

# AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY INNOVATION TRENDS

## PART ONE: DESIGN-BASED APPROACHES

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In this first of a series of papers on trends in Community Innovation, I will explore two approaches that have their roots in the practice and rigour of design: Design Thinking and Social Labs. These approaches draw heavily on Community Engagement, iterative and experimental processes, and creative collaboration as pathways to effect change.

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<http://events.tamarackcommunity.ca/community-change-festival>

Are you a Design Thinker? A Social Innovator? A Behavioural Economist? Do you use Systems Thinking, Co-Design, or Labs to effect change? If you're thinking about these terms in the context of *community* change, chances are that you're engaging in the practice of Community Innovation. Tamarack has identified Community Innovation as one of five interconnected practices that we believe are central to the work of community change. Amongst the others – Community Engagement, Collaborative Leadership, Evaluating Impact, and Collective Impact – the practice of Community Innovation is one of being able to draw upon new perspectives, approaches, ideas, and experiments to scale community change.

Many new approaches are becoming increasingly popular in the work of community change, and all of them make a bold promise – that using them *effectively* will lead to the resolution of our great intractable problems: poverty, homelessness, climate change, and so on. The palette of approaches for community changemakers is ever-expanding, but with all of these new approaches and trends, how do those working to effect community change know where to start, what to draw upon, and what to leave behind?

In this series of papers I hope to provide clarity on these different approaches for Community Innovation by: identifying some of the most prominent approaches for change today; providing

a starting point for understanding the value of these approaches for community change; and sharing places where you can learn more if it feels that a particular approach might be what could inspire your community change efforts. Although the lines between all of these approaches are incredibly muddled, I find it helpful to think of them within four broad categories:

### 1. DESIGN-FOCUSED METHODS

These approaches have their roots in the field of design, drawing heavily on Community Engagement, iterative and experimental processes, and encouraging creative collaboration. Importantly, these approaches are often solution-agnostic: they don't begin with a concept of what a solution will be, but instead provide a framework towards building the solution that best fits the challenge at hand. Design Thinking/ Human-Centred Design and Social Labs are prominent design-based approaches.

### 2. SCOPE- AND SCALE-FOCUSED METHODS

These approaches focus on specific levers for social change. Ranging from focusing on systems to focusing on small changes in our environments, they provide insight into specific leverage points for change. Behavioural Economics and the broader field of Behavioural Psychology look at the role that our environment (e.g., cues in our spaces, the words we choose, and the content of our interactions) plays in shaping our behaviours and how we can use that knowledge to effect positive behaviour change. Meanwhile, Systems Thinking focuses on how we can conceptualize the relationships between systems and understand where potential intervention points might be.

### 3. FINANCE-FOCUSED METHODS

These approaches focus on the role that financing and financial structures play in supporting social change. Social Finance is primarily concerned with models for funding and scaling social innovations, while Social Enterprise and Social Business are an attempt to fill the gaps that binary non-profit and for-profit business models leave in creating social change.

### 4. INCLUSION-FOCUSED METHODS

While they also have a focus on design, Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Co-Design are approaches that focus explicitly on positioning those with lived experience as the designers of change. They provide a unique lens through which community changemakers can approach the inclusion of those impacted by a change in shaping it themselves.

While this is not an exhaustive list, I hope this will be a starting point for community changemakers to be able to navigate the current and emerging trends that are shaping the environment of Community Innovation. While some may advocate the use of one approach over another, at the Tamarack Institute we believe that the process of Community Innovation is

unique to each community. Each of the approaches mentioned above contain tools, methods, and resources that may be helpful in your specific context as complements to the four other interconnected practices that are core to community change.

## INTRODUCING DESIGN-BASED APPROACHES

Design-based approaches integrate well with Community Engagement, Collaborative Leadership, Evaluating Impact, and Collective Impact. Design Thinking frameworks provide processes and paths that collaborative leaders can draw upon in their efforts. The field contains a wealth of ways to bring diverse perspectives to the table and build a unifying vision. Design Thinking processes are also naturally flexible and adaptable – well suited to the realities of leading change in communities.

Meanwhile, Social Labs provide one potential container for a Collective Impact approach. The Lab structure intentionally addresses some of the core conditions of Collective Impact 2.0 and 3.0 (Weaver and Cabaj); Labs typically provide: an explicit container for change (including space, place, and resources), approaches to developing a common agenda, pathways to Community Engagement, and focus explicitly on high-leverage activities.

