

Social Labs:
Beyond

Experimentation,

Towards
a New Model for

Public
Participation

in

Hong Kong

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JOCKEY CLUB
MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SOCIAL
LAB

賽馬會“創不同”
社會創新實驗室



Preface

The Jockey Club Make a Difference Social Lab (JC MaD Social Lab) had a humble start. In the summer of 2015, we tested the concept of the social lab via a short 2-week Lab Sprint. To our surprise, many young people enrolled and participated with immense enthusiasm. To keep the youth as changemakers spirit going, MaD discussed with the Hong Kong Jockey Club to scale up the social lab initiative with the objectives of nurturing young change agents, co-creating new relationships and taking action in communities with prototypes for improvement of policies and services in mind.

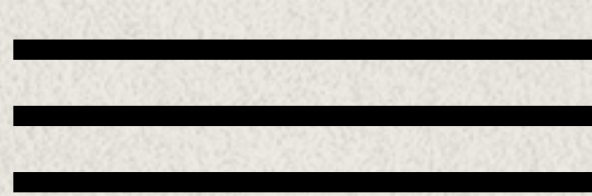
A little more than two years later, we have completed three social labs. The reason we were able to do so, is because we have a very dedicated social lab team at MaD, who has in turn recruited passionate young people to participate in this process. It is also because we have government departments willing to co-create with the community for innovative solutions to respond to complex issues. This is the cross-sector public innovation community that Hong Kong needs! I would like to thank them all.

In embarking on the JC MaD Social Lab, one question that hovered over us often, is “what does success look like” and “how could we effectively and objectively evaluate our work”? The concept of social lab is innovative as a new kind of participation where new networks are formed and new skills and ways of thinking acquired. The usual quantitative analysis would not do the work of identifying intangible outcome. Chris Sigaloff, who has brought insights to MaD in our early days of the social lab, suggested the concept of “developmental evaluation”.

Chris might not agree that she is a developmental evaluator for MaD, but this paper has all the elements of developmental evaluation: it is embedded, gave us real-time feedback, and walked alongside the lab operations. The MaD team has learnt much from the international perspective and insights offered by this paper, from comments on the social labs as a safe space for co-learning and not just as “solutions providers”, to the longer term goal of social labs to steer away from the complaints culture in Hong Kong to more fruitful and co-creative participation. Thanks to Chris also for her sharp points on the challenges ahead. The MaD team will take on board these views to design future social labs to be less fuzzy, with clearer objectives and more interactive partnerships so that more prototypes can be eventually adopted.

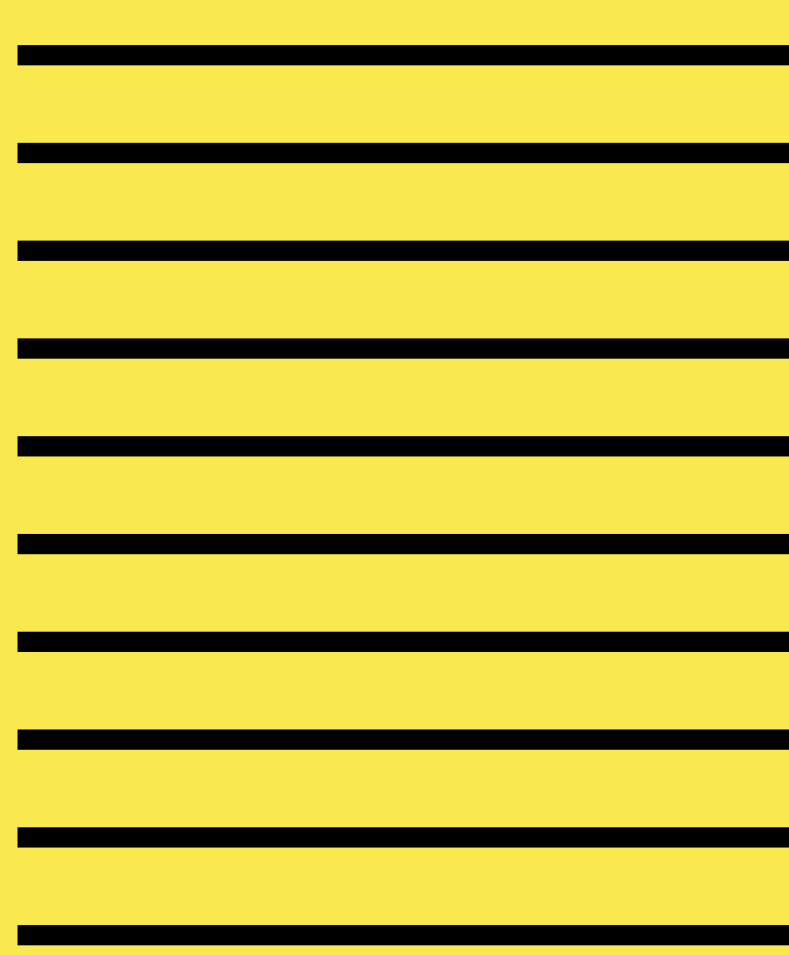
Hong Kong is at the cusp of change. We need to embed a culture of innovation in all sectors and in particular in our younger generation. This will continue to be the mission of the JC MaD Social Lab. Thanks again to Chris Sigaloff and all those who supported this evaluation. Your honest opinion and insights have been very valuable to our future development.

Ada Wong, Chair, Make A Difference Institute



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01

Introduction

During the spring of 2018 the Make A Difference (MaD) Institute¹ invited me to Hong Kong to undertake a study of the social labs they were developing around different themes such as the use of public libraries, parks and walkable streets. There is no common definition of a social lab, but in general, they are an attempt to create a safe space for experimentation, and they bring together citizens, civil servants and professionals in order to co-create new approaches to social issues. My task was threefold: to identify the main outcomes of the social labs, to place the lab work in Hong Kong in an international context, and to support the lab team to improve the quality of their work for the future. And since I had set up social labs² in the Netherlands which had been a source of inspiration for the work in Hong Kong, I gladly accepted the request to review this initiative with fresh eyes.

During my stay in Hong Kong I organised numerous workshops and carried out interviews with a number of people that were involved in the labs, including civil servants, designers, students, consultants and civil society groups. I then continued to have regular discussions with the MaD team to review the progress of the labs. This report is based on these and other discussions and is very much a personal account. It is based on my observations and reflections and in this sense it is not a formal evaluation. This will be carried out by the Institute of User Participation, a non-profit organisation set up by professors at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Instead, my research focused on gathering stories from different stakeholders, reflecting on some of the common threads and stimulating a culture of reflection within the lab team. The reflections in this report have also been shaped by my personal experience of having worked in the field of social innovation for the last ten years.

The report starts with chapter two on the need for public sector innovation and the emergence of social labs as a method for creating space for innovation and experimentation within government institutions and public services. This is quite a daunting task since the public sector is not in general geared towards experimentation. This is especially true in Hong Kong, where social labs go against the grain of the hierarchical and bureaucratic government culture.

Chapter three provides provides a description of the social labs that were undertaken in Hong Kong. It describes what happened, how they were set up and what activities they undertook.

Chapter four and five examine the main outcomes and challenges faced by the social labs respectively. They describe how, even though the outcomes were not fixed at the outset so that the process could be truly experimental, the labs did lead to a number of positive outcomes including the development of new skills, new ways of thinking and new cross-sectoral networks. As such, the labs provided a new model for public participation in Hong Kong.

¹ <http://www.mad.asia/>

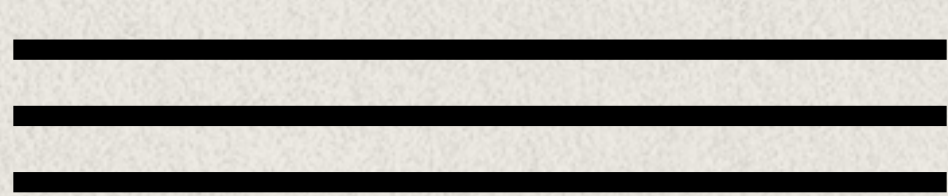
² <https://www.kl.nl/en/cases/labs-proeftuinen-terra-incognita/>

Over the last two decades there has been a proliferation of social labs across the globe. Chapter six reflects on this development. There are numerous publications on the subject of social labs – from mappings and categorizations to overviews of the different types of labs and guides for how to set up and run a social lab. I have not tried to replicate any of these materials. Instead, I explore whether some of the lessons learnt in other contexts could be of use when thinking about new models for public participation in Hong Kong.

To conclude, I explore how the work of the social labs could best be amplified in the future. One option may be to think of social labs as a key component of a wider social innovation system. This systemic approach might involve looking at funding, skills, leadership and organisational culture. But how could tri-sector stakeholders (i.e. government, business and civil society) become more systematic about supporting, generating and scaling social and public innovations? One possible route could be to start by engaging citizens, through social labs, to better understand citizens' needs and desires, to co-create ideas and test them in practice. As the experience of the social labs in Hong Kong shows, public participation can help to improve the quality of services, tackle the complaints culture, and forge trust and empathy between citizens and government.

02

Public Sector Innovation and the Need for Social Labs



2.1 Mind The Gap!

The Need for Public Sector Innovation

To ease the strain on the public hospital system, the Hong Kong Government’s Food & Health Bureau will be piloting a District Health Centre (DHC) in Kwai Tsing District in 2019. This is a coordinated effort to provide person-centred care in a local setting. The authorities, however, have a relatively traditional health centre in mind, providing mostly conventional services such as consultations, health assessments and some preventive care services. There are already some concerns among the local population that this new initiative will not go far enough to meet their needs. For example, blue-collar workers hope the centre will extend its opening hours so that they can make appointments in the evenings or during weekends; full-time carers of elderly family members do not see how this centre will provide support or respite care for their wellbeing, and smokers are not convinced the services on offer will be sufficient to support them to quit. There are also questions about whether dementia care, dental and eye health will also be included as part of the new DHC. As one participant in a DHC public consultation asked, “how can we ensure the DHC will work to meet local district needs instead of just meeting what the Government needs?”

Most citizens dream about better lives. And in many societies we turn to government as an important actor in generating better outcomes for all. However, governments are often out of touch with what people actually want and need. Government departments become systems in themselves, preoccupied with implementing policies and delivering services, but often without understanding or listening to what people actually want or need – and in some cases worsening the lives of citizens as a result. This gap between what people want and what governments deliver contributes to the growing distrust between citizens and governments and can leave communities feeling disempowered while governments simply defend the implementation of their policies.

Indeed, all governments face a widening gap between citizens’ expectations and what the public sector can deliver. This is often compounded by fundamental issues; the explosion of chronic diseases together with the pressures of an ageing society are placing an ever greater burden on our systems of health and social care and make pensions and care for the elderly, ever unaffordable. Add to this ‘wicked problems’ such as inequality, homelessness, immigration, climate change and long term unemployment and it’s clear that governments around the world are in desperate need of new approaches to tackling social problems and that social wellbeing is just as important as economic growth.

As a result, there has been an explosion in public sector innovation initiatives over the last decade. There has been rapid growth in the number of innovation offices, teams, labs, units and funds across government – tackling challenges as diverse as reducing murder rates, increasing business growth and cutting poverty. There are also innumerable public sector innovation awards, prizes, networks, challenges and competitions.³ However, despite the rhetoric around innovation, design methods and entrepreneurship, most efforts do not necessarily result in change, innovation or even better wellbeing for citizens. Tidd, Bessant, and Pavitt⁴ and Hartley⁵ and Lekhi⁶ suggest that innovation in the public sector generally remains a “fragile and unpredictable process, with a high rate of failure” due to a lack of agreement in defining what innovation means in public services.

³ For more information see e.g. the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation

⁴ Joe Tidd and Keith Pavitt (2011) *Managing Innovation: Integrating Technological, Market And Organizational Change*. Wiley, New Jersey

⁵ Jean Hartley (2005) ‘Innovation in governance and public services: past and present.’ *Public Money and Management*, 25(1) pp. 27–34.

⁶ Rohit Lekhi (2007). *Public Service Innovation*. Manchester: The Work Foundation.



2.2 Why is Innovation in the Public Sector So Hard?

One of the problems is that innovation programmes might deliver incremental improvements to existing services, or new (technological) infrastructures or even help optimise service delivery, but they rarely lead to fundamental change. Most money goes to one-off pilots, research projects, competitions, conferences, and training programs. What is lacking is sustained investment and a rigorous methodology for developing new kinds of government services.

Another common problem is the positioning of the innovation efforts. If you work from the outside to create a coherent alternative to the status quo, you risk being ignored and marginalised; but if you work within the system and directly influence the levers of power, you risk being co-opted and shifted from radical to incremental change. This classical dilemma, described by Geoff Mulgan in his 2014 paper⁷, is a difficult problem to solve.

A third problem is that innovation often becomes a goal in itself – but innovation for innovation’s sake is no recipe for success. As Sarah Schulman, director of InWithForward states, “innovation is not a vision”⁸. Innovation is simply a means to an end and should start with a vision. A vision about better outcomes, a vision about more freedom for people to express what they need and desire – however varied those needs and desires may be. Innovation efforts should at least be geared towards better outcomes for people instead of becoming instrumental and self-referential.

In leading businesses, innovation is often deeply ingrained in the fabric of the organisation. There is no successful company that does not understand the motto “innovate or die”. There is a longstanding understanding that research and development is the bedrock of innovative tech companies. An organisation like Apple spends US\$11 million a day on research and development (R&D)⁹. It’s not only the amount that Apple spends that’s interesting. It’s also how they use the money. They have in-house research, rather than outsourced consultancy; curated teams, rather than individual experts; ethnographic research and rapid prototyping methods, rather than just statistical analyses and literature reviews. And, they are interested in creating new platforms (like iTunes), not just single services or products (like the iPad and iPhone). For some companies, outsourcing a part of their R&D functions makes the most sense, and for others innovation through acquisition is the most effective strategy. Needless to say the largest and most successful companies will have an innovation strategy – this is seldom the case with public sector bodies although it is becoming more common.

⁷ Geoff Mulgan (2014) *The Radical’s Dilemma: An Overview of the Practice and Prospects of Social and Public Labs*. London: Nesta.

