maintained. This is contradictory to the concepts behind social innovation, which calls for diversity and transformative change.

**Assumption 4**  
**Humans are happy “labbed” creatures**  
SI labs look like happy, inspiring places, buzzing with creativity. Practitioners work with attractive visuals, participants are immersed in workshops and “the jargon radiates a sense of co-creation and endless possibilities.”<sup>15</sup>

This way of representing social challenges is far from the social reality of the world outside labs. Reality, as it is understood, lacks orderliness and it is irrational and unpredictable. Do sessions on lab practices reflect situations in actual practice? Truly, there could be more preparation for a variety of behavioural responses that could be encountered in real practice, like hard-line politics, messy fights, fractured cooperation and decreasing motivation over lengths of time.



NEW SCENARIOS FOR LAB PRACTICE

“If [labs] stand too much inside the system they risk losing their radical edge, if they stand too far outside they risk having little impact.” – Geoff Mulgan,<sup>16</sup> Nesta's Chief Executive

In view of our understanding of the practice and our oversights (discussed in the preceding section), how can we better engage stakeholders and work towards discontinuous change? How do we envisage lab practices for the future? The following 10 scenarios are created from the ideas of participants in Lab2, literature available, conversations and thinking at Kennisland. Lab stakeholders could use them in considering the oversights in practice.



What if labs... design and scale processes instead of solutions?

Attention on “solutions” can be pulled towards changing processes. Mulgan writes about benefitting from innovations through reshaping the design and structure of the existing system.<sup>17</sup> This includes the way funds are channelled, knowledge and information is disseminated, and how education, healthcare, social security, criminal justice and employment, environment and business are managed. There is more leverage for systemic change in altering processes than simply gunning for solutions.



What if labs... spread ethics and ideas instead of solutions?

“We better invest in scaling principles and knowledge, instead of investing in replicating models and methodologies.” – Lab2 participant, Juan Casanueva (Social TIC lab)<sup>18</sup>

As behaviour and actions are influenced by beliefs, which is first determined by values, we could be more explicit about our values and ethics of what a good life means, and to whom. If the core principles can be seen to bring about positive effects in practice, labs can share these values and principles and record new ways of thinking. Further, labs may play a more powerful role if they become more effective in presenting issues and building awareness.



What if labs... connected with like-minded movements?

Rather than working in isolation, labs would do better connecting with movements that share similar values, themes and goals. Working together with alliances will establish social and political networks, which would be much needed in challenging times. Alliances particularly give support when innovating to bring about a paradigm shift.



What if labs... become more politically aware?

“The challenge for labs does not lie in acting like saviours to the poor and vulnerable, but lies in developing political gravitas outside the lab to detect where and when outcomes of actions in the system stop or start to flow (of finances, of people physically moving from A to B, of knowledge and ideas).”<sup>19</sup>

Labs should develop methodologies that will lead them to recognise and respond to the dominant power relations and hierarchies existing in the context of their work. Without the ability to do this, labs could appear to be endorsing an existing status quo.



What if labs... were better networked, especially geographically?

Establishing an infrastructure connecting labs and related organisations will help facilitate instructional knowledge that helps practitioners assess lab practices as well as challenges in order to provide support to future implementation. There is a need to connect globally as it might give us access to environments not “burdened with success and institutions to safeguard success.”<sup>20</sup>



What if labs... were more financially independent?

There is more likelihood for discontinuous change and freedom from existing systems if there is more capability on the part of labs to have more diversity and fewer conditions attached to funding. A single focus on the outcomes through rigorous impact assessment could restrict operation of labs and slow down progress. In practice, what might help would be more negotiation with funders on issues with regard to start-up periods and working principles.



What if labs... were more responsive to human behaviour?

Studies in political and behavioural science can provide better understanding of tolerance of risks and decision-making. The two fields can provide further insight into creating a working culture that is more open to experimentation and risks. From them, lab practitioners can build on skills to engage, manage and resolve conflict.



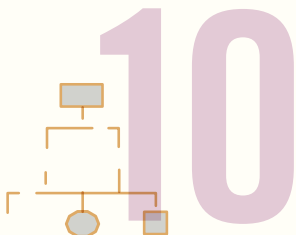
What if labs... invested more in building innovation capacity within local communities?