Design-based approaches can also play a role in addressing some of the challenges of Evaluating Community Change. In the absence of a predetermined method for evaluation, these approaches can be used to actually *design* the evaluation method. Exploring which indicators are most relevant to those impacted by a change, and which evaluation methods yield useful information is but a particular application of a design-based approach.

With that in mind, I hope that the remainder of this paper will provide a starting point in understanding how design-based approaches may be used to bolster your community change efforts.

## DESIGN THINKING

### MOVING BETWEEN REFLECTION AND ACTION, CREATIVELY



**Design Thinking is a process for creative problem solving.**

**Coe Leta Stafford, Managing Director IDEO U (Stafford)**



Design Thinking, popularized by innovation firms such as IDEO and institutions such as Stanford's d.School, is being adopted as an approach to achieving innovative outcomes across the private, public, and voluntary sectors. The promise of this approach is alluring – that seeking to deeply understand the perspective of those impacted by a service, program, or system, and adopting an iterative, prototype-driven approach to problem-solving will result in revolutionary changes that will benefit all. But, is that promise always possible? What exactly is Design Thinking, and how is it different from other similar approaches such as Human-Centred Design?

The last question is easiest to address – in practice Design Thinking and Human-Centred Design are often used to refer to the same core idea: using the principles and practices of the field of design (e.g., Industrial Design) to approach the creation of new ideas and tools that address all sorts of challenges (from here onward I will simply use the term Design Thinking). Of course, even that definition doesn't quite explain how we can 'do' Design Thinking - it is not simply a process that can be followed step-by-step.

For me, the most important framework for anyone hoping to embed Design Thinking in their organization, community, or institution is the diagram on the following page.

#### *Questions for Reflection*

- How well do I and my organization know the people who are impacted by our work?
- To what extent does it feel that I and my organization are able to generate creative approaches to our challenges?
- To what extent do I and my organization experiment in safe ways and learn from our mistakes?

If it feels that any of these areas are lacking, Design Thinking will likely be helpful to learn more about as you approach Community Innovation.



*Damien Newman's Design Squiggle*

This is what Design Thinking looks and feels like in practice – it is messy, ambiguous, chaotic, intuitive, and disruptive, but something different usually emerges. Before exploring the value of Design Thinking for community change, remember that **Design Thinking is not something you can simply turn on or off – using it to solve one problem and not another.** Instead, it is a collection of processes and practices that help to generate new and valuable solutions to a problem. Because it is explicitly focused on the generation and adoption of what is new and valuable, the body of work provides very helpful tools and approaches that community changemakers can draw upon to guide and strengthen their work.

IDEO's online school, IDEO U suggests that there are three essential aspects of Design Thinking: Empathy (understanding human perspectives), Ideation (generating lots of ideas), and Experimentation (testing those ideas in the real world) (Stafford). These natural human capabilities are fascinatingly drilled out of us in our educational and professional lives, which is what makes them so valuable for us as we work to effect change. We are encouraged on a daily basis to draw upon expert opinion over lived experience, to suggest only 'good' ideas, and to avoid making mistakes. These tendencies act counter to Empathy, Ideation, and Experimentation, so part of the process of drawing upon Design Thinking is one of helping these aspect flourish in ourselves and in others once more.

## DESIGN THINKING IS BUILT UPON HUMAN PERSPECTIVES

A critical mistake that is often made in effecting change is neglecting or misunderstanding the perspectives of those who are impacted. Many of our systems and institutions are historically grounded in top-down approaches. Pause for a moment and think about who decides what is most important for children to learn in school or how to best help people experiencing homelessness and poverty. How closely are the perspectives of those most impacted by those decisions connected with those who make them?

What is most challenging about this issue is that it's hard for us to recognize when we are taking a 'we know best' approach, particularly if we think we understand someone else's experience. Here's a quick reality check – **We can never truly walk in someone else's shoes.** In my opinion, Design Thinking at its best starts from the premise that we will never truly understand the perspectives of those who our work impacts, but that we can work towards improving our understanding and creating change from those perspectives. Approaches like ethnography (the systematic study of people and cultures) and stakeholder interviews are all part of broadening our perspectives.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Before diving into the methods around understanding other's perspectives, here's a quick activity that you can try on your own, outside of your professional responsibilities.