⁸ Sarah Schulman, Innovation is not a vision, 13th June 2018. <https://inwithforward.com/2018/06/innovation-not-vision/>

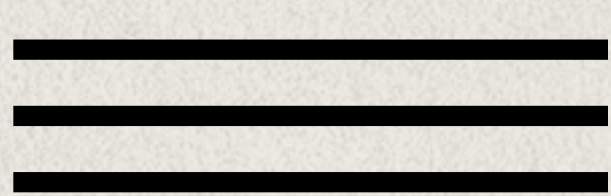
⁹ Apple spends over \$11.6m on R&D every day, but on what? <https://www.zdnet.com/article/apple-spends-over-11-6m-on-r-d-every-day-but-on-what/>

In comparison to the private sector, the public sector falls far behind when it comes to innovation. Public sector organisations operate within a risk-averse, rules-based culture with limited access to capital, technology, networks, data and innovation capabilities. Furthermore, short-term thinking – a consequence of election cycles – makes it hard to effect long term change. Innovation efforts can often come up against a culture that is resistant to change. In many cases, it is understandable that public sector bodies are risk-averse and less interested in innovation – especially those working with vulnerable groups or where innovation risks causing significant harm. This might be the case, for example, with innovations in intensive care or in services working with vulnerable adults. The roll out of Universal Credit in the UK, which is replacing up to six welfare benefits with one single payment, shows how innovations can cause significant harm when poorly implemented.¹⁰ This is why the public sector is often geared towards damage limitation or sticking to the rules rather than making new things happen.

Another issue is cost. Innovation is often seen as a way of reducing costs and increasing efficiency. This may be the case over the longer term but in the short term, there are inevitably costs associated with developing ideas and then testing them in practice. Some governments have introduced ‘invest to save’ funding models in the past, but in today’s climate when many government departments are strapped for cash, finding money for innovation programmes which are by their very nature experimental and therefore may or may not deliver new or improved services can be a tough argument to make.

For these reasons, innovation within government bodies can be a daunting task. In this context, social labs are an interesting development since they offer one way of overcoming some of these “innovation barriers”. They provide a “safe space” for experimentation – and therefore for failure. They can be positioned inside or outside of government, depending on what is required, and they bring together diverse groups of people with different skills and backgrounds to tackle social issues in new and creative ways. They have a pro-innovation culture and use a variety of methodologies – such as design methods, formal research methods, data analysis or mixed methods – to develop ideas and test them in an iterative and inclusive way.

¹⁰ National Audit Office, Rolling Out Universal Credit. June 15, 2018.
<https://www.nao.org.uk/press-release/rolling-out-universal-credit/>



2.3 What are Social Labs?

The concept of a social lab comes from experimental labs which are commonplace in science and technology and have been in existence since at least the early 18th Century. One of the first social labs was John Dewey's Laboratory School¹¹ in Chicago which systematically carried out research and experiments in order to develop educational innovations. Even though the concept of a social lab has been around for over 120 years, there is as yet no common definition. This is partly because the term "lab" has been used indiscriminately over the last few years – there are many organisations which call themselves labs even though their work could best be described as a network, consultancy or even event organisation. However, if one were to attempt a definition, one might describe a social lab as ***a safe space for experimentation, at one remove from an organisation's daily routines and responsibilities, which aims to develop novel approaches to addressing social issues and can demonstrate impact.***

Labs employ a variety of methods – including data analysis, ethnography, public participation, behavioural economics, action research, formal research methods like randomised control trials (RCTs) – or even a combination of methods. For example, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) has conducted over 900 randomized impact evaluations to answer critical questions in the fight against poverty,¹² while on the other side of the spectrum, the Social Innovation Bureau in Seoul has used a variety of methods to engage citizens in co-creating experiments and develop citizen-led projects in local communities.¹³

Many labs use a "design-led approach". Advocates claim that this approach bridges the shortcomings of other change models that may be too prescriptive, linear, abstract or non-participative. Design helps "deliver solutions that are practical and desirable and places the individual at the heart of new solutions, and builds the capacity to innovate into organizations and institutions"¹⁴.

A social lab differs from workshops or programmes which deliver recommendations, strategies or blueprints. The goal of a social lab is to produce real interactions, user experiences, back-end systems which can be tested to see what works and for whom. However, they do not simply focus on products and solutions but also on processes and intangibles such as attitudes, values and relationships. They focus on testing ideas through the development of prototypes but are not usually concerned with how innovations are implemented or deployed at scale.

There are some other commonalities. For example, social lab teams tend to be diverse, bringing forward a multiplicity of skills, mindsets, experiences and perspectives. As Zaid Hassan points out in his fieldbook for Social Labs¹⁵, they are different from traditional labs in that they require a team that reflects the social diversity of the challenges they are addressing to do the work.

¹¹ <http://www.mi-knoll.de/122501.html>

¹² <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/>

¹³ Sunkyung Han, Jungwon Kim, Sojung Rim and Ah Young Park (2013) 'Seoul City's social innovation strategy: A model of multi-channel communication to strengthen governance and citizen engagement' in Alex Nicholls, Julie Simon and Madeleine Gabriel (eds.) *Social Frontiers: The Next Edge of Social Innovation Research*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁴ Colin Burns, Hilary Cottam, Chris Vanstone and Jennie Winhall (2006) *RED paper 02: Transformation design*. London: Design Council.

¹⁵ Zaid Hassan (2015) *The Social Labs Fieldbook: a practical guide to next generation social labs*. Version 1.0 Draft. Available here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/594babd2b8a79b2463782825/t/595e682ecd0f68b99457db33/1499359291459/Social+Labs+Fieldbook+D12.pdf>

Social labs are different in that they are not run by teams of scientists or technocrats but diverse teams of stakeholders. MindLab¹⁶ employed multi-disciplinary teams involving civil servants and citizens to co-create solutions, while The Barcelona Urban Lab¹⁷ works with local businesses to foster innovation.

Unlike labs in science and technology which usually take place in closed and controlled environments, social labs often take place in the heart of where things really happen (homes, families, neighbourhoods, communities, districts). This has two benefits – it provides a new vantage point to better understand the challenges as well as resources that a community might face or have at its disposal. It also creates that space – away from daily routines and responsibilities – which makes it possible to experiment, to make mistakes, to leave room for ambiguity but also for emergence, collaboration and play. This is often where innovation starts.

Social labs tend to reduce large (central government level) tasks to smaller, bitesize tasks which are easier in a practical sense to get to grips with – to contribute to, to learn from and to help develop. This small-scale approach is important since it means it's possible to experiment with social challenges which at first glance may appear too big to deal with.

Social labs usually incorporate the following elements:

- **Exploration and experimentation** – social labs aren't simply about generating policy proposals or carrying out research, although they may do both these things. They carry out experiments, usually in the form of prototypes, pilots and/or trials.
- **Design thinking** – is a solution and action oriented approach which usually involves understanding people's needs, defining the problem, developing a solution and rapidly and iteratively testing prototypes. Methods might include storytelling, visualisations, brainstorming and mapping.
- **User-orientation** – working with citizens, service users and/or local communities to understand issues from their perspective and working with them to develop ideas. This usually entails an asset-based approach – working with people, employing their skills and resources. Social labs facilitate this process and help to build capacities – they don't impose solutions from the outside or top down.
- **Multi-disciplinary teams** – working in an inclusive way, bringing together stakeholders from the public, private and civic sectors as well as different disciplines and approaches.
- **A dedicated space** (real or virtual) for experimentation and developing new ideas. This can be inside or outside of government, indoors or outdoor, permanent or temporary.
- **Systems thinking** takes a holistic view, trying to understand the many links, interdependencies, and interconnections between issues which might help to explain social issues like homelessness, unemployment or mental health.

In what follows, we examine how the social labs were conceived and developed by MaD with a grant from The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust¹⁸ and how, and in what way, these labs might be an interesting model for fostering innovation and experimentation in Hong Kong.

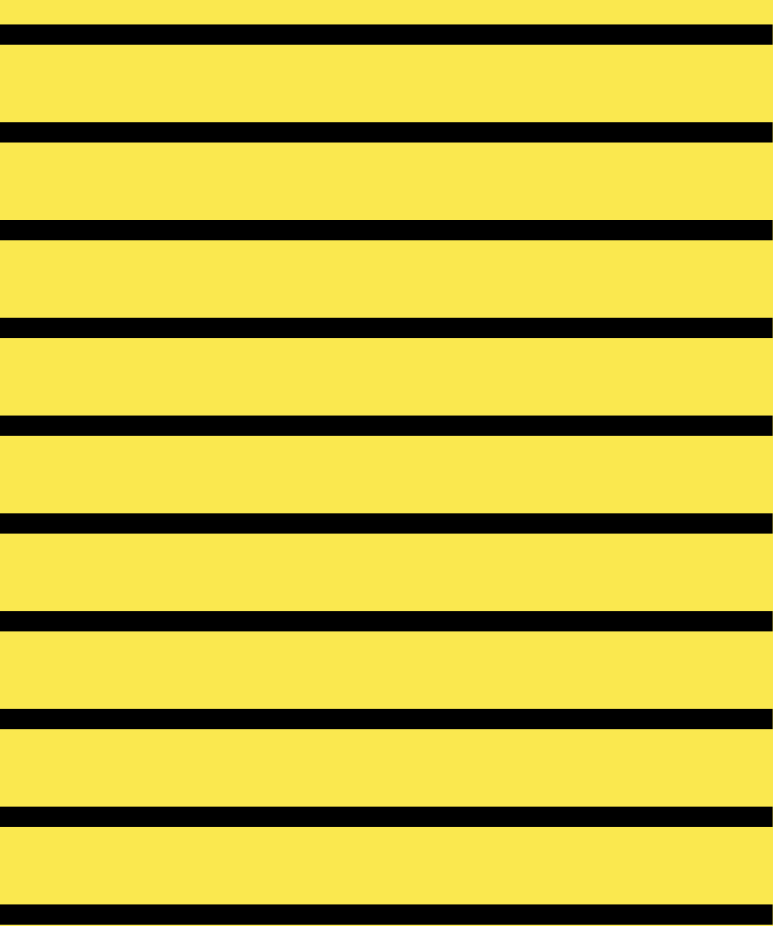
¹⁶ <http://mind-lab.dk/en>

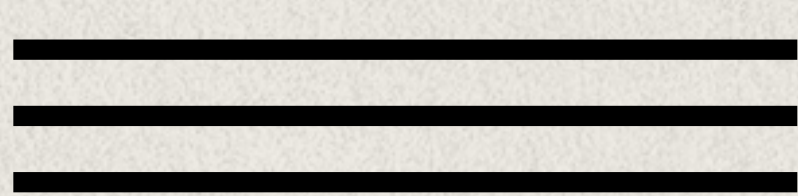
¹⁷ <http://www.22barcelona.com/content/view/698/897/lang,en/>

¹⁸ <https://charities.hkjc.com/charities/english/charities-trust/index.aspx>

Jockey Club
Make a Difference
Social Lab

03





3.1 Background

After speaking to academics working in public administration I understood more clearly how Hong Kong citizens often tend to file a complaint or go out into the streets to protest if they are unhappy with the Government. Since there are few channels for public participation, civic activism is often linked to working against or in opposition to the Government resulting in a widespread culture of complaints and growing mistrust. This has become more commonplace over the last decade or so as social problems have grown more complex and civil society has become less complacent. Society has become increasingly polarised. There is little room for collaboration between government and citizens. The public consultation model is mostly top-down and formal and it does not respond well to the plight of ordinary people, as seen in the story below:

Shortage of public housing vs the Golf Club

In early July 2013, the Hong Kong Government rolled out its plan to develop two new towns in the northeastern part of the New Territories (NENT NDA Development). This was in anticipation of further population growth and the need for more affordable housing. The plan called for the seizure of hundreds of hectares of farmland and the demolition of village houses. The Hong Kong Golf Club, which counts 2,000 of the city’s elite as its members, operates three golf courses, occupying 170 hectares of land in the vicinity of the New Territories. After the plan was announced, villagers were angry that they would be displaced while the golf courses would remain. They threatened to occupy the golf club if their villages were demolished. Activists and villagers protested at the front gates of the golf club, calling for re-entry to the golf club land that was under short-term tenancy. Such an action highlighted the people’s mistrust of government initiatives and actually pitched 2,000 “haves” against more than 100,000 “have-nots” who could have benefited if the golf courses had been used for public housing. Such is the fragmented state of the society in Hong Kong.

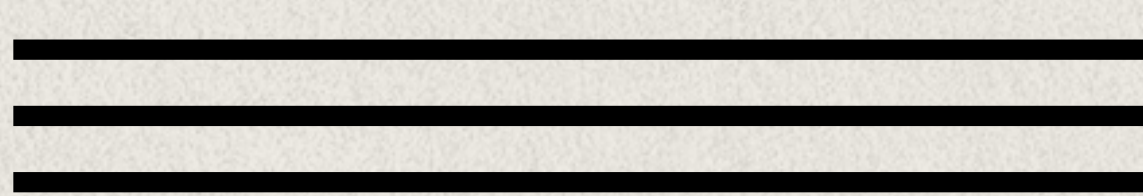
Source: ‘From Fragmentation and Silos to Tri-Sector Collaboration: Social Innovation in Hong Kong’, Ada Wong, 2013

Against such a backdrop, the mere idea of bringing people together, from across different sections of society, may seem incredibly daunting. Public participation, could however, help to harness the creativity, talent and ideas of citizens and in this way improve the governance of Hong Kong. It could help to break down silos between government departments and dissolve divisions across society. In this context, the social labs are an interesting model – they provide a blueprint for a more collaborative approach between citizens and the Government. Like others around the world, Hong Kong is facing numerous challenges such as affordability and quality of housing, inequality, poverty, pollution and climate change. Social labs could provide a safe space for experimentation – but also for collaboration, building trust, forging new relationships between citizens and the Government – which could underpin efforts to develop innovative solutions to these challenges.

In 2016 the Make A Difference Institute initiated Hong Kong's first public service innovation lab with the aim of engaging citizens, in particular young people, the public sector and other stakeholders in developing cross-disciplinary, cross-sector and cross-generational collaborative innovations. MaD is a think-and-do tank which seeks to support a creative civil society. The JC MaD Social Lab, funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, will run four labs over a period of three years. Specifically, the social labs were tasked with the following:

1. Seek an empathetic, multi-perspective understanding of the community and targeted issues; create smart communities
2. Nurture a generation of young change agents with compassion and know-how
3. Acquire system insights; identify existing policy and service gaps
4. Create new relationships, experiments and prototypes to tackle problems in a collaborative manner
5. Narrow the gap between government, the younger generation and social sector
6. Develop sustainable measures for better policies and services

MaD saw these social labs as an opportunity to gain fresh insights in order to solve problems and find new opportunities. The labs were based on the belief that only by understanding what people and systems need can innovators find the levers for change. For this reason, the social labs were conceived with three perspectives in mind: the end-user perspective, the civil servant or service provider perspective, and the organisation/system perspective. In this way, citizens are included in the process, as well as civil servants, but also the organisations they work for and the systems within which they operate. At the heart of this initiative was a desire for action: MaD was keen that the social labs not only talk or think, but that they do too. They wanted to create an experiential learning space where participants could get their hands dirty.



