SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS – A SEEDBED FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

One way of systemically developing new social practices is to use the social innovation labs (SI lab) approach. The term SI lab describes a variety of different organisational forms and methods – social entrepreneurship hubs, public policy labs, change labs, and many others – with the intention to create socially innovative initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

Social innovation labs (SI labs) are intermediaries convening and facilitating cross-sector stakeholder working groups. They provide a physical space and/or process in which collaboration between different actors is supported in order to develop new projects, processes, models, products, regulations etc.. The term 'social innovation lab' is used to characterise a variety of different organisational forms and methods. It includes organisations such as centres for social innovation, design labs, change labs, public innovation labs, impact labs, impact incubators, impact learning labs, collective impact learning labs and more [1]. Additionally, there are manifold organisations which are not formally characterised as SI lab, but which fulfil the same or very similar functions.

Following an understanding of social innovation as a newly institutionalised social practice, we can subsume different configurations of labs under the term 'SI lab'. Every social innovation starts with a socially innovative initiative (e.g. a new process, model etc.) mostly resulting from cooperation between different actors working on a specific problem solution (invention). Social innovation labs offer a dedicated space and method to organise and possibly optimise the process to create socially innovative initiatives. Therefore, SI labs are a possible starting point for social innovation, as they help 'socially innovative inventions' to develop.

KEY FEATURES OF THE SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB'S APPROACH

In practice, throughout the last 20 years, organisations have emerged all over the world providing spaces and processes for multi-stakeholder groups to develop new practices for a specific complex problem, often addressing one of the main societal challenges of our times such as demographic change or climate change. They regularly engage in or at least refer to global social innovation communities. Regarding the majority of mission statements, these organisations share the ambition of solving complex social challenges and presuppose that solutions to these challenges require the cooperation of a diverse set of stakeholders, often across societal sectors (private business, public authorities, science and civil society) [2]. In general, social innovation labs share the following five key characteristics:

- They provide institutionalised processes and spaces for experimentation (organisations or organisational units, structures & resources),
- facilitate innovation processes (use innovation methods, e.g. co-creation, collective intelligence, design-thinking),
- work on societal challenges and demands framed as specific questions,
- engage with cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder teams,
- create 'practice inventions' (socially innovative initiatives) as prototypes with high innovation potential.

Taking into account the different stages of SI processes, SI labs have an impact especially on ideation and prototyping/testing rather than on diffusion and systemic change processes. Once a lab intervention is being carried out in a certain context it has to deliver on its social innovation potential.

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A TYPOLOGY OF LABS

SI labs serve a multitude of topics and different contexts of societal challenges. They can be run on any scale, e.g. on an inter-organisational, local/neighbourhood/urban level, on regional and national levels and even on a global level. Some SI labs focus on social innovation in general, some are related only to public sector innovations and some have a thematic focus such as on environment, work or health [3]. They also have quite diverse ownership and financing models. As SI labs can be found in all societal sectors, a typology can be developed along these lines. Accordingly, we can observe the following types of labs:

1. **Labs for social entrepreneurship** provide a shared working space for initiatives working on the cross-boundaries of civil society and business and seek support either for consultancy, e.g. for founding an organisation, or for diffusion of a social entrepreneurial business model. This way, new non-profit associations and businesses are created. On the other hand, social entrepreneurial organisations use co-working spaces as a preferred way of office renting. This way, labs for social entrepreneurship combine incubator and acceleration models. They provide co-working-spaces and networking for social entrepreneurship.

2. **Social innovation labs at higher education institutions** support projects by students and researchers which aim at social innovation. These particular science centres link education and innovation for solving societal challenges. Often, they provide special programmes for children and citizens. Furthermore, certain programmes are developed in order to cooperatively design and engage in research, thereby involving lay knowledge and the expertise of stakeholders which as end-users will be responsible for applying research outcomes in practice. Here, inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation (linking different disciplines and non-academic actors) is emphasised to develop socially innovative initiatives.

3. **Labs for civil society and citizen innovation** are spaces and processes which gather actors, e.g. in a neighbourhood district or city to cooperatively create specific solutions for societal challenges. These labs are often owned by non-profit organisations and their innovation processes aim at a broad participation of other civil society actors as well as citizens. Socially innovative initiatives of civil society organisations often require strong engagement of citizens.

4. **Labs for policy and public sector innovation** are most often owned by organisational units of public administrations, e.g. to enhance cross-departmental cooperation over different policy fields and to enhance participation with actors outside the public sector realm. As these labs serve a governance approach (instead of a government approach) they are commonly abbreviated as 'GovLabs'. GovLab innovations often refer to novel practices within the organisation (e.g. by applying new technologies). On the other hand, a growing amount of GovLab innovation processes involve cross-sectoral, multi-sector participation.