- Write down everything that you think you know about the perspective of a single person who your work impacts. An [empathy map](#) is a great tool to do this. Pay attention to anything that you're not quite sure of!
- Find someone who is most impacted by your work and arrange to spend an hour together in the place that is most comfortable for them. Treat them to coffee, lunch, or dinner. Most people are happy to connect with someone who is curious about them, particularly if broadening your perspective is your sole agenda.
- Now, connect with that person. Seek to learn broadly about them – who they are, what they have experienced, what their skills and struggles are, before you explore how they experience your work or your organization. The most important thing here is that you start with a beginner's mind – assuming that you know absolutely nothing about this person and being completely open to hearing their perspective.
- Immediately after you've finished connecting with that person, find a quiet place and jot down as many thoughts as you can about what you've experienced. What did you learn? What was most surprising to you? Was there anything that challenged your preconceptions? Were there any things that you expected to come up that didn't?
- Then, return back to your empathy map and revisit what you wrote. Was there anything that you got wrong? Anything that you got right? Anything missing? Were there any things that you expected to come up that didn't?

If this activity proves interesting and helps shed a new perspective on your work, you're well on your way to deepening your practice in this area. You can continue to explore how to incorporate this type of thinking in your work through the stories in [Hidden in Plain Sight](#) by Jan Chipchase or the tools and methods shared in [The Convivial Toolbox](#) by Sanders and Stappers.

## DESIGN THINKING IS BUILT UPON THE OPEN GENERATION OF IDEAS

Have you ever been shy to speak up or been afraid that you might have the wrong answer to a question? If so, you've encountered one of the biggest barriers to generating new ideas. Even if we think we're creating a space to encourage new ideas and new ways of thinking, our habits and practices often undermine what we intend.

Fortunately, Design Thinking practitioners have a deep knowledge of how to create spaces for creative ideas to emerge. d. School's six rules for brainstorming provide a good starting point.

### SIX RULES FOR BRAINSTORMING (Stanford d. School)

**Defer judgment** – Separating idea generation from idea selection strengthens both activities. For now, suspend critique. Know that you'll have plenty of time to evaluate the ideas after the brainstorm.

**Encourage wild ideas** – Breakout ideas are right next to the absurd ones.

**Build on the ideas of others** – Listen and add to the flow of ideas. This will springboard your group to places no individual can get to on their own.

**Go for volume** – The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.

**One conversation at a time** – Maintain momentum as a group. Save the side conversations for later.

**Headline** – Capture the essence of an idea quickly and move on. Don't stall the group by going into a long-winded idea.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

The next time you're trying to come up with new ideas, try the following:

- Prepare for your brainstorming session by spending time thinking of the right question to ask. [Crafting "How Might We" Questions](#) is a tool that can help you work through this process effectively.
- Set a timer for brainstorming – this is the time during which all of the rules for brainstorming will be active. 15 to 20 minutes is a good amount of time to work with a single question.
- Pick a person to moderate the group – this person's sole job is to make sure the rules of brainstorming are upheld, paying particular attention to opportunities to build on others' ideas and watching for judgement if it happens.
- Challenge the group to go for quantity, not quality. Make it a game (e.g., "let's fill this whiteboard with ideas").
- Reflect with the group on the experience. What was helpful and unhelpful? How would they approach brainstorming next time?

## DESIGN THINKING IS BUILT UPON TESTING IDEAS IN THE REAL WORLD

The last foundational tenet of Design Thinking is that whatever we think we know, the real test is what happens in the real world. Designers find ways to prototype ideas – building scale mockups, models, and sketches to give form to ideas. The benefit of taking ideas into the world before they are fully formed is that you can see how the world responds, if you're watching carefully and honestly enough.

Design Thinking as a field provides a multitude of possible ways to prototype and test ideas. The following short list contains some of the methods that might be most helpful for community change efforts.

### QUICK AND DIRTY COMMUNITY INNOVATION PROTOTYPING METHODS

#### Roleplay

Rather than talking about how your community could be different, why not act it out? Putting yourself in the situation that you're hoping to create can help you more concretely think through what that will actually look like and feel like. Do you think youth mentorship is best done by peers or by experts? Why not try on both hats and see what it feels like? Better yet, invite some youth to join you and interact with people portraying your 'peer' or 'expert' mentors.