3.2 The Social Labs — What Happened?

At the time of writing, MaD completed three social labs: the LIBoratory Project focused on public libraries and how they can improve people’s lives; the Park Lab on how public parks can be free, open and happy spaces, and; the Healthy Street Lab on how people can be encouraged to spend more time walking on the streets. These labs took place in the local community of Sham Shui Po and lasted about five months. The fourth social lab will take place in 2019 on the subject of modernising markets and will involve the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD).

Sham Shui Po

Sham Shui Po is an area of Kowloon, Hong Kong, situated in the northwestern part of the Kowloon Peninsula, north of Tai Kok Tsui, east of Cheung Sha Wan and south of Shek Kip Mei. It is part of the larger Sham Shui Po District.

With a land size of 1,047 hectares and home to over 400,000 residents, Sham Shui Po District is one of the oldest and most densely populated districts in Hong Kong. 94% of residents are Chinese, with a mix of new immigrants from mainland China, the Philippines, Indonesia and South Asia. Average household size is 2.6 members, slightly less than the Hong Kong-wide average of 2.8 partly because of independent seniors living on their own.

Sham Shui Po is often considered a working class neighbourhood, earning a median monthly domestic household income of HKD25,000 (USD3,200), about 18% lower than the Hong Kong-wide median of HKD30,450 (USD3,900). Mainly residential in nature, Sham Shui Po has also many lively street markets, electronic outlets, fabric stores, restaurants and food vendors. It has the first public estate in Hong Kong – Shek Kip Mei Estate, numerous old tenements, subdivided flats, cage homes but also newly built public housing estates and private buildings in the reclamation area.

Statistics from: Sham Shui Po District Profile, 2016 Population By-Census, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government

Even though the labs differed in how they were set up and run, they all used a similar approach that was based on ethnography, human centred design, action-research, systems thinking and co-creation. Participatory, de-expertised research methods were used to enable lab members to acquire in-depth understanding of the community, before coming up with innovative prototypes and forming new cross-sectoral partnerships to make real and thoughtful changes.

Each lab went through three stages all closely related to design thinking methodology: a field research stage, an analysis and idea generation stage, and a prototyping/testing stage. The first stage was based on understanding the issue by delving into the community, the second on making sense of the observations and coming up with new ideas and the third on creating

and testing prototypes. The social lab consisted of weekend sessions which took place at the Good Lab¹⁹, a social innovation co-working space in the Sham Shui Po district, and also in the community.

Each lab was led by the MaD team and developed in close collaboration with a government department. Each team consisted of local citizens, civil servants from the relevant government departments, designers, community groups, researchers and facilitators. The citizens were recruited via MaD's online and social media platforms, the civil servants were nominated by their departments as a training opportunity. In some instances, the teams decided to draw on outside expertise to help develop the prototypes. For instance, a group of designers and professors at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University advised the Park Lab while the Clean Air Network partnered with the Healthy Street Lab.

In addition, for each of the labs, the departmental directors involved came together as a "Directors' Lab" to reflect on the process, learn about the lab's progress and to give strategic advice. Members included Deputy and Assistant Directors from government departments, representatives from the Efficiency Office as well as colleagues from the Jockey Club Charities Trust and MaD. This way senior civil servants were involved in the lab process, a necessary step since the labs took place outside of the Government's remit. The Directors' Lab increased the status of the labs and created a better understanding of both the process and progress of the labs.

All of the social labs were tasked with producing concrete tangible results in the form of prototypes. A prototype is an early sample, model, or release of a product built to test a concept or process or to act as a thing to be replicated or learned from. In these social labs, the prototypes functioned as a way of making new ideas real by actually implementing them. In what follows, I describe in a little more detail what happened in each of the labs.

¹⁹ <http://www.goodlab.hk/en/>



3.3 The LIBoratory Project

This lab was tasked with “opening up the imagination and understanding of public libraries to be more interesting and closely knitted with the community”. It was set up with the support of Kennisland, a think-and-do tank based in the Netherlands, and in close collaboration with the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). The lab consisted of 34 participants who were publicly recruited and came from all walks of life, including four librarians nominated by the LCSD. The lab team was assisted by three designers and a small team of organisers and facilitators from MaD.

Project period
Sep 2016 – Jan 2017

Lab Partners
Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Cultural Team & Kennisland (The Netherlands)

Project Base
Po On Road Public Library

34 Lab Members

who participated from start till finish from different disciplines



20 Marlieke Kieboom, Chris Sigaloff, Thijs van Exel and Wieteke Vrouwe (2015) Lab Practice: Creating spaces for social change. Kennisland.

21 See the stories at <https://medium.com/theliboratoryproject>

Method

This lab used a methodology developed by Kennisland called Feed Forward, which is described in Lab Practice: Creating Spaces for Social Change²⁰. 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. In guided steps, the lab team and citizens went out into the field and together created and interpreted stories²¹ of citizens’ lives and the challenges they experience. The team carried out 79 interviews, resulting in 79 citizen stories.



Next, the written or filmed accounts of these stories and encounters were discussed and analysed in order to come up with potential ideas and “solutions”. In addition, the lab team organised “collective evaluations” – essentially public moments in which a broader public was invited to interpret and evaluate the work of the lab team. An important element in this approach is the belief that stories can act as a powerful instrument in innovation processes. Stories answer questions that we could never have imagined ourselves and leave space for surprises, ambiguities, variety and normative statements. Stories are a way of producing knowledge and of challenging perceptions or assumptions so that new possibilities can emerge. Sharing stories make new interactions possible as became evident in the labs. By sharing the stories, people started to discuss how they could better help each other. In this way, stories can be a powerful relational and evaluative tool in generating change and social innovation.

Context

Public libraries in Hong Kong, like elsewhere, have lost substantial numbers of visitors over the last decade due to the expanding use of the internet. Based on an opinion survey commissioned by the LCSD in 2009, as many as 3.1 million or 48% of people aged 12 and above had not used public library services and facilities in the past year, visibly up from the corresponding figures of 2.3 million or 38% in the earlier round of the opinion survey conducted in 2004²². The library in Sham Shui Po is still being used by older residents, but mainly as a place to read newspapers.

One of the aims of the LIBoratory Project was to transform libraries from hubs for passive, traditional forms of knowledge to more communal spaces where younger and more diverse groups of people could come together to share informal as well as formal types of knowledge. The prototypes that were developed as part of the lab (shown below) were meant to show different possibilities for creating a library of the future and were based on the collected stories of people in the neighbourhood. In these stories people expressed why they did or did not use the library but also more general information about what they desire in life, what they desire for their children and their communities.



Calligraphy Master at the Library

Grandpa Chan spends eight hours at the Po On Road Public Library everyday copying Chinese paintings and calligraphy from different books with his ink brush. “Most of the people here know me,” he says proudly, “sometimes, children would even sit beside me and watch me practice for half an hour!”

Despite his remarkable skills, calligraphy is in fact a relatively recent hobby for Grandpa Chan. He emulates the great artists and perfects his skills through close observation and diligent practice, and just like that, he began a decade-long dedication to penmanship. “A lot of people have complimented my works, and that makes me very, very happy. Once there was a HKU professor who saw my calligraphy and came to express his admirations!”

Grandpa Chan (in his 70s)

22 Research Office Legislative Council Secretariat (2016) Challenges of public libraries in Hong Kong. Research Brief Issue No. 2 2015 – 2016. Available here: <http://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/1516rb02-challenges-of-public-libraries-in-hong-kong-20160229-e.pdf>



Volunteer Readers

Xiao Xiao loves to volunteer as a “library auntie” at the kindergarten at Un Chau Estate in Sham Shui Po which her son attends. As well as reading stories to children, she helps with book loans and returns. She is one of a number of “library aunties” who come to read stories to children to encourage them to learn about the world around them through pictures, stories, poems and non-fiction. Xiao Xiao hopes that volunteering will help her to “make more friends, talk to different kinds of friends, and in so doing, learn new things and broaden [her] knowledge”.

Xiao Xiao, mother and new immigrant from Mainland China: actively participating in her local community.

Local perceptions

“I don’t really go to the library!” When we asked why, he explained that he disliked reading and had always found it boring. He preferred pictures to words, but the manga comic books and graphic novels at the library were not “trendy” enough for him. And, if he wanted to read the latest chapter of a manga comic book, he would be able to find it online. His impression of the library was that it is old fashioned and dull. “It’s meant to spread knowledge, so why would the library have the manga I like in their collection? It’s just not their style!”



Ah Chun, a young man stepping into the world of work

The lab resulted in six concrete prototypes. Most of the prototypes focused on making reading more attractive and stimulating new user-groups to come to the library. For example, “Curated Library”, “South Asian Bookshare”, “Experimenting Library Space” and “Rack on the Go” tried to make book and newspaper reading more attractive to a larger and wider group of readers.

Although promising, these prototypes focused on the classical product of the libraries, namely books and newspapers. As such, they were about improving the status quo rather than taking a leap into a possible new future.

The prototypes “Friends of Library” and “Happy Library Cards” did try to go a step further by creating an inclusive dialogue about possible new approaches for libraries. These prototypes expressed the need for libraries to go beyond their role as passive book and information centres run by professional librarians, to proactively creating community ties, district-based programmes and services that respond to the needs of the neighbourhood and allow for more local character to be developed.



Re-orientation of Library spaces

This prototype examined how the library could better meet the expectations of different groups of users through spatial and atmospheric design. There was a lot of experimentation with the use of colours. The reading atmosphere has become more vibrant and livelier, making it a popular place for the children. The elderly think that the idea is great, though they expressed worries on the noise level which the interior design shall further investigate.



Rack-on-the-Go

Local residents like to read newspapers in the library. This prototype examined whether it was possible to create alternative reading spaces in the community. This prototype transforms a cloth-drying rack into a mobile newspaper rack that can roam in the community, creating alternative reading spaces and testing users’ feedback to reading newspapers in a non-library setting. The tests were conducted in parks and the podium of a housing estate, with the hope of alleviating space congestion in the library while also making better use of communal space.



Friends of the Library

An ambassador scheme for citizens to support and promote the library, and design community-focused library programmes and services. It provides a means for the community to participate in the library, and cultivates a sense of community ownership. This prototype sought to nurture a sense of belonging. How can a library be more relevant to its community? Would citizens be more willing to take part? What if citizens could also organise activities in the library?



The Curated Library

Books in the library are usually well arranged to give a proper and orderly feel. This prototype experimented with book curation based on themes to try to arouse readers’ interests and encourage them to read new books. The Lab Team also designed a questionnaire inspired by the traditional dim-sum order sheet for readers to contribute their ideas for future library activities. The feedback demonstrated the possibility of collecting user feedback and book recommendations in a creative and constructive way. Library users are instantly attracted and eager to explore the book display.



Happy Library Cards

A card game and communication toolkit that puts players into different roles to discuss library issues and navigate needs of stakeholders. Through the game, players cultivate empathy for other users and discuss new strategies for library management. This sought to cultivate empathy towards the library management who spend a lot of time handling complaints. Library users all have different needs. Can we use this specially-designed deck of cards to foster empathy and tackle conflicts? Can it be a way of overcoming the complaints culture in Hong Kong?

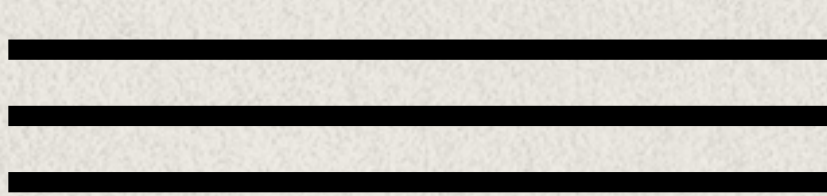


South Asian Bookshare

This aimed to promote inclusivity. The South Asian community rarely visits the library. The team has been experimenting on a South Asian book-sharing network. Thanks to the generosity of Sagar Library, a community-run Pakistani Library, the team was able to gather 50 Urdu books to kick-start the experiment. Posters were put up at various community spots for the South Asian community and a Facebook page was also created to promote the scheme. However, The corner was not as popular as the Lab Team had imagined.

All of the prototypes were tested in the Po On Road Public Library. Interestingly, at the outset there wasn't a sense among the LCSD staff that libraries needed much innovation. Indeed, some of the librarians actually enjoyed receiving fewer visitors since it meant that the library was calm and peaceful. However, the research phase did change their minds and the librarians and library directors became enthusiastic about the prototypes. Despite this enthusiasm, however, none of the prototypes were implemented by the library on a permanent basis although parts of the prototypes were adopted, such as the thematic way of presenting books and the new spatial and atmospheric design. One prototype - "re-orientation of library spaces" - quickly ran into legislative hurdles since the spatial design in a library is under strict regulations which makes alterations almost impossible. Other prototypes such as "Happy Cards" and "Friends of the Library" demanded too much of the existing capacity and required far more support from senior management. Recently, however, the LCSD has expressed interest in re-examining a couple of the prototypes such as thematic book display, better book curation and personalized book bags for young children.

The biggest achievement of this process was that it opened participants' eyes to the needs and wishes of people in the community rather than focusing simply on books and buildings. Jimmy, the senior librarian stated: "I used to only see *readers* when I walked into the library, now I see *people*". It showed how with small simple steps, and including the users in the process, changes can actually be made to the existing system. It made the librarians aware that they should be more receptive to the needs of the community and that there are different needs for learning and library services. As a result, the lab changed the way the library collects data; previously it had simply collected statistical data but now it collects stories from citizens in order to better understand the needs of different community groups.



3.4 The Park Lab

The Park Lab was developed in collaboration with LCSD, a group of design lecturers at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) School of Design, and Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong. The lab consisted of 28 people – who were representatives from these organisations as well as citizens working in fields such as architecture, social work, design and marketing. LCSD was very supportive and nominated 5 representatives covering different aspects of park management to the team, giving the lab insightful advice on operation and policy. They included the Former Deputy District Leisure Manager (Sham Shui Po), the Deputy District Leisure Manager (Sham Shui Po), an Assistant Leisure Manager (Land-based Venues), a Leisure Manager of Lai Chi Kok Park and a Leisure Manager of Tsuen Wan Park. The Lab team was further assisted by six design facilitators and lab organisers from MaD.

Project period
Apr – Sep 2017

Lab Partners
Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Leisure Team, Design lecturers at Hong Kong Polytechnic University & Boys’ and Girls’ Club Association (Mei Foo Youth Integrated Services Centre)

Project Base
Lai Chi Kok Park

28

Lab Members

from different disciplines



 LCSD Leisure Manager x4	 Project Organizer x4	 Community Organizer x3	 Marketer x3	 Educator x2
 Architect x2	 Student x2	 Video Producer x1	 Maker x1	 Government Consultant x1
 Horticulturist x1	 Councilor Assistant x1	 Social Worker x1	 Interior Designer x1	 Retiree x1

Method

While the LIBoratory project used the Feed Forward method developed by Kennisland, this lab used design thinking and methods with the support of designers from PolyU. During the field research phase, ethnographic methods were used such as the AEIOU²³ model which refers to Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects and Users.