It is important to note that although a lab might be owned and financed by one sector the concept and practice of social innovation emphasises multi-sectoral cooperation in the generation of new practices. Looking at the variety of social innovation labs all over the world a mix of lab approaches is visible. If programmes for social entrepreneurship incubation are combined with public sector innovation processes plus a vivid environment for civil society organisations to work, a whole ecosystem for social innovation can flourish, e.g. on city level. Mixing lab approaches yields stronger outputs for single innovation processes and strengthens SI ecosystems.
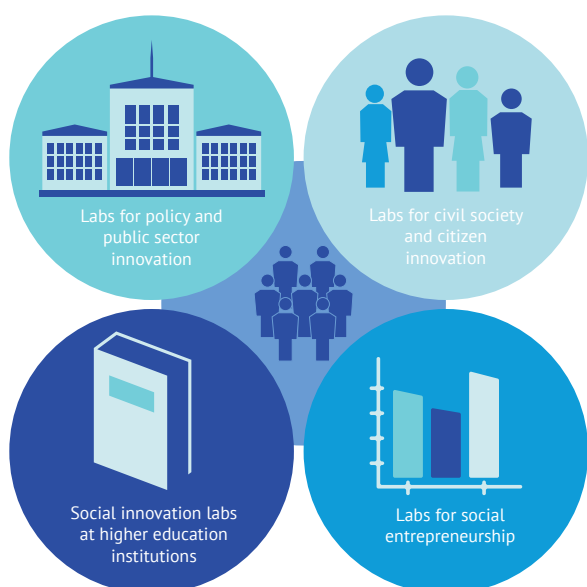
Typology of Social Innovation Labs according to mission and/or ownership

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LESSONS LEARNT FROM A GLOBAL OVERVIEW

The existing literature gives important hints to what needs to be taken into account in order to build successful SI labs. Our own empirical research within the project KoSI-Lab including 14 international case studies confirmed many of the success factors and barriers that labs have to go through. The results are presented below in relation to different

'lenses' that can be found in the literature referring to 1) the lab as an organisation, 2) the lab as a process, 3) the lab as a space and 4) the lab as part of an ecosystem:

The lab as an organisation refers to all structural features of the organisation, including ownership, funding, organisational identity and culture, mission statement, motivations for foundation as well as institutional embeddedness in different sectors or as hybrids. The institutional setting in which SI labs are embedded is only a minor focus of lab studies [4]. All types of labs share the notion of developing new forms of working, e.g. the concept of co-working spaces, the concept of cross-sector cooperation and inter-organisational collaboration, the concept of mission and problem orientation or the concept of applying design-centred methods. Depending on the institutional context in which the lab operates, it is probably more or less difficult to establish these new modes of working. Either possible funders and promoters might not be convinced of the merits that a lab process could yield, or colleagues and the wider community of the lab do not share the same ambition as the core lab team.

The lab as a process refers to all procedural aspects of lab facilitation, including the way in which topics and projects are chosen and mandated, how 'wicked' and 'politically contested' these problems might be; which methods are applied, how cross-sector cooperation is to be achieved and what competencies this lab facilitation requires. The purpose of labs is to conduct lab processes as a systemically designed procedure of arranging collaboration between different stakeholders. Each lab has other ways of identifying the problems and challenges to work on, e.g. as mandated by funders, a client, an own programme management or via open public processes. The lab team designs a process more or less tailored to the lab challenge and decides on the methods that are applied. Ideas developed in SI-labs have to anticipate opposition and constraints as well as potential enabling factors in their complex implementation strategies [5]. Most importantly, social innovation labs very often work on societal challenges, which always implies a political dimension. Funding structures (by private donors, public funding etc.) might impose a political bias which might prevent an open solution process. Furthermore, lab participants need careful process facilitation, e.g. with respect to differing values and institutional logics as well as possible hidden agendas. This poses a challenging task on lab facilitators.

The lab as a space refers to 'location' as an important factor for effective lab processes. The literature about design labs, learning labs etc. suggests that processes that are supposed to yield innovation need to enable creative thinking, learning and doing. A well-fitted space might be key to attracting stakeholders and to develop new and innovative projects; though not all SI labs specifically emphasize the importance of their lab offices as being a part of their innovation system. But for some labs the 'functional space' in which lab processes are developed and conducted is very important, because it presents a location with working methods that are not known to a lot of people or at least are seldom experienced in everyday work for most lab participants. Furthermore, the location is often a place which is far from where lab participants usually work. Therefore, generating a 'neutral' space which is new and inspiring at the same time can make an important contribution to effective lab processes. Furthermore, the surrounding infrastructure of 'creative territories' might support collaborative social dynamics and relational patterns by providing 'soft' infrastructures that could facilitate frequent interactions among members of the SI ecosystem.

The lab as part of an ecosystem and different networks refers to activities of the lab beyond the initial support of lab processes. This includes organisational internal learning activities as well as knowledge sharing and helping to spread one's own working methods and ambitions. Most SI labs are engaged in networks of labs for mutual knowledge exchange, e.g. via international conferences. This also might increase their visibility to other lab practitioners and a wider audience, including their local communities. Continuous exchange within a network requires certain resources and capacities, however by sharing knowledge in this way many labs are unable to engage with it. On the other hand, education activities, e.g. by creating academies and learning tutorials for cross-sector leadership, design thinking or social entrepreneurship acceleration seem to be an important element of the work of labs as they like to 'de-routinise' and disrupt prevailing practices of problem-framing and solution-finding.

Briefly summing up, social innovation labs can be characterised as a seedbed for social innovation. Their potential is acknowledged by many actors which explains why the spread of SI labs is still ongoing.

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