#### Sketching

Designers' bread and butter is sketching rather than talking. When we only speak our ideas, it's easy to think that everyone else has the same understanding of what we're saying as we do. Instead, sketching the key elements that our Food Bank should have to make members feel more comfortable gives us room to clarify our ideas and gives others the opportunity to add or subtract what they think is most important.

#### Video

A great way to help your community anchor and work towards a desired change is actually to show what that change could look like. Although design agencies often use higher-production approaches (like [this one](#) from Bridgeable), a cellphone, some friends, and a few hours are all you need to make an inspiring and effective video that communicates your vision. Check out [these three videos](#) that show that big budgets and time are not needed to communicate an idea through video.



## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Try taking a few moments to work through the following the next time you're working on creating something new, as a way to practice using a Design Thinking approach. What you're working on can be anything – a presentation to your team, a new way of working with community members, or a new program. There's a great tendency for us to want to keep our ideas to ourselves until they're fully polished and 'ready,' but that approach keeps us blind to all the assumptions we have about what will and won't happen, as well as which details are and aren't important.

- What are my make-or-break assumptions about what I'm working on? What **has** to be true for it to achieve what I want? *For example: I assume that people will want to sign up for my exciting new community program if I open a booth at our upcoming street festival.*
- How can I test that assumption, by **making it as real as possible** and **getting into its real context**, within the span of an hour? *For example: I could ask a close friend how they feel about the program, but that's not exactly a 'real-world' situation. A better approach might simply be to try recruiting people in a community location while testing different ways of 'pitching' my program.*
- Reflect: What did I learn from the experience of making it real? Was there anything that surprised me or that I should do differently next time? *For example, it turned out that most people didn't want to talk to me at all – they thought I was looking for donations for my charity! Maybe I need to experiment with how and where I try to get people interested before I get too invested in this approach.*

For a fun example of how rapid prototyping can be effective, take a look at these [before](#) and [after](#) videos for an iPhone app that design firm IDEO developed. Notice how with very little time and resources the design team was able to effectively communicate the core idea that they were exploring. This type of prototype allows others to engage with it – to get inspired by it, build off of it, or tell you that they hate it, before you invest heavily in an idea that may be totally on the wrong track.

## WHERE DESIGN THINKING MAY NOT BE BEST

There are many situations in which Design Thinking may not be best. Some of the most common ones I have encountered are:

- 1. You are focused on optimization of an existing program rather than reconsidering and reframing it**

Design Thinking isn't necessarily *wrong* in this situation, but Empathy, Ideation, and Experimentation can sometimes run counter to optimization efforts if not managed effectively. Design Thinking approaches usually challenge the status quo, and while they

can be applied to challenges of optimization (e.g., improving the experience of a food bank member) they're just as likely to challenge the premises that the optimization is based upon (e.g., if you hear from members that they would prefer a living wage to a better food bank experience). Design Thinking also doesn't have explicit tools or approaches for streamlining effort and cutting costs, unlike other approaches like [Lean](#). If you're applying Design Thinking to optimize an existing program, you'll need to be explicit about why this is the right approach and what the constraints of the design process are – what can't be changed, and why?

## 2. Your organization or community is already stretched beyond its capacity

While the body of work behind Design Thinking does suggest that following this approach can get to better results sooner, it takes time for a group to become comfortable with this new approach. When groups are already overextended, many of the practices of design thinking (careful reflection, play, prototyping, stakeholder engagement, and so on) can feel like a waste of time, leading to frustration with the process. Avoid using Design Thinking to reduce effort in the short-term – it usually takes time and effort for groups to learn how to use these tools effectively for their work.

## 3. You are already committed to a solution

If you already have a solution in mind, Design Thinking may not be the best approach. Empathy, Ideation, and Experimentation are all geared to generating new solutions or adapting existing ones to best suit the needs of our situation. If you are confident that your social challenge could be best addressed through an app, a Design Thinking approach might reveal that a face-to-face service might be better. Reconciling this tension could mean sacrificing effort that has already been spent in developing the solution you were committed to or disregarding what has been learned through the process. Design Thinking approaches are best used when we have some sense of the change that we want to see, but are not beholden to only one way of making that change happen.