The model helped the social lab organise their findings and identify interrelationships between different aspects of the park. The team also carried out field research at Lai Chi Kok Park by zone and by user group, by observing and collecting photo-stories about users and facilities in the park. This was done through an open class, methodology workshops and numerous lab team meetings.



Park observation presentations



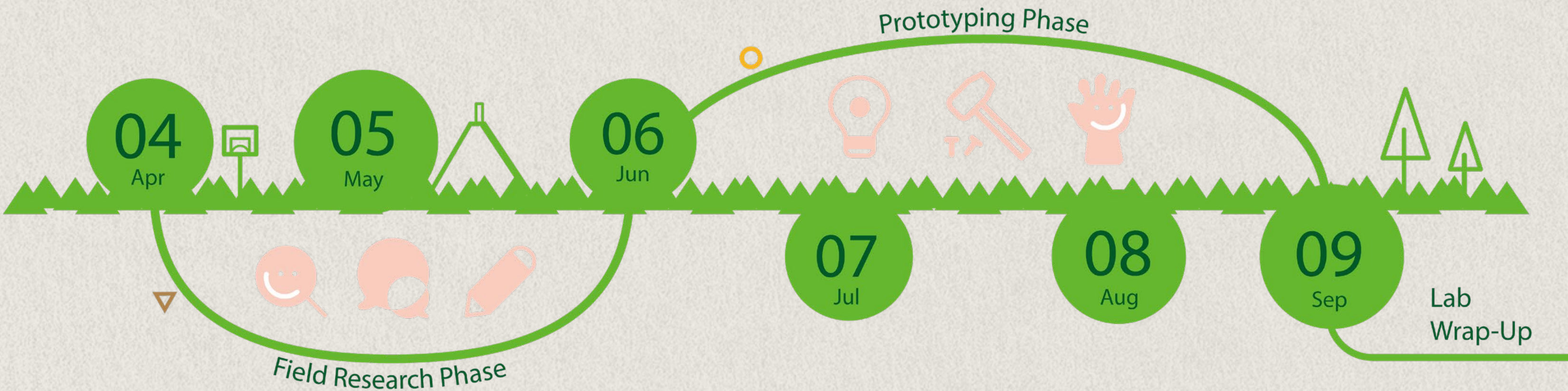
Presenting findings to major stakeholders

23 <http://dlrtoolkit.com/aeiou/>

A well-known problem in trying to make sense of stories is that one often jumps to conclusions too quickly. A common flaw is a missing link between description and deduction. The PolyU facilitators tried to create consciousness to differentiate between happenings/ phenomena, the interviewees’ perspectives and the personal opinions of the lab participants. However, people found it difficult to get away from judgements and interpretations. For example we might (especially in the Hong Kong context) interpret someone who is alone as being lonely and thus problematic, while in fact the person is simply enjoying solitude, which in a city like Hong Kong can be especially hard to do.

In comparison to the LIBoratory Project, Park Lab started with a far more specific problem. Instead of asking wider questions about how people want to live in general, Park Lab directed its attention to the use of parks. This structured the findings but also limited the scope of the prototypes which focused on new facilities and services for the park instead of trying to rethink or re-imagine how public spaces can be used more generally.

The five month process involved a field research phase, a prototyping phase and a final wrap up phase:



Prototypes

This lab’s main objective was to open up the parks, and turn them into communal spaces with more activities for citizens. Parks in Hong Kong are a government run and managed space without sufficient freedom for their visitors. One of the main findings of the field research was that many citizens wanted more freedom and space for their own activities. For example they wanted to play with water, watch a movie, walk their dogs, organize a picnic or even camp out on the lawn. All of these activities are banned under current regulations (unless with specific approvals).

The Park Lab resulted in five prototypes that were all geared towards opening up the park and creating new activities that park users had been calling for – such as creating space for pets, water play, spaces and activities for physical exercise and opening up the park during evenings. The prototypes showed what could be possible if the LCSD were more receptive and responsive to citizens’ ideas.

A public event was held in a community hall where the prototypes were presented and discussed in order to collect opinions from park users. The local community was enthusiastic about the prototypes, especially “Park for People and Pets”. The LCSD team wished to extend the Pet Park experiment, but did not initially receive support from the District Council. Recently, however, the Director confirmed that LCSD will be launching 6 pet friendly “park corners” in various districts in Hong Kong.

The prototypes demonstrate that innovation requires buy-in from park managers, political will and in some cases extra resources. Without changes to the “back office” of government such as additional resources, policy changes and new park operating rules, the likelihood that these types of “solutions” could become embedded is small.



Dialogue in the Park

Some residents hope for more playful park facilities. By installing a DIY sound transmission play device, this prototype explored the possibilities for playful hacking of park space for cross-generational play.



Park for People and Pets

The Pet Activities Area in Lai Chi Kok Park lacks a proper enclosure and observes a number of restrictions. This prototype experiments with a double-gated pet park opened to both people and animals inside Lai Chi Kok Park, to explore the possible enhancement of existing Pet Activities Area.



Parkour in Parks

Most park facilities have designated usage. Taking parkour or Freerunning (a sport which uses the built environment as an obstacle course) as an example, this prototype attempts to broaden people’s attitudes about park facilities and how they can be used.



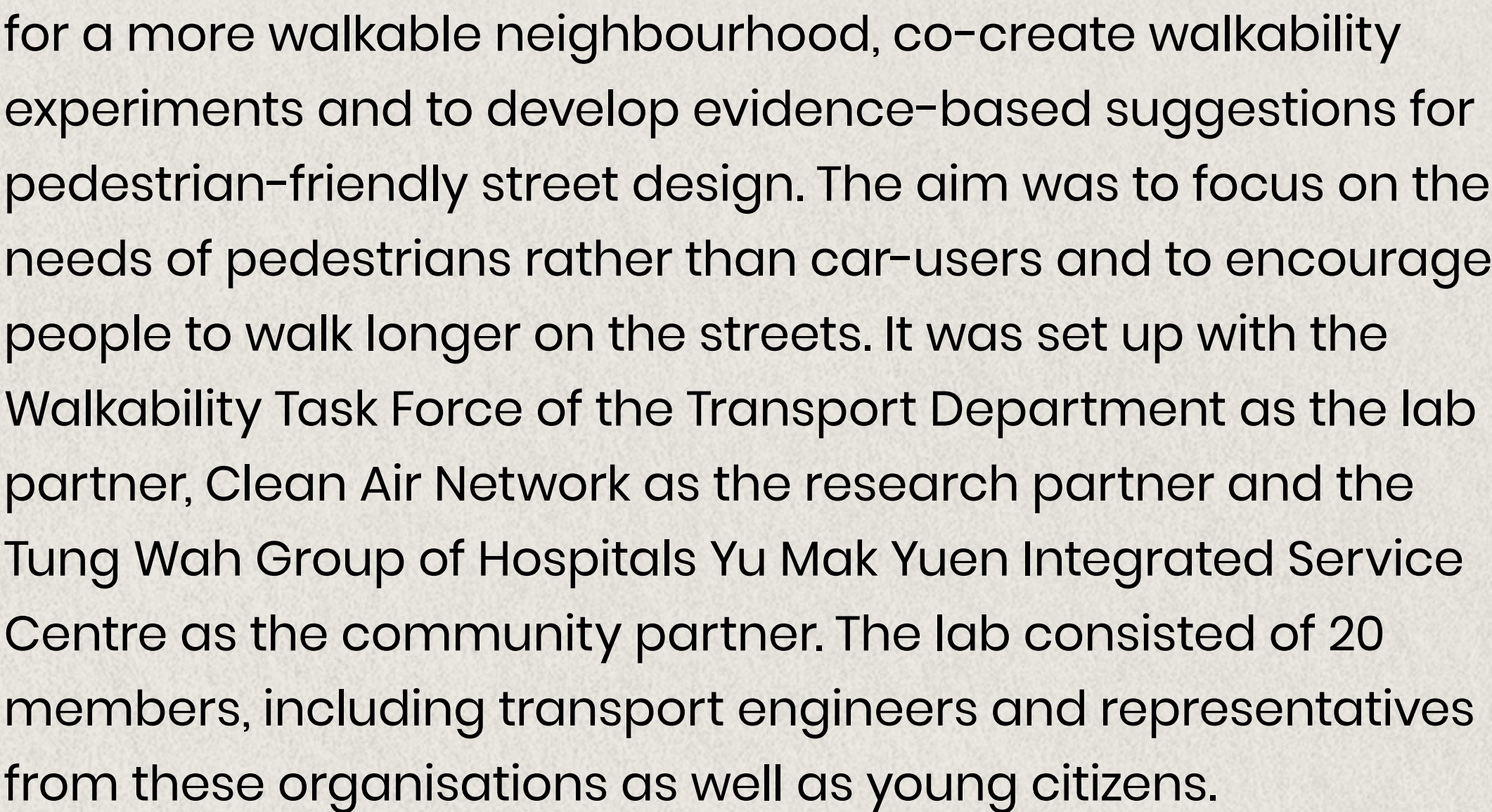
WeWet Festival

Water is a wonderful medium for children's creative play and family fun. While parks are children's everyday playground, rarely do we see water play facilities or events. What do children and parents think about water play? What new possibilities may water play open up to children?

Park in the Dark

Parks at night gather people of different ages and interests, yet interactions seldom happen among them. Through community screenings and a mini-concert, this prototype explored the possibility of night parks as a site of community engagement. What activities are suitable for residents nearby? Can there be citizen-initiated activities?



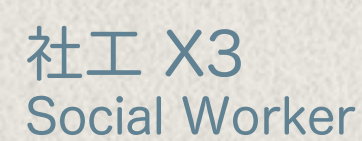


Project period
Mar – Jul 2018

Research Partners
Clean Air Network

Project Area
Sham Shui Po

from different disciplines



Method

As part of this lab cycle, the lab team set up the “Kai Fong Think Tank” (“kai fong” being colloquial word for community folks and neighbours) consisting of about 40 local residents who were all residents of Sham Shui Po and interested in street improvement. They conducted field research with the lab team and gave feedback on the prototypes. The Yu Mak Yuen Integrated Services Centre was instrumental in connecting the lab to local citizens.



The lab team started by following local residents on their daily, everyday routes – from home to the shop, to the restaurant and to work. Citizens expressed some of their thoughts and feelings along the way. Not only about the roads and pedestrian crossings, but also about tiny details such as water dripping from air-conditioning units and the length of time of green pedestrian lights. The lab team also followed a range of different road-users, such as shop owners, delivery men and road sweepers, to ensure that their experiences were also captured. These voices and opinions provided valuable

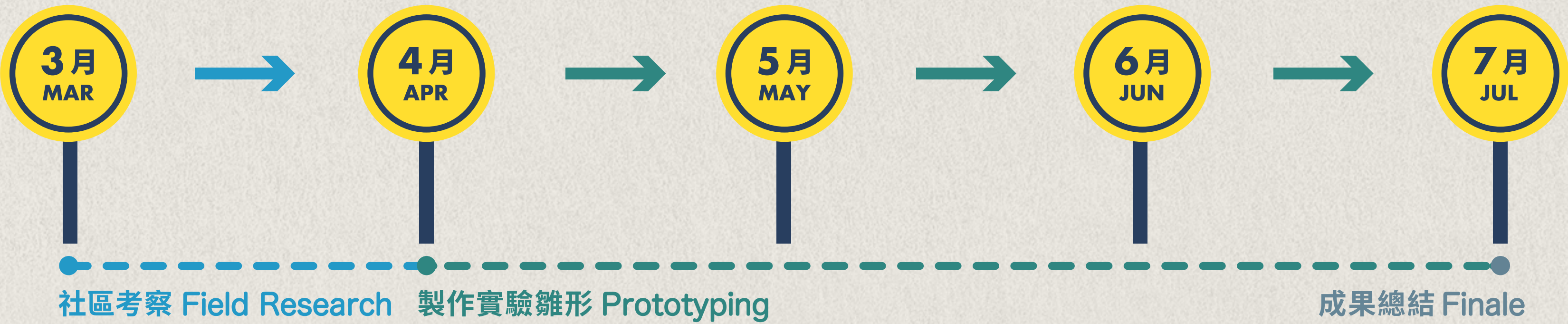


information and also helped to build up relationships with local residents. During this stage, the lab team organised 24 visits and interviewed 17 citizens, all of which was documented on a public blog.

The lab team also spent a day on the streets using wheelchairs and crutches to experience what it is like to have a disability on the streets of Hong Kong. One of the things they discovered while doing this was that trolleys were frequently being used. On Lai Chi Kok Road, for example, four to eight trolley users passed every 15 minutes. Many of these trolley users are cleaners who carry as much as 300 pounds of rubbish every journey and do this up to 10 times a day. When the pavements are crowded, they are forced to use the roads, adding to congestion on often very busy roads. And pavements are usually made with bricks which makes it bumpy and therefore physically hard to push the trolleys.

The lab team also carried out research on the design of the roads, including the main roads in Sham Shui Po, and the way people were making use of street facilities such as lights, railings and empty spaces. Furthermore, focus groups were organised in which different age groups of citizens were invited, including parents, children, teenagers, women and the elderly in order to understand what they think of their streets and for them to give feedback on the findings of the lab team.