Research has shown that in order to achieve structural change, design processes need to be part of organisational cultures from the start. In working to influence institutions, innovation skills are needed in negotiating design thinking with policymaking. On the other end, labs could also provide support for groups in the local communities in order to build resilience to failures in the system, and hence seek ways to function more independently.



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

Is the present trend to use rigid metrics for assessing the impact of innovation effective? Is it possible to capture standard experiences and human interactions in datasets? Labs could look into designing methodologies more suited for innovative research rather than keeping to the tools used by traditional institutions.



What if labs... prototyped new organisational models?

To achieve the targeted impact and deepen their practice, labs might have to go “outside the lab” or “not even have a lab at all.” Time could be spent on the subjects, procedures and institutions they are working towards changing. This might call for organisational changes from within lab practice.



"IN WORKING TO INFLUENCE INSTITUTIONS, INNOVATION SKILLS ARE NEEDED IN NEGOTIATING DESIGN THINKING WITH POLICYMAKING. ON THE OTHER END, LABS COULD ALSO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR GROUPS IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN ORDER TO BUILD RESILIENCE TO FAILURES IN THE SYSTEM, AND HENCE SEEK WAYS TO FUNCTION MORE INDEPENDENTLY."

CONCLUSION

The paper has identified four areas that may obscure the positive outcomes with regard to the impact and engagement generated by lab practice. However, if labs wish to reach further in offering innovative changes to values at a systemic level, more has to be done in “designing smart structures.”<sup>21</sup> This means moving into alternative spaces where existing interests are challenged. What are the implications then on the functions and nature of labs? Could there be more balance in practice within the lab, and developments outside—in the real world? Or is there a need to create additional mediums? Are raising such questions the best way to move towards a critical engagement on the subject? Is there a better framework of knowledge that can be used?

Kennisland with Hivos, Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) and other interested partners look towards strengthening future dialogue with lab practitioners through learning and exchanging critical reflection. Their latest collaboration has resulted in a new publication, *Labcraft*.<sup>22</sup> This is an invitation for change practitioners to join the debate and mutually support their efforts. ■

*The complete version of "Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories" is available at [www.kennisland.nl/filter/publicaties/lab-matters-challenging-the-practice-of-social-innovation-laborat](http://www.kennisland.nl/filter/publicaties/lab-matters-challenging-the-practice-of-social-innovation-laborat)*

*Kieboom, M. (2014), summarised by Soo Lian Chee (2014). Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories. Amsterdam: Kennisland. Licensed under CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).*

Endnotes

1 Kennisland, [www.kennisland.nl/en](http://www.kennisland.nl/en)

2 Hivos, [www.hivos.org/](http://www.hivos.org/)

3 Marlieke Kieboom, *Lab Matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories*, (Amsterdam: Kennisland, 2014), 7, <http://www.kennisland.nl/filter/publicaties/lab-matters-challenging-the-practice-of-social-innovation-laborat>

4 Ibid., 9, 10.

5 Ibid., 13.

6 Ibid., 16.

7 Ibid., 19 (Sarah Schulman).

8 Ibid., 21.

9 Ibid., 21, 22.

10 Ibid., 24.

11 Ibid., 24.

12 Ibid., 24 (Evygeny Morozov).

13 Ibid., 25.

14 Bruce Nussbaum, [www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian-design-the-new-imperialism](http://www.fastcodesign.com/1661859/is-humanitarian-design-the-new-imperialism)

15 Ibid., 31.

16 Ibid., 34 (Geoff Mulgan).

17 Ibid., 34 (Geoff Mulgan).

18 Ibid., 35.

19 Ibid., 36.

20 Ibid., 37.

21 Ibid., 42.

22 Labcraft, <http://labcraft.co/>

# INNOVATION IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION

“ONCE POVERTY IS GONE, WE'LL NEED TO BUILD MUSEUMS TO DISPLAY ITS HORRORS TO FUTURE GENERATIONS. THEY'LL WONDER WHY POVERTY CONTINUED SO LONG IN HUMAN SOCIETY - HOW A FEW PEOPLE COULD LIVE IN LUXURY WHILE BILLIONS DWELT IN MISERY, DEPRIVATION AND DESPAIR.”

— Muhammad Yunus

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Source: Jared Tham, "A Slum in Manila's Chinatown."