## GOING DEEPER WITH DESIGN THINKING

If you've started to explore some of the practices suggested above and want to learn more, there are a number of free or easily accessible resources on Design Thinking that you can dive into:

- [Acumen and IDEO.org](#) offer a free, 9-week online course on Human-Centred Design
- [Change by Design](#) by Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO provides a more in-depth overview of Design Thinking
- Stanford's d. School offers an [online crash course](#) in Design Thinking, along with a great reference for [tools, approaches, and methods](#)
- The Tamarack Institute will be hosting a free, [1-hour introductory webinar](#) to elaborate upon some of the topics covered here and provide more context

Most importantly, **none of these resources will make you a practitioner.** Bolstering your own skill set further requires taking these concepts, applying them to your context, and learning and adapting as you go.

## SOCIAL LABS

### EXPERIMENTING WITH CHANGING SYSTEMS

“Labs in the social sector [are] a highly designed and expert facilitated process clearly intended to support multi-stakeholder groups in addressing a complex social problem.”

Frances Westley and Sam Laban (Westley et al.)

New social labs are emerging across Canada on what sometimes feels like a weekly basis. But what is the essential glue that connects such disparate organizations and initiatives as the Institute Without Boundaries, the MaRS Solutions Lab, and the Winnipeg Boldness project? What does the process that Westley and Laban mention above actually look like in action, and how can community changemakers make use of it? What does this mean for those who are working towards community change?

The movement towards Social Labs starts from the premise that – a) our current ways of working are not resolving our biggest social issues, and b) that we need to create infrastructure to support Social R&D if we hope to change those ways of working (similar to how an R&D department in a business might develop a disruptive new product or solution). “Lab” is the name given to refer to this infrastructure.

As a consequence of this broad definition, many different types of Labs have emerged which sometimes gives the impression that there is very little in common between Labs themselves. Geoff Mulgan of the UK’s National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts (NESTA) gives a thorough overview of the sheer diversity of the Lab ecosystem:

#### *Critical Questions for Reflection (adapted from Innoweave)*

- To what extent does your challenge need to be addressed at a systems level?
- To what extent is your challenge complex and multivariate?
- To what extent are you lacking existing models and evidence-based approaches to resolving your challenge?
- To what extent will you need to engage a diversity of perspectives and organizations to resolve your challenge?
- To what extent are you willing to commit time and resources to resolving this challenge?

If you answered on the ‘high’ side of most of these questions, Social Labs will likely be helpful to learn more about as you approach Community Innovation.

## METHODS FOR LABS [adapted from Hassan]

**Design Labs** try to introduce Design Thinking into government or civil society (e.g., Mindlab, TACSI, DesignGov)

**Citizen-Led Ideas Incubators** focus on incubating the ideas generated by citizens, rather than experts (e.g., Sociallab, Goodlab, or BRAC's Social Innovation Lab)

**Data and Digital Technology Labs** emphasize the collection, use, and dissemination of data and digital technology (e.g., Code for America and MySociety)

**Experiment-Based Labs** are driven by formal experimentation such as Randomized Control Trials and Behavioural Psychology (e.g., J-PAL, the Behavioural Insights team, and the Center for Advanced Hindsight).

**Organization-based Labs** work within a single organization (e.g., UNICEF's Labs in Kosovo and Uganda)

**Process-Oriented Labs** focus on change processes to build multi-stakeholder partnerships for change (e.g., the Engineering Change Lab)

**Funding Labs** use open funding to support many different types of projects and many different types of methods (e.g., NESTA's Innovation Lab)

**Incubators/Accelerators** aim to support the creation of new ventures that address social needs (e.g., the Centre for Social Innovation)

Despite this diversity, Zaid Hassan of Reos partners provides a helpful and concise definition that starts to bring some clarity about the essential similarities between Labs:

*“Social labs are platforms for addressing complex social challenges that have three core characteristics.*

1. **They are social.** *Social labs start by bringing together diverse participants to work in a team that acts collectively. They are ideally drawn from different sectors of society, such as government, civil society, and the business community. The participation of diverse stakeholders beyond consultation, as opposed to teams of experts or technocrats, represents the social nature of social labs.*
2. **They are experimental.** *Social labs are not one-off experiences. They're ongoing and sustained efforts. The team doing the work takes an iterative approach to the challenges it wants to address, prototyping interventions and managing a portfolio of promising solutions. This reflects the experimental nature of social labs, as opposed to the project-based nature of many social interventions.*
3. **They are systemic.** *The ideas and initiatives developing in social labs, released as prototypes, aspire to be systemic in nature. This means trying to come up with solutions that go beyond dealing with a part of the whole or symptoms and address the root cause of why things are not working in the first place.” (Hassan)*