The 4-month lab process:



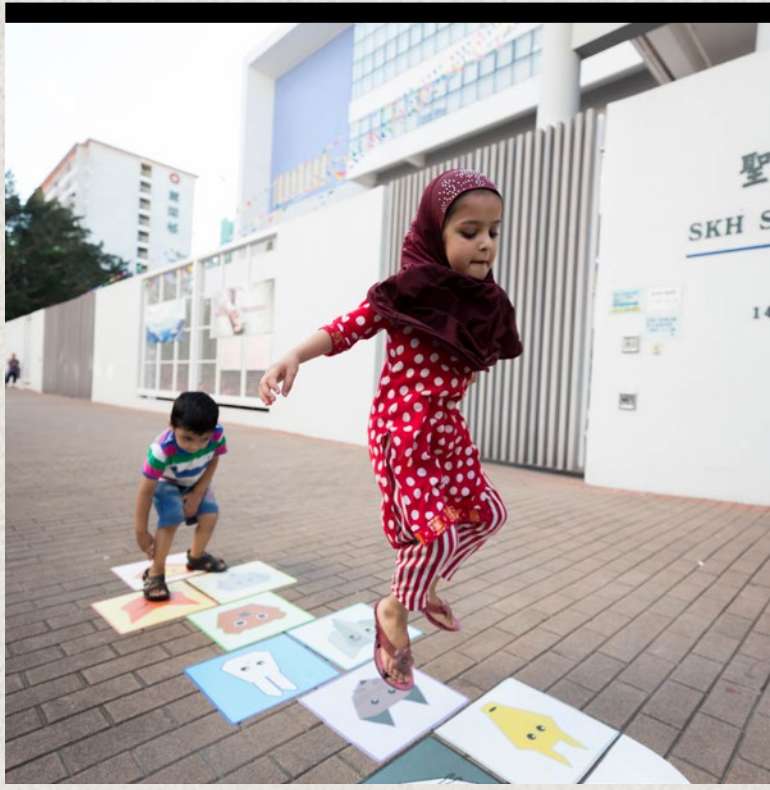
This ethnographic approach was complemented with data analytics. The Clean Air Network, the lab’s research partner, has access to state-of-the-art knowledge on the topic of “healthy streets” and various relevant data sets such as pollution data. As such, they were able to guide the process with data and scientific knowledge. The stories and the data were used to come up with possible prototypes. This was done in a voting session in which the lab participants identified three more specific design questions to develop their prototypes: how can the streets become more playful, how can pedestrians cross the road more easily and how can the roads enable people in wheelchairs or pushing trolleys? International best practices were used to develop the prototypes.

Prototypes

The team developed four walkability experiments as prototypes, exploring how new crossings and new forms of zoning could make the streets safer, more accessible and more fun for pedestrians. The seniors of the Transport Department were enthusiastic as were the local residents. However one of the main problems was that other government departments did not allow the lab participants to actually test the prototypes in the streets due to safety reasons. Some were considered to be too dangerous. For this reason all the prototypes had to be tested on the pavement.

The prototypes were tested on the pavements and the residents were invited to give their feedback. At the end of the experiment, Healthy Street Lab organised a sharing event with the Kai Fong Think Tank.

Overall while the Healthy Street Lab had the support of the Walkability Task Force of the Transport Department, it was confronted with resistance from other public bodies which meant that some of the prototypes had to be amended in order to be tested. Even though a more walkable neighbourhood and better street design are not contentious issues it was clear that streets are not yet the place for experiments and innovations, and there are limits to what social labs can



Linear Play Streets

Besides passage, can sidewalks also be a space for fun? Can footpaths become more fun to attract people to walk more, and transform into sites of placemaking? This prototype explored whether interesting streets can develop into alternative routes that help divert traffic from busy streets.



Ground-level LED Light Strip

Urban dwellers are often preoccupied by their mobile phones. Global statistics report increases in pedestrian accidents related to mobile phones. This prototype experimented with the feasibility of “ground-level LED alert lights” that cater to citizens’ habits. Can traffic facilities catch up with people’s fast-changing lifestyle?



Comfort Lane for Trolley Users

Street cleaners carry as many as 300 pounds of trash at each journey on rugged and crowded footpaths everyday. This prototype experimented with a safer and easier route for trolley users and other slow-speed walkers. What can we do to facilitate empathetic sharing of public space?



Pedestrian-centric Street Design

Taking Yu Chau Street and Kweilin Street as an example, this prototype explored possibilities for more pedestrian-centric street design in a crowded district like Sham Shui Po. Experiments included crossings that match pedestrians’ habits and a traffic calming streetscape to further ensure pedestrians’ safety.

achieve when prototypes must conform to existing regulations and guidelines. Indeed, for some of these prototypes to be embedded, new regulations and guidelines would have to be put in place which would require buy-in from senior leadership. Unsurprisingly therefore, none of the prototypes has yet been implemented. The Healthy Street Lab showed that changes in public streets not only require changes in legislation, but a change in culture. Currently, the culture is such that citizens complain when they are unhappy with an issue, and the Government tries to anticipate this, reducing the chances that things can go wrong. Change of culture to embrace more innovation is never easy. Recently however, there seems to be a shift in the right direction, with the Chief Executive’s Policy Address confirming that the Walkability initiative will be tested in two pilot areas (i.e. Sham Shui Po and Central).

04

Insights
and
Outcomes

So how successful were the social labs? The objectives of the social labs were relatively broad – they were an attempt to experiment with a methodology for bridging gaps and disconnects between citizens and the Government, nurturing young change agents, and forming new relationships, better services and smart communities. In a sense the outcomes were not fixed so that the process could be truly experimental. However, this approach can make it more difficult to assess and evaluate success since it’s not always entirely clear what criteria or benchmarks to use. Moreover, it often takes times for results to come to fruition and for impacts to be observed. So, what success looks like depends significantly on what timeframe is being used. From my observations and discussions with MaD and the lab teams, I would argue that **the main outcomes of the three social labs undertaken were new skills, new ways of thinking, new cross-sectoral networks and new models for public participation. We will look at each of these in turn.**



4.1 New skills

In each of the three social labs, citizens (mostly young working adults and university students) are recruited to join as lab members. Many of them explained that taking part in the lab process had given them new skills – in the form of new methods, new practices and new tools. Jeanny, who took part in the Park Lab said:

“My biggest learning is understanding the process of a social lab and social innovation. After joining the lab, I found it was not as difficult as I thought and that actually everyone can be part of it regardless of one’s background. In fact it can be initiated by little thoughts and co-organized by everyone.”

For others it meant letting go of some of their expertise and knowledge. The lab made them look at their surroundings with fresh eyes. Alliot from the LIBoratory Project explained:

“At first I thought this was an interior design project for the library. But then I found that we had to collect stories from the neighborhood and analyse them to define the problems. I had to put aside my expertise and professional perspective to do it well. It was a very interesting process.”

What was particularly notable was the experience of public sector staff – many expressed that they had learnt new and valuable skills. They were introduced to design-thinking methods and practices with new ways of interacting and co-creating with citizens. The social lab did therefore act as a safe place to learn, reflect and try out new things.

Other members felt that being part of the lab experience gave participants a better understanding of local community needs and therefore contributed to a sense of community cohesion. Chu, an environmental activist involved in the Park Lab explained:

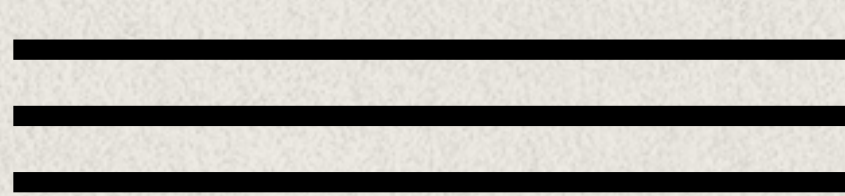
“When we talk about community needs, the public, even the residents, may not exactly know what they are. Through the process of “observation--finding--interview--opinion collection--prototype experiment”, the community has come up with solid ideas of their needs. This has helped cultivate community cohesion and awareness.”

Christian Bason, the founder of the Danish in-house public innovation lab, MindLab, argues that design approaches and tools can help government to consciously create meaning and value they want citizens, businesses and other actors in society to experience.²⁴ A series of case studies by the UK Design Council (2013), on design for public sector innovation of the Sharing Experiences Europe (SEE) network, showed that design contributes to public sector innovation in many different ways.²⁵ This includes looking at the entire system to redefine the problem from the ground up, understanding user needs, testing iteratively to prevent expensive and risky pilots, integrating the process of problem analysis, solution development and implementation, and engaging teams and departments in collaboration across silos. It is widely acknowledged that building the design capability of staff within the public and social sector can lead to more ‘transformative change’ that allows the sector to respond to challenges in new ways.²⁶ It was certainly the case with the social labs in Hong Kong that participants felt that they had acquired new skills, and for public sector employees it was the exposure to design based methods which was seen as most beneficial.

²⁴ Christian Bason (2010) *Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-Creating for a Better Society*. Bristol University Press.

²⁵ SEE Platform (2013) *Design for Public Good*. London: Design Council.

²⁶ Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, Lucy Kaldor, Rodger Watson and Veronique Hillen (2015) Supporting the Emerging Practice of Public Sector Design Innovation. IASDR Conference 2015; Joyce Yee and Hazel White (2015) The Goldilocks Conundrum: The ‘just right’ conditions for design to achieve impact in public and third sector projects. *International Journal of Design*, 10(1), 7-19; Geoff Mulgan (2014) *Design in public and social innovation; What works and what could work better*. Nesta.



4.2 New Ways of Thinking

One of the most striking outcomes of the social labs was that the process really did open up participants' minds to new ideas and perspectives. Social labs are a space where people can experience new things – so they are also about changing how people and organisations view the world.

Many people I spoke to explained that taking part in the social lab had changed the way they thought about particular subjects, their understanding of the role of government, the innovation potential of citizens, and their own personal contribution as an agent of change. For example Eunice, the senior librarian involved in the LIBoratory Project explained: “We learned that we should not only focus on the people in the library but much more on the people outside.” This was echoed by other participants. Martin, from the Transport Department and the Healthy Street Lab stated:

“We (engineers from the Transport Department) often focus on challenges, difficulties and safety issues when we engage in projects. But I saw many different perspectives in our cross-sector lab team and in our interaction with local residents. It took me a while to adjust to such different mindsets. This is the potential of cross-sector collaboration – to think from another perspective.”

The lab process also opened people's minds to new ways of doing things. For instance, the Healthy Street Lab introduced the engineers from the Transport Department to a totally different way of identifying problems, formulating ideas and implementing new measures. One of them explained: *“In the Government we never do testing or trials. We do calculations and impact assessment etc. Then we implement the new measures directly.”*

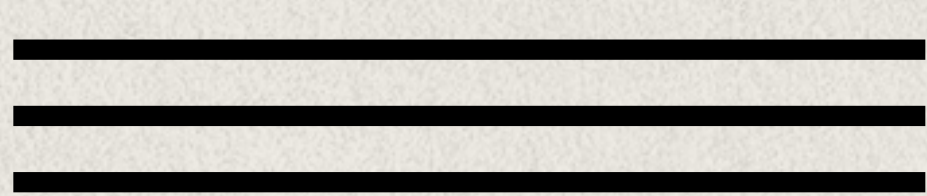
The experience of taking part in a social lab also contributed to better understanding of other people's perspectives – and in some cases dispelled myths about other people's behaviours and motivations. Joelle from the LIBoratory Project summed this up nicely:

“Up until the moment I heard it from the interviewee in person, my thinking had always been biased. That's where the power of a story lies – it's sincere, it's real, and it tears down walls of prejudice.”

These insights often need time to sink in. The head librarian told me that it was only a year after the lab had ended that he realised how profoundly it had changed his way of thinking. Having heard their stories he realized that library users were not just his target audience, but that they were people with their own dreams, hopes and fears: “I used to look at the people here in the library and see readers; now I see human beings”.

Another important element was that the lab often dissolved the difference between citizens and civil servants. In the lab there was not really a distinction between being a citizen and a civil servant – all participants were “labbers” and all made an equal, if different, contribution. This was stated by the park manager Alan: “When I was part of the Park Lab, I was no longer a service provider, I was a labber”. In some instances however this was challenging. Some civil servants found it difficult to take off their civil servant “hat” and have an open mind to new insights and new possibilities.

Changing attitudes and perceptions are a valuable outcome of the social labs. However, policies do not change through new perceptions alone – usually what is required is a combination of evidence, advocacy and coalitions for change. Having people from government change their perception about the value of citizen participation does not automatically change the way policy is made. Ideas like this are a necessary but insufficient condition for change. For practices to change, change of attitudes and perceptions need to be translated across sectors into operating structures, cultural norms, and workforce skills. Otherwise they are perceived as strange oddities which have little chance of being adopted. As one participant noted about a colleague that had not been involved and did not understand the role and value of the social lab process: “...My colleagues were skeptical and afraid of more work”.



4.3 New Networks

It is evident that new networks were established through the social labs. People from very different backgrounds who never knew each other now understand each other in a much better way. Many labbers state that through the social lab process, they have developed a better understanding of other people's roles and in particular, the role of civil servants and government departments. New connections have been made, and in some cases, this has helped to underpin new collaborations. For example, the department responsible for overseeing public parks is now working with NGOs which were previously not involved as a result of the lab process.

Another important aspect is the development of a network of people interested in innovation, equipped with the same newfound skills. This is particularly true for the public sector workers. It has often been said that innovators in the public sector are lonely – coming up against structures and cultures which are resistant to change. As such, it helps to have a network of peers engaged in innovation efforts in other government departments. Indeed, it was noted by Ryan, a social worker from the Healthy Street Lab that this new network of innovation champions in government could be a useful channel for collaboration:

“When we were developing our prototype, Transport Department (TD) suggested that we talk to Leisure and Culture Services Department (LCSD) about removing the railings outside the sitting-out area for more spacious pavement. I think TD is interested in collaborating with LCSD but lacks a channel in doing so. Social Lab can be an effective platform for cross-departmental collaboration.”

The labs also encouraged cross-sectoral partnerships and many participants saw value in these new kinds of relationships. Johnson who is a civil servant stated, “It is very worthwhile to work with other people and with outside partners: they bring creative ideas and speed up the process.”

One good example of the cross-sectoral collaborations that were developed as part of the social lab process was the Linear Play Street prototype developed by the Healthy Street Lab. The lab team engaged a local primary school on Pratas Street to help develop the prototype. Not only did the school principal support the prototype, he also invited the students and their parents to get involved. Parents spread information about the Action Day amongst themselves through various parents' groups; meanwhile students organized themselves by putting up posters for Action Day in their school. The principal also connected the lab team with a technician from another local primary school to take some aerial videography for the lab team.

Another result was new relationships within the same sectors. Following on from the South Asian Bookshare prototype in the LIBoratory Project, the lab team connected a few NGOs, community-run libraries and individuals interested in promoting book exchanges within the South Asian Community. In one meeting, cross-marketing between two parties was discussed and then facilitated. Sagar Library, a community-run library of Urdu books joined forces with a community bookshop in Tuen Mun and provided Urdu books as part of a book-sharing exercise between the two libraries and also offered to put on Urdu poetry classes at Tuen Mun. Books donated to Tuen Mun were labelled with information about Sagar Library so that interested readers could find out more information and visit.

One of the most striking results is the active community of lab team members. Many labbers come to public events, are active on Facebook and still have contact with civil servants from different government departments. Whatsapp groups have been set up to share news on social innovation and updates on, say, new measures in libraries, parks and streets. A method exploration group has also been set up, with around ten members who meet monthly on Sunday afternoons to exchange ideas about social labs and social design methodologies. Some of the more active lab team members are now involved in the current lab cycle with the prototype testing. Even though the social lab community is small, it is gathering a group of dedicated members.



4.4 A New Model for Public Participation

The social lab is, in essence, an experiment in opening up government structures to the insights and ideas of citizens as a way of fostering social and public sector innovation. Although this was not an explicit topic during the social labs, many participants reflected on the possibilities for the Government to adopt a more participatory approach – working with both citizens and civil society organisations. Doris Fok, Assistant Director of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department explained:

“Social lab is a good platform to show that government bodies can play a role as a facilitator: we discovered the importance of connection, e.g. facilitate the district council and community groups to join hands to provide different services for the neighbourhood and make the activities and facilities in the park more responsive to the people.”

The lab experience also showed the civil servants taking part that participatory approaches could help to improve the quality of services. In some instances, it can be more successful to choose an open and inclusive approach.

“The biggest insight especially for the civil servants was thus that it can be worthwhile to think from the perspective of users. We seldom think from the perspectives of users. Yet, after joining the Park Lab, I try to observe and understand park management from the angle of users. Users’ ideas or suggestions, as long as they do not compromise safety, can really help to improve our services!”

–Lee Kai Ho, Assistant Leisure Manager, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, Park Lab

“The originality and feasibility of the prototypes suggested is something we couldn’t get from the expert approach we usually take. This lab approach brought to us a new dimension of civic participation.

–Louis Ng, Deputy Director, Leisure and Cultural Services Department

This is an important outcome since there is a perception that there is a culture of complaints against public sector workers from citizens. Indeed, at the outset of the social labs, there was a concern that the social lab experiments would generate a considerable number of complaints from local citizens. However, the opposite was true. The social labs seemed to be an effective way of encouraging constructive feedback from citizens. As Alan the park manager explained, “During the social lab, citizens expressed their opinions in a softer way”. Ambrose Cheung, chairman of the Sham Shui Po District Council said:

“Nowadays, people give opinions that are accusing or criticizing in nature. Carrying out projects in the community often bring conflicts among groups. The Park Lab, on the other hand, worked in an inclusive and understanding manner. It is humble, participatory and it listens to all stakeholders in the community.”

In some cases, the improvements that were seen were the result of the often serendipitous nature of innovation processes. In the Healthy Street Lab, one of the prototypes “Linear Play Street” accidentally solved the problem of dogs fouling on Pratas Street in Sham Shui Po. As part of the Linear Play Street prototype, the lab team set up a giant chess game and two other play devices on the pavement outside a school for two days. The school’s Principal was surprised to find the street clean and tidy in the morning during the testing days: “I found no dog faeces on the street this morning! Probably the pet owners found the play devices too nice to be ruined.” The school had tried complaining to government departments and district council members, but without much success. The experience of the Healthy Street Lab introduced him to a new perspective: maybe the solution was to improve the aesthetics of the pavement.

The social lab experience didn’t just change attitudes about public sector workers – it also sparked new perspectives about the role that citizens could play. Social labs were seen as a way of empowering citizens of all ages:

“As a social worker, we often encourage local residents to speak their thoughts about the community. Yet, residents feel that their words have no impact. In Social Lab, the cross-sector team help local residents to visualize their wishes or suggestions. There can be changes. This is very empowering for local residents. My colleagues and friends from other NGOs also found the Social Lab project very inspiring.”

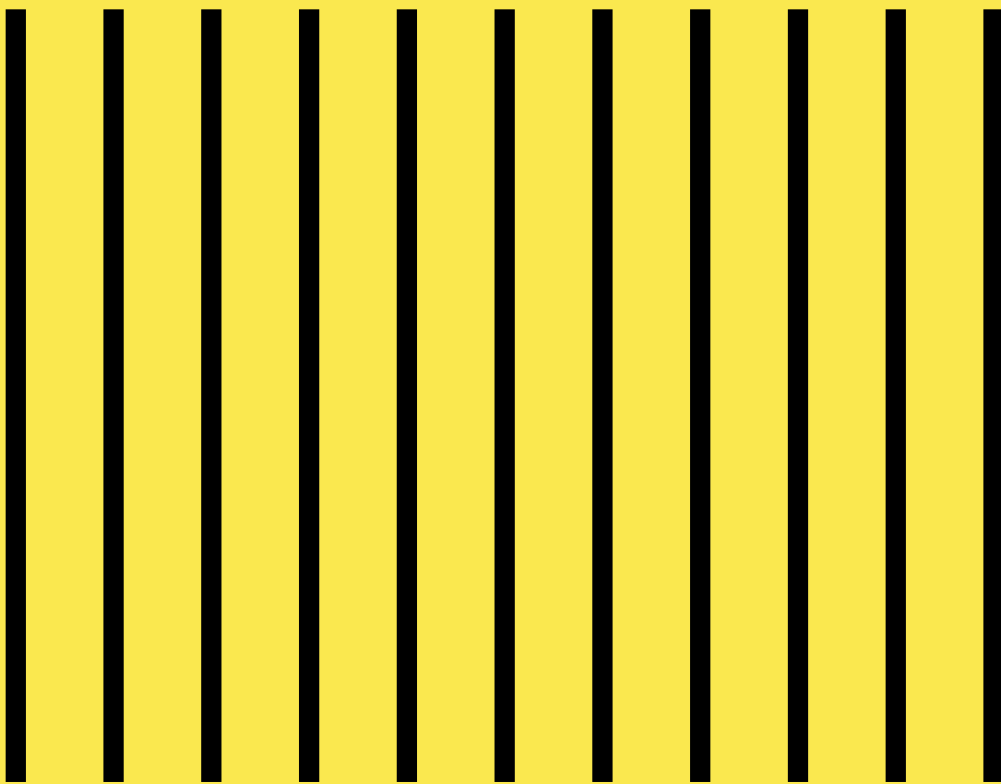
–Ryan, Healthy Street Lab, Social Worker

“It is appealing to be able to have government authorities involved in the collaboration and potentially taking the ideas forward. I now have more understanding toward the rules and regulations regarding transportation, and of other relevant departments that were involved through the lab process. This helps to come up with a mutually agreed design.”

–Hermion, Healthy Street Lab, Urban Designer

Challenges

05



The labs developed by MaD were the first social labs set up in Hong Kong. As such, this was a trailblazing experiment – a pioneering attempt to open up government to the needs and ideas of citizens. As the first attempt of its kind, however, it is not surprising that the labs encountered a number of challenges. I will address each in turn.



5.1 Lab Design

“There are so many variables out there on the streets so we have too many issues and solutions to consider. With a longer time frame, it will be easier for labbers to conduct research.”

–Ryan, Healthy Street Lab, Social Worker

Some of the challenges arose from the way the labs were designed and delivered. For example, some felt that the labs were too short-term and transitive in nature and would have benefitted from a longer time frame. Indeed, five months when meeting for often only a couple of hours a week is a very short amount of time to carry out research, design prototypes, test them and learn and reflect on the whole experience.

Others felt that the prototypes were in place for too short a time period (usually a day or two) to draw any conclusions. Indeed, some lab members felt that if the prototypes had been in place for longer, it would have been possible to develop them in a more iterative way as it would have been possible to know what people liked, disliked and what they thought could be improved. In addition, lab team members were taking part in the process in addition to their regular, day-to-day activities. This meant that lab work had to fit into and around people’s normal schedules. As such, there was not enough dedicated time to take part. This contributed to a sense among lab team members that they were under pressure to deliver and had insufficient time. One option here might be to have more time intensive but shorter labs (with secondments for example, which would enable civil servants to work full time on the social lab for a certain period of time) or to spread the work of the lab over a longer period of time.



5.2 Messy Group Dynamics

Perhaps one consequence of the short time frame and the pressure participants felt under to deliver results was relatively challenging group dynamics at various points in the lab cycle. A similar pattern emerged in each lab. They all started with a lot of enthusiasm and energy. The discovery phase took participants to new places, helped them gain new insights and challenged assumptions. This phase was carried out in various ways (through story collecting, research, images) and in all lab cycles this was considered the most fruitful and energizing. As one of the Park Managers explained, “Through the story collecting, for the first time I really started to understand what people want!” stated the Park Manager while interviewing him on the experience of participating in a social lab.

The second phase involved analysing the information that was gathered in the first phase. Lab teams spent a lot of time trying to arrange the stories, to categorize them and to make meaning of them. It was during this phase that lab members would start to feel a little lost and frustrated. To break what seemed like an impasse, lab members started to debate, argue and mostly come up with quick next steps in order to move away from this phase of not knowing. And instead of basing this on the insights from the ethnographic phase, it quickly became a negotiation between group members on what to do next. Some of the facilitators found it difficult to manage and navigate some of these situations – especially where there were intense disagreements about how best to proceed. This almost certainly contributed to a growing sense of frustration among lab members, who felt that “the show must go on”. The bigger the groups, the more frustrating this process seemed to be.

So although the approach was set up in such a way that the choice for prototypes would result from the ethnographic research, this was not how things happened. People chose prototypes based on physical constraints (there is no time for such a grand idea), on power-structures (the Government is never going to realize this), on personal ideas and ambitions (I just want to do this) and on group dynamics (let’s stop discussing and just do something, no matter what). Not only did this process cost lab organisers a lot of time and energy, it also created a disconnect between the open and rich ethnographic phase and the much more pragmatic and results-driven prototyping phase.

The lab organisers at MaD tried different strategies for dealing with messy group dynamics. First, they decided to drastically restrict the size of the groups. From working in bigger groups of around 8 to 10 people, the group size was restricted to 6. Another strategy was to create more time for the idea generation phase. However, more time seemed to lead to more discussion and not always better results. Also the lab organisers started to take more responsibility into their own hands but this then left less room for participants. Although this seemed to create better and more substantial prototypes, it also led to a loss of energy and sense of ownership by lab participants.

Clearly, organising and facilitating social labs is not an easy task; at the best of times, it can be hard to navigate the complex terrain of conflicting demands, opposing objectives and diverse perspectives. Although the social lab is often presented as a straightforward linear process in

which different stages are followed, the practice is very different. A social lab is not an objective and fixed method, it is an open and often messy process in which the labbers continually adjust and experiment with different frameworks and methodologies. This difficulty can also be compounded by a lack of requisite skills or a lack of resources, or even simply working with groups that have wildly differing opinions. But in a sense this is the essence of lab work and it is important to embrace the messiness and complexity because while it can be the source of many challenges it is also the source of much insight, creativity and serendipity which makes social labs so valuable.

Steering and managing a social lab is a delicate balancing act in which there needs to be enough room for creativity and serendipity, but also structure and guidance in order to get things done. Embracing this messiness and complexity means giving emphasis to developing the right skills, as opposed to following a strict methodology. In my opinion, too much focus on the methodology can lead to a certain passiveness among the members of a lab team. As long as the steps are being followed, lab teams might believe that things are going well and that everything is as it should be. This however, is a very technocratic understanding of a social lab. It belies an attitude that by implementing a certain fixed strategy, results can be achieved.

However, working in the field of complexity is not about following clear and linear methodologies, but about being able to strategically maneuver between different, often opposing, dynamics. It means reflecting on the process, asking the right questions, skillfully changing direction when this is required and employing the right methodology for the task at hand. So, rather than focusing on the methodology, one should focus on how the problem and 'solution' are perceived, framed and understood. This can be achieved in many different ways. **Most importantly, however, it requires an independent and critical way of observing and thinking that allows people from different backgrounds to reframe the issues they are confronted with.** This requires the ability to convene different groups, to venture into the unknown, to ask difficult questions, to build trust, to communicate, to know what skills are required and then drawing them in at the right time, to communicate and to hold still. This cannot be learned by tool boxes, master classes or fixed methods. It can only be learned by doing. Perhaps one should speak about the mastery of social labs,

*"There are no cheap tickets to mastery. You have to work at it, whether that means rigorously analyzing a system or rigorously casting off your own paradigms and throwing yourself into the humility of Not Knowing. In the end, it seems that power has less to do with pushing leverage points than it does with strategically, profoundly, madly letting go."*²⁷

Developing mastery in practical terms means learning by doing, but it also means reflecting on one's practice and creating a culture of continuous learning. This is a process that needs ample time, dedication and resource.

²⁷ Donella Meadows (1999) *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a system*. The Sustainability Institute.

5.3 Fuzzy Objectives And Demonstrating Impact

As I mentioned earlier, the objectives of the social labs were very broad. They included creating smart communities, nurturing young change agents, identifying gaps in services, creating new relationships, experiments and prototypes and developing sustainable measures for better policies and services. Because the objectives were so diverse and broad, participants were able to have their own views on whether the labs were a successful endeavour. Some, for example, saw the main outcome as the acquisition of new skills, new tools and new methods which could then be used by citizens and the government alike. Others viewed the social labs as a safe space for government-civil society relations; where government departments could address citizens' views and work with them to co-create solutions. Others viewed the main outcomes of the labs as the prototypes – the concrete results – that could potentially be implemented and adopted by government agencies. Here, the social lab was seen as an incubator for new solutions.

One of the issues with these “fuzzy” objectives is that they cover both the results of the labs (the prototypes) and also the results of the process (new relationships, changes in attitudes etc.). This makes it hard to pin down whether the labs were successful and in what way. Clearly participants had positive and valuable experiences – but clearer objectives in future lab cycles might be able to help answer questions like: what are the most effective methods and processes for generating insights and ideas? How can social labs learn most effectively from prototyping? What kinds of skills are required to successfully facilitate a social lab? In what fields and sectors can social labs be most impactful? Clearer aims and objectives could help to refine the process which could in turn, improve the impact and outcomes.

In addition, there was a sense that the prototypes were the most important outcome of the social labs. But on this basis alone it could be argued that the social labs were not successful since most of the prototypes were not or not yet adopted by the relevant government departments. However, this would be a false conclusion. Just because the prototypes were not adopted does not mean that the prototypes were not good, useful or informative. In some cases they could not be properly implemented because they were too innovative. For example, in responding to some prototypes in the Healthy Street Lab during a meeting with the Hong Kong Police Force and the Transport Department, a police inspector explained:

“We understand that lab prototypes are in good faith. In fact, if they can be implemented well, they might be useful. But they are outside the legal framework right now and we cannot give approval.”

In some instances the number and quality of prototypes was seen as the most important outcome simply as this was more easily measurable than other, “softer” and more intangible outcomes like new relationships or new ways of thinking. **Since this is often where the real value and impact of social labs lies, it might be useful to consider other ways of measuring these kinds of outcomes.**

It is worth noting, however, that focusing on more intangible outcomes can also be problematic. All stakeholders tend to be keen on tangible, concrete results and there is a general attitude that “quick fixes” are possible. **Making the case that social labs serve more as a source of inspiration, as a vehicle for cooperation and experimentation could make it harder to raise resources and get buy-in from government.** This is already the case since the experimental nature of the lab process makes it very hard for people to anticipate the possible outcomes and results. This could make social labs vulnerable. Partners and funders could be given reassurance by using alternative methods for evaluation and different evaluation frameworks.