## CONNECTING COMMUNITIES, LABS, AND INNOVATION

This definition provides a starting point for thinking about Labs' usefulness for Community Innovation. If you are thinking about effecting social change through experiments and changing systems, Labs as a concept can provide:

- CREDIBILITY** – Labs are a recognized pathway for systemic change. Although their effectiveness is the subject of debate (Martin et al.) they are a vehicle under which you can frame a social, experimental, and systemic approach to change. In very much the same way as the 'naming' of Collective Impact and its conditions for success by Kania and Kramer in 2011 provided a foundation for communities and funders to label their efforts under a recognized banner, so too Labs provide a way to frame a certain type of initiative in a way that can be understood and supported by others.. For Community Innovators seeking funding and momentum, a Lab is a credible frame (although it should be noted that just like Collective Impact, simply invoking the name or blindly applying the models is not a recipe for the desired impact).
- INSPIRATION** – While the frameworks that explain what labs are and how they achieve impact are nebulous there is a key strength in the diversity of Lab approaches: they provide a menu of possible approaches for effecting change. If you're hoping to support locally-led initiatives that draw upon indigenous or community strengths, values, and perspectives, the Winnipeg Boldness Project could provide a helpful blueprint. If you're looking to shift the culture and behavior of an institution or organization, Alberta's CoLab might be a better framework to draw upon. Lastly, if you're looking to provide a space where new socially-impactful initiatives can grow and flourish, the Centre for Social Innovation would be a good place to start. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any good directories where one can browse all of Canada's Social Labs, but a starting point is the work done by Dr. Gary Martin (Canada's Social Innovation Labs). As well, the work done by the Bridgespan Group and the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR) provide helpful blueprints for getting started with Labs (Insight Center Staff; Westley et al.).

### *Labs are diverse*

The three examples below illustrate the diversity in how a Lab framework is being applied across Canada.

**The Winnipeg Boldness Project** "is a child-centred, early childhood development project that will bring together deep community wisdom and world-leading science in order to bring about large-scale change." (Winnipeg Boldness Project)

**Alberta's CoLab** is a design team within the Department of Energy looking at how to develop policy differently. (Ryan)

**The Centre for Social Innovation** "offers coworking, community, and acceleration services to people who are changing the world." (Centre for Social Innovation)

- **URGENCY** – If it feels as though no one around you is acknowledging the need for experimentation or investment in Social R&D, the corpus of work around Labs is filled to the brim with credible support and urgency. Nearly every discussion about labs themselves begins with a discussion on the need for different ways of approaching our social challenges (this [white paper](#) by Westley, Goebey, and Robinson is a good example), and [this paper](#) by Dr. Sarah Schulman provides a foundation for the need for, and pathways to investing in Social Innovation in Canada.

Even if your Community Innovation efforts are not as wide-reaching, as formal, or as ambitious as the examples shared above, Labs provide examples of how to create space for collaboration between diverse people, conduct expanding experiments, and seek to shift the systems we operate within. Communities are the perfect space for a Lab-based approach because they provide a real, physical container for this type of work. One of the risks of Labs, like many approaches to social innovation, is that those doing the work are multiple degrees of separation removed from those who are impacted, either by time, by space, or socially. Innovating within communities reduces this risk and makes it easier to collaborate, experiment, and find the pain points where systems act as barriers to the change that communities want to see. As highlighted in my recent article [This is Community Innovation](#), communities have access to unique assets that can facilitate this type of work: local knowledge and context, bounded scale and specificity, connection to outcomes, space and place for exploration, and community members themselves. Whether you use them formally or are simply guided by them, the ways that Labs operate may help unlock these assets.

## THE DARK SIDE OF LABS

It should be apparent that Labs, as with all of the approaches shaping Community Innovation, are not a panacea for our many social challenges. It's particularly important to understand where a Lab model may not be appropriate, and some of the questions that may not get asked when considering how to use the model *well*. For anyone who is particularly keen on Labs Jonathan Veale, Chief Design Officer at Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, wrote an excellent and cautionary [open letter](#). The first step he recommends? "Kill the Design Lab or Change Lab or Whatever Lab." The letter provides a great counterpoint to our current love affair with Labs, and some critical considerations for those of us thinking about using a Lab model.

The Bridgespan Group has also identified five conditions where a Lab approach is inappropriate:

### **WHEN ARE SOCIAL LABS NOT BEST?** [from the [Bridgespan Group](#)]

**If the problem is a technical problem and/or the solution is largely known**

**If the main objective is action planning (e.g., business planning)**

**If the need lies primarily in quantitative data analysis (e.g., if a key analysis of an existing idea is the core of the work)**

**If the need for formally-evaluated, evidence-based results is high**

**If there is not sufficient willingness to engage in an iterative process**

Building upon these cautions, there are a few critical questions that are often obscured in the excitement of applying the Lab model:

#### **HOW WILL YOU MEASURE SUCCESS?**

“What gets measured, gets done” is an apt adage to consider here. Since part of the process of forming Labs is carving out room for experimentation, the metrics for success also change dramatically. In the absence of traditional measures of success, it’s even more vital to be crystal clear on what ‘good’ looks like for the Lab at every step. Will you celebrate the number of experiments the Lab runs? What about the degree to which systems change is effected? Or the breadth of people who get involved in the Lab’s effort?

One of the biggest pitfalls for this type of work is that the team loses its way. When working through complex, ambiguous problems with no predefined path to follow, teams need a way of knowing where they are headed and assessing whether each step they take is moving towards, or away from that goal. Labs that are simply motivated by surfacing new ideas and approaches risk creating a litany of beautiful but woefully impractical solutions.

#### **WHAT INFLUENCE DO YOU ACTUALLY HAVE OVER THE SYSTEMS YOU HOPE TO CHANGE?**

An interesting Catch-22 of Labs is that part of the process of formation (carving out a distinct and safe space for experimentation) often distances the Lab from the very system that it’s trying to change. When a Lab makes recommendations or runs experiments that demonstrate the potential for change, what leverage does it have to get the necessary systems to make changes themselves? This is a huge potential downside to bringing in outside change agents as your Lab team – if the members of the Lab don’t have the leverage themselves to influence systems change, they risk becoming yet another voice lost in the cacophony. Within a

community this can be different if your Lab is not composed solely of design and systems thinking experts, but people who have deep connections to the systems that affect your issue – community, municipal, nonprofit, and business leaders.

### HOW WILL YOUR LAB LEAD TO SUSTAINED CHANGE?

Businesses fund research and development efforts because there is money to be made in being a leader. Though Social Labs are also powered by money (and time, and energy) there isn't often an explicit or direct financial incentive to support the Lab in the long run. Some Labs rely on a cost-recovery model as a pathway to sustainability, while others are funded to exist only for a period of time. The latter are particularly susceptible to [Snap Back](#), the tendency of the resilience of our dominant systems to win out over change efforts. Labs should have a clear plan for what happens when the funding, momentum, or people are no longer available to maintain the Lab. Our communities and systems shift regularly – the political cycle being one of the most tangible examples – and Labs that don't prepare for those shifts risk spending effort, time, and energy on an ultimately fruitless activity.

### PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

While Labs require investment and commitment, there are some quick ways that you can start to explore whether a Lab approach may be relevant to your community change effort, while also experimenting with some of the tools that guide Lab practitioners. Try exploring some of the following questions in your community:

**1. What is the nature of the system that creates the challenge that I am trying to address?**

Understanding the systems that we find ourselves within is a key starting point for understanding where we might begin to effect change. A systems map is a great way to get started with visualizing the complex interactions that happen between elements of a system. FSG provides a [great overview](#) of the types of systems maps that might be most relevant for your issue, but the simplest approach is often to create a map of the people and institutions that influence your situation by visually mapping out your thoughts on the following three questions:

- Who directly affects or is directly affected by the challenge I've identified, and in what way?
- Who indirectly affects or is indirectly affected by the challenge I've identified?
- What are the relationships that exist between these people that create the challenge?

**2. Who do we need at the table?**

Using your draft systems map identify people you think would need to be involved in driving or supporting a Lab initiative. Go and have conversations with them. Do they see the system in the same way? What else are they able to add to your understanding of the challenge?



### 3. What resources can we draw upon to develop change?

Working with the group of people that you have started to connect with, identify the resources that exist within your community that might provide room to experiment. Are there any physical spaces that you