Thankfully, there are new methods and approaches being developed in this space. In terms of measuring intangibles, one well established method, for example, is social network analysis, which measures relationships and interactions. In terms of evaluations, **one emerging approach is called Developmental Evaluation (DE).** This has been pioneered by Michael Quinn Patton and is now gaining traction among funders who support collaborative, complex and evolving change processes. This approach overturns many of the assumptions of more traditional evaluation frameworks; it is embedded rather than detached, continuous rather than episodic, and— most importantly—it has as its goal learning, not judgement. It is seen as an evaluation approach that can assist social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments. It provides real-time feedback thereby facilitating a continuous development loop. It is particularly well-suited to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments. Funders such as the McConnell Foundation which have geared their funding to complex, emergent, long-term initiatives, have shifted their evaluation framework from normative and formative to developmental. Such an approach could help future social labs to evaluate their impact and in so doing make the case for social labs.

“The front edge of the philanthropic sector has spent the last decade experimenting with innovative grantmaking in the hopes of triggering significant and sustainable change. But the sector’s approach to evaluation is not keeping pace with these innovations. In many cases, traditional evaluation approaches fail to meet the fast-paced information needs of philanthropic decision makers and innovators in the midst of complex social change efforts”.²⁸

²⁸ Evaluating Social Innovation, Preskill & Beer, Center for Evaluation Innovation, FSG, 2012.

5.4 Difficulty in Getting Buy-in from Government

One of the first questions that came up during the lab cycle was how best to partner with the government. The social labs were predicated on the cooperation and involvement of government departments – after all, one needs government departments to co-create the lab topic and offer civil servants the opportunity to join the lab teams. However, while government departments were receptive and a senior official became the champion for the social labs in each case, the social lab’s more co-creative approach is still very new and its outcomes uncertain, government buy-in is difficult, and it will take an even longer time for the prototypes to be considered, consulted and adopted. This was the case where changes in regulation and legislation might be required (which is to be expected), but also the case where relatively small changes might be needed. For example the Police found the proposals from the Healthy Street Lab very interesting, but simply “too innovative” for them to consider within their remit.

When a prototype or policy recommendation does not fit the standard governmental frameworks the chance of having it adopted is small. A police official explains:

“...safety of road users is the main focus of my office, but the interesting proposal of the Healthy Street Lab does not fit into our impact assessment or our legal framework. For this reason we cannot give approval to it”.

Without either a clear mandate or support from more senior elements in government, creating change is a slow process. This problem was particularly pronounced in the Healthy Street Lab. Any prototyping ideas concerning pedestrian crossings received serious objections from the Transport Department and the Police. They stressed “we cannot experiment with people’s lives”. For example, the idea of diagonal crossing was politely rejected by the Transport Department because of its non-standard design and law enforcement issues – even though this is fairly commonplace in many other cities.

In another lab case, even if the government lab partner supported further exploration and the implementation of particular prototypes, the support of local councils was required and could prove problematic. For example, after the Pet Park experiment in Lai Chi Kok Park, the LCSD proposed a further trial at the same location and submitted the plan to the Sham Shui Po District Council for consultation with local stakeholders. Unfortunately, this proposal was vetoed, raising the question of how best to introduce new initiatives to community leaders who usually favour the status-quo. Recently, however, the LCSD submitted another proposal (which was by and large adopted from the pet park prototype of the Park Lab) to various District Councils to transform 6 parks in Hong Kong into pet-friendly parks and the first park is expected to launch in 2019.

Finally, with regard to the first social lab on public libraries, LCSD is now considering scaling up the “Curated Book Display” prototype of the LIBoratory project with a focus on children books, curating and recommending books for parents.

These developments show that change can happen but that it takes time and requires careful consideration, especially in a government context. It is noteworthy that the network of the MaD social lab team and “labbers” is strong. They are the young change agents wishing to create new relationships for smarter and more empathetic communities. It will be interesting to follow the post-lab possibilities and opportunities that emerge from the lab process in the years to come, as the lab team continues with traditional advocacy, trying to raise awareness within the community and government, holding on to big ambitions, but moving forward one step at a time.

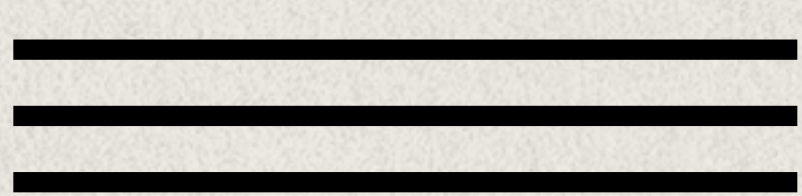
The
Global Social Lab
Landscape

06

In the last few decades there has been an explosion in the number of social labs around the world. There are design labs, change labs, digital labs, living labs, social innovation policy labs, social labs and many more. Some work within specific sectors while others work across sectors. Some use specific methods – such as design methods or formal research methods – while others employ hybrid methods. Some labs are permanent, others exist only for a matter of days. Some consider themselves to be incubators for new solutions, others see themselves as tools for learning new skills. The one common characteristic is that they experiment with new approaches to addressing social challenges.²⁹

What can we learn from these international experiences and examples? Can some of the lessons learnt in other contexts help us to refine and develop the social labs in Hong Kong? Some of the critical lessons here refer to expectations and whether the intended impacts are related to the process or outputs of social labs. Another critical issue is positioning – how can labs have the freedom to experiment while also securing the necessary buy-in from government? And with the growth in labs using data analytics and formal research methods, is there space for more experiential labs?

²⁹ Ruth Puttick (2014) Innovation Teams and Labs: A Practice Guide. London: Nesta



6.1 Social Labs – A New Approach?

In his book *The Social Labs Revolution: a new approach to solving our most complex challenges*, Zaid Hassan sets out the transformative potential of social labs. The premise of his argument is that “we have scientific and technical labs for solving our most difficult scientific and technical challenges. We need social labs to solve our most pressing social challenges.” For Zaid, social labs are incubators of new solutions. At the same time, the process used by social labs is significant since social labs are also “a space for multi-disciplinary collaboration”.

However, this claim that a social lab alone can generate long lasting social change seems highly questionable. Systemic change is usually the result of a number of elements coming together over a period of time – such as social movements, new laws and regulations, new technologies, new institutional forms, new business models, new skills and formation and a critical mass of practical examples – and usually involves the private sector, public sector and civil society. Moreover, multi-disciplinary collaboration does not necessarily lead to successful and sustainable results. It might be a catalyst and precondition for success, but in itself, it is no guarantee.

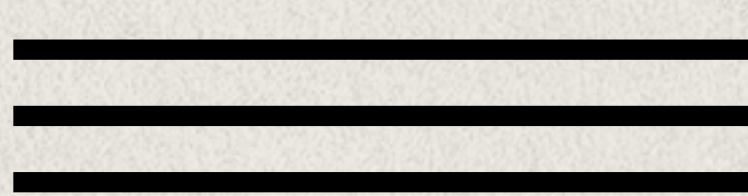
Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that social labs have indeed resulted in wide-ranging, long-lasting social change. One recent major review published by ESADE pointed to more modest impacts by concluding that **most labs lead to new methods and approaches, act as a learning platform, bring actors together and operate as agents of change.**³⁰ Why does this matter? To me, it seems important to have clear expectations about what social labs can achieve, otherwise they are simply being set up to fail.

When examining the global lab landscape it seems evident that most labs are torn between two often opposing intentions: the desire to create a space for learning and collaboration and the desire to solve actual problems. There is an enormous amount of pressure to “solve” problems and to deliver tangible results and to provide long lasting social change. As Kieboom observes, “The latest trend in our quest to fix the global challenges of the twenty-first century is to ‘lab’ complex issues”.³¹ However, in most cases these lofty ambitions are far from feasible.

However, some of the softer, more intangible outcomes such as changing attitudes, building new relationships and introducing new ways of working, can be highly valuable. Reflecting on the experience in Hong Kong, it is clear that the most valuable outcome of the social labs in Hong Kong was to create a safe space for opening up the interactions between citizens and government. Future Lab cycles should continue their role as catalyst for new thinking, new skills, new networks, and not necessarily as solution providers. The prototypes that are developed during the process should serve as attractors – a vehicle for collaboration, experimentation and learning.

³⁰ Labs for social innovation, Kyriaki Papageorgiou, ESADE Institute for social innovation.

³¹ Marlieke Kieboom (2014) *Lab matters: Challenging the practice of social innovation laboratories*. Amsterdam: Kennisland.



6.2 Positioning: Inside or Outside of Government?

One of the critical questions facing social labs is whether to sit inside or outside of government. Tõnurist and colleagues³² point to their status as “change agents”, suggesting they are structurally set apart from the rest of the public sector and operate with a large degree of autonomy in setting their targets and working methods. While labs are generally regarded as experimental in some sense, they vary significantly in their proximity to executive power. Some are centrally located within the executive branches of government; others sit between multiple government agencies and departments; while others operate as non-governmental organisations that are contracted to work on policy and public sector innovation.

There are trade offs to both approaches. As Geoff Mulgan explains in his paper *The Radical's Dilemma*, the risk is that if you work outside of government you risk having little impact, but if you work inside government you risk losing your radical edge:

*“...do you work from the outside to create a coherent alternative to the status quo, but risk being ignored and marginalised; or do you work within the system and directly influence the levers of power, but risk being co-opted and shifted from radical to incremental change?”*³³

There are labs at both ends of the spectrum – for example, at one end there is MindLab in Denmark which was for many years working at the heart of government, reporting to three government departments. At the other end of the spectrum are, for example, Kennisland and the MaRS Solutions Lab which work with government but are independent bodies outside of the government.

The labs within government have the advantage of a stable funding model and a clear mandate from government departments. Such labs are often considered a special unit or taskforce and report directly to departmental heads. The drawback is less freedom to act since they are directed by departmental goals and therefore have less room to operate beyond the borders of their institutional culture. Realising disruptive change in this context is challenging but not impossible. Government labs are often geared towards creating efficiencies and introducing new tools and methods to civil servants. They can advocate a change of practice and procedures but are less likely to achieve a change of culture and values. The UK's Policy Lab, for example, focuses on bringing new policy techniques to departments across the civil service to help them design services in a more “open, data-driven, digital and user-centred way.” This is a valuable way of supporting civil servants, but doesn't challenge the structures, processes and cultures which hinder innovation. Mindlab, which was recently closed down, set up numerous successful and impactful projects but found it difficult to change the way that government departments work.

³² Piret Tõnurist, Rainer Kattel, Veiko Lember (2015) 'Discovering Innovation Labs in the Public Sector'. Working Papers in Technology Governance and Economic Dynamics. The Other Canon Foundation, and Tallinn University of Technology, and the Ragnar Nurkse School of Innovation and Governance.

³³ Geoff Mulgan (2014) *The Radical's Dilemma: An Overview of the Practice and Prospects of Social and Public Labs*. London: Nesta.

Organisations working outside of government, such as Kennisland³⁴ in the Netherlands or the MaD social labs in Hong Kong deal with the opposite problem. They have no structural funding so have to find resources for each lab cycle. This can be achieved through a project-based consultancy model with the support of either philanthropic organisations or public bodies. However, one of the drawbacks of this approach is that labs might be seen as an external service provider for governments. In other cases they might lose some independence if their actions and proposals are shaped by the requirements of their funders.

Moreover, labs that get funding from philanthropic organizations – as in the case in Hong Kong – might find it difficult to get a real mandate from their government partners. Where government departments are not making a financial contribution to the lab process, there is often a sense among participating civil servants and public sector employees that they are free of obligations. Time can be a major constraint since lab work is often treated as something to be done alongside normal business. At Kennisland the lab team found it difficult to get civil servants to spend enough time to take part in the lab process. “Work as usual” was almost always more urgent than lab work. In addition, buy-in from senior management is often weak since the initiative is not “owned” by the Government. Innovation is still often treated as a hobby instead of an integral part of the system.

The future seems to be for labs that are creating new governance models, are positioned between government and civil society, and where at least part of the funding comes from government sources but where the lab has freedom to act. One model which fulfills most of these criteria, is the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in the UK, which applies insights from behavioural economics to help improve public policies and services.³⁵ It was set up in the heart of government (the Cabinet Office) following an initiative by the then Head of the Civil Service, Gus O'Donnell. It was set up as an in-house task force, and received commissions from specific government departments. Over the years, BIT has developed and refined its methodology and now uses a specific framework for developing its interventions. It has run numerous successful projects which have now become embedded in public policy – most notably on tax collection, organ donation, access to education and employment. BIT started to receive interest from NGOs and governments abroad and therefore decided to spin out as a social purpose company in 2014. The UK government is a shareholder and key strategic client of BIT but the team now has the flexibility to work for a wide range of organisations both internationally and at home. In this way, BIT works outside of government but with the critical support and buy-in from government. It operates completely independently, using its tried and tested methodology on subjects as diverse as education, gender, productivity, tax and financial capability.

³⁴ <https://www.kl.nl/en/>

³⁵ <https://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>

Another interesting model is being undertaken by InWithForward, a mission-driven business based in Canada.³⁶ Even though they do not call themselves a lab, their work could easily be described as such – they develop multi-disciplinary teams, use ethnographic and design methods to understand social issues, and design, test and iterate prototypes. Experimentation is at the heart of what they do. Unlike other social labs, however, their work is long term in nature. They work with government bodies (mostly service providers), as long term partners, rather than consultants. This means that they set up formal partnerships with local government organisations and share the risks and rewards of the work. Funding for the work comes from agencies, foundations, and government bodies. They are currently exploring a membership-based business model where organisations pay a fee to access shared talent, data, and learning resources for sustainable research and development. This approach, which they call Grounded Space, tries to embed innovation capacities and capabilities – research and development infrastructure – in the communities with which they work. They are building a shared back office for innovation and experimentation. As such, their work is not a one off change process, as most labs are, but a structural way to spark innovation within an existing context.

Looking at the international context it is fair to say that new ways to organise, fund and position social lab initiatives is needed. However, there are interesting models out there which can serve as inspiration. In order to secure buy-in from senior levels of government, what is most important is to create sustainable partnerships with public bodies. This can only be done when the public sector and civil society come together to develop the initiative together, and feel the same level of commitment.

³⁶ <https://inwithforward.com/>

6.3 From Experiential Design to Data Labs

In recent times, some of the most pioneering social/design labs have been closed down or are currently facing challenges. For example, the Helsinki Design Lab was closed down due to a lack of funding from its mother organisation SITRA. Mindlab, which was set up by government departments will close due to a change in the Danish political climate. And the future looks uncertain for the Laboratory for the City in Mexico City which was set up directly under the mayor who is facing increasing pressure to deliver concrete results.

While all these labs listed above were based on design methods, co-creation and inclusive approaches which created a lot of room for experimentation and improvisation, there now seems to be a rise in more evidence-based policy making and the use of open data. More and more governments are investing time and resources in making government data accessible with the broad goal of improving people's lives. Unsurprisingly, there is considerable hype around data labs. Such labs connect policy makers, government data owners, industry bodies, and university data scientists in order to help government and the social sector improve public policies and services through data science. Good examples are the Jakarta Pulse Lab³⁷ and GovLab³⁸ based in the US. They conduct research using existing data, they generate new tools and products for analysing data and they connect and train data innovators all over the world.

Yet much of the potential value of open data still remains untapped, in part because there are continual issues around the quality of data, a lack of standards across central and local government about how data is captured, handled and released, much data is not "open", and data analysis is seldom embedded in decision making processes. We could undoubtedly benefit from the insights that could be generated but there are significant challenges that need to be resolved. So, moving away from experiential design labs towards data labs may not be the most sensible option. Instead, one promising approach may be to combine the best of both worlds.

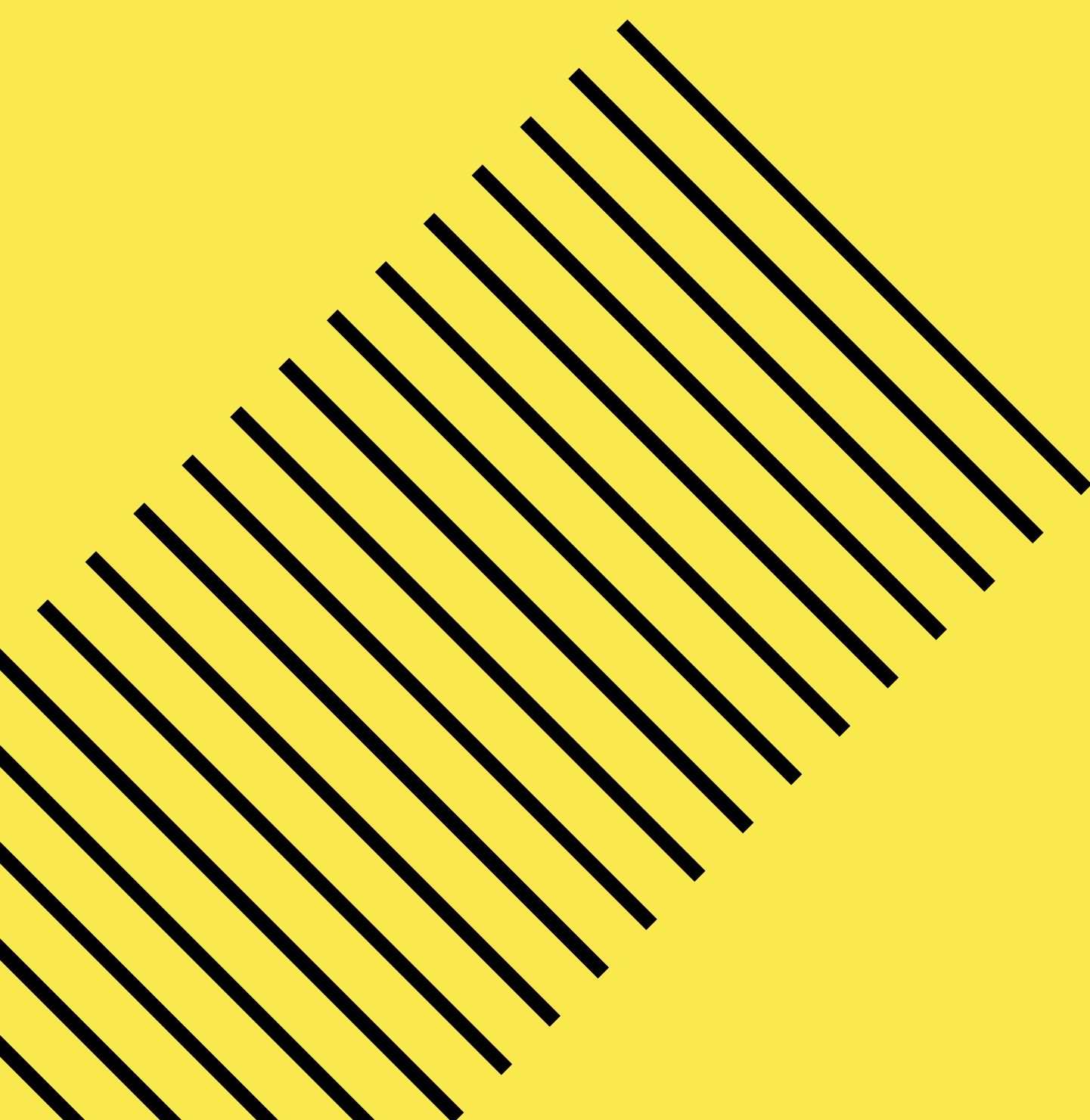
Social labs based on design methods have particular strengths in terms of understanding citizens' needs and experiences (through qualitative research), ideation, rapid experimentation and improvisation. Data labs in contrast tend to be based on generating insights and impact at the macro level and part of a positivist framing of policymaking as an empirically driven decision making process. As such, the two may actually fit together quite nicely - connecting the micro and the macro and the qualitative with the quantitative. Focusing on releasing open data, building new portals and applications starts with really understanding the needs of people. Data can only make sense and be put to use if it is connected to people's daily lives. The tools and practice of design based social labs, such as ethnographic methods, story collecting, and rapid prototyping could act as an excellent complement to evidence-based and data-based policy making.

³⁷ <https://www.unglobalpulse.org/jakarta>

³⁸ <http://www.thegovlab.org/projects.html>

07

Conclusion



Over the past two years, the JC MaD social Lab initiative has designed, developed and delivered three social labs, with the aim of designing policies and services for a better public life, through community participation, design thinking and co-creative experiments in the fields of public parks, public libraries and healthy streets. These were the first social labs of their kind in Hong Kong. They were themselves an experiment in bringing together citizens, civil servants and professionals to co-create new approaches to social issues. Not only did they deliver valuable experiences for those involved and the local community of Sham Shui Po in which these labs were based, they also provide valuable lessons for future social labs and for those engaged in social innovation in Hong Kong.

Each lab devised its own methodology, but in each case, the approach drew from ethnography, human centred design, action-research, systems thinking and methods for public participation. Each lab followed three stages: an exploratory research phase, an analysis and idea generation phase, and finally a prototype testing phase. Each lab was organised by the MaD team, developed in close collaboration with a government department and consisted of local citizens, civil servants, designers, community groups, researchers and facilitators. During the process, 15 prototypes were developed and thousands of people were involved in the labs – either as participants, contributors, interviewees or prototype testers.

The social labs proved a very valuable exercise – they helped participants develop new skills, encouraged new ways of thinking, fostered new networks and relationships, and provided a new model for public participation. Many lab team members felt that the labs provided a space where “new imaginations” were created, helping them reframe the way problems and solutions were conceptualised. It was through the lab process that new mindsets had arisen, that people had started to shift their attitudes about the roles of government, civil society and citizens – and started to see their own potential as changemakers. The labs were also seen as a convenor; a platform for creating new networks between different actors and different organisations.

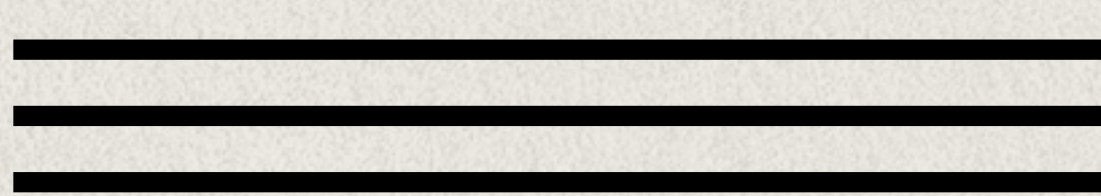
One of the most significant aspects of the lab process was to show citizens and civil servants that public participation could help to improve governance; **by opening up government structures to the insights and ideas of citizens, social labs helped to foster trust, empathy and to forge new relationships.** Civil servants felt that the process encouraged citizens to provide constructive feedback, rather than simply complaints, while citizens felt empowered, as agent of change in their own right. Together, citizens and civil servants felt that greater public participation could make public services more responsive to citizens’ needs and thereby underpin improvements and innovations in those arenas.

The lab experience also demonstrated the limitations to what could be achieved without buy-in vertically from senior levels of government, or horizontally, across relevant departments. For example, enthusiastic labbers had to fight hard to convince their departmental colleagues, especially those working in areas relating to standards, to allow the prototypes to be tested in situ. Labbers had to emphasise the experimental nature of the prototypes, that they would be in place for a matter of days, and that they could easily be removed in case of any incidents. In several cases, lab members were not successful in persuading their colleagues and prototypes had to be abandoned or amended. Even where prototypes were successful, the vast majority could not be implemented on a permanent basis either because to do so would require a change in guidelines, operating rules or even the law. In some cases it would have required additional resources, which were not yet forthcoming.

One of the striking things about the lab process was that the topics chosen – parks, streets and libraries – were relatively uncontentious issues. And yet, the lab teams came up against a fair amount of bureaucratic resistance and inertia. In this context, how would one design a lab in an area that was more contentious – such as education, housing, or urban renewal? This shows both the limits of social labs but also the need for social labs in Hong Kong.

There were some important lessons for future social labs in Hong Kong. Drawing on my observations of the lab process, it seems that there is a need to strengthen and develop a culture of reflective practice among lab team members. Driving change requires a continuous process of improvisation and anticipation in order to act strategically and systemically. Thus not the method is leading but the ability to reflect on one's practice and create a culture of continuous learning. Another lesson to consider is to be very explicit where social labs should be positioned in relation to government. The issue of positioning is critical – it determines whether social labs have the flexibility and freedom which is required for experimentation (and failure) but also the buy-in and adoption needed for changes to be made where prototypes have been shown to have a positive impact. There are a number of inside/outside models such as the Behavioural Insights Team in the UK or InWithForward in Canada which could provide a potential blueprint for future lab efforts.

At the same time, there has to be more realistic expectations of what social labs alone can achieve. Over the last few years bold claims have been made about the potential for social labs – with some going as far as to say that they provide a model for solving our most pressing social and environmental challenges. While social labs can and do play a critical role – in terms of changing mindsets, giving voice to citizens, improving skills and capabilities, fostering new relationships and new networks, and even developing new ideas – there is a limit to what these kinds of processes alone can achieve.



7.1 From Social Labs to Social R&D?

How can we most effectively amplify and embed the work of social labs? One potential route here is to think of **social labs as playing an important role within a social innovation ecosystem**. Just as labs in science and technology play a critical role in innovation systems, we need to think about social labs as part of a wider, more systemic approach to generating social and public innovations. So in this sense, it isn't just more social labs that is required, but a fertile ecosystem – a social R&D infrastructure – which makes it possible to experiment, a pipeline of innovative ideas and mechanisms to enable them to scale – both inside and outside of the public sector. This means investing in the dedicated institutions, roles, skills and resources which are required for innovation, experimentation and co-creation to take place in a more structured way. As Sarah Shulman argues, “We will need to invest along the entire development continuum from research to invention to innovation”³⁹. In concrete terms, this means investing in early stage research to identify citizens' needs and to develop new ideas and prototypes, in evaluations to identify what works, and in supporting innovations to spread and scale through, for example, the establishment of new networks, sharing best practices, providing access to capital, and commissioning and procurement.⁴⁰ But how do we achieve this? How do we create room for experimentation, innovation and creativity in organisations which are mostly focused on hierarchy and legality?

Potential elements of a social innovation ecosystem might include:

- **Developing the skills base**
(through training schemes, professional development, secondments etc.)
- **Ensuring a supportive regulatory and policy framework**
(making sure rules, regulations and procedures do not block innovation)
- **Access to funds**
(invest to save budgets, dedicated innovation budgets or social venture capital and social investment funds outside of government)
- **Dedicated innovation spaces**
(e.g. teams, units etc. which can carry out experiments, prototypes, trials and formal evaluations)
- **Leadership and culture**
(visible leadership, incentives to support innovation and learning culture to share, reflect and collaborate)
- **Procurement and commissioning**
(e.g. commissioning innovative services, outcomes based commissioning, joint commissioning and personalised budgets)

³⁹ Sarah Shulman (2017) *Develop and Deliver: Making the case for social R&D infrastructure*. Employment and Social Development Canada.

⁴⁰ Robin Murray, Julie Caulier-Grice and Geoff Mulgan (2010) *The Open Book of Social Innovation*, London: Nesta.

None of these are easy or quick fixes. Reshaping the organisational culture of government agencies to really embed these processes and structures is not straightforward. And yet the benefits are clear – being more systematic about supporting and nurturing public and social innovations could make governments more effective, efficient and better able to meet the pressing social, economic and environmental challenges of today.

A first start could be for more social labs and co-creative opportunities to take place so that government departments become more confident in adopting new ways of interacting with citizens. The social labs show that this is possible and that there is a lot to gain from being more inclusive and open. Doing so could lead to fewer complaints, better ideas and more effective responses. In concrete terms, this might include working with citizens to better understand the issues at hand, to develop ideas and to test them in practice. The experience of the social labs show that it can be so much more effective to co-create with citizens:

“From LCSD information, there are around 1,000 complaints a year. But our prototypes, innovative and unconventional, caused zero complaint. There is a lesson learnt: active public participation does not only improve public services, it can be a solution to the complaints culture in Hong Kong. Can we cultivate partnership between the civil society and government?”

–Johnson, Park Lab, Civil Servant

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Appendix A

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Chris is a longtime social innovator fascinated by our society's transitions. Her primary focus is on putting innovative ideas into action and to find new approaches, strategies and (design) interventions for complex social problems. Chris regularly advises, speaks and teaches on social innovation. Currently she is an advisor for the Dutch Council for Culture. She also serves on the board of various public organisations and is an independent advisor and researcher.

For the last 10 years Chris was the director of Kennisland, a think tank for social innovation based in the Netherlands, where she had developed many innovative programmes, methods and startup projects, such as the Education Pioneers (an innovation fund for teachers), LinC (a school for cultural changemakers), the Kafka Brigade (a method to tackle bureaucracy) and the Social Labs (a laboratory for social change). All these initiatives share three common threads: they all embrace the idea that innovation and learning should go hand in hand; that theory must be supported by practice, rather than the other way around; and that asking questions can be more powerful than knowing the answers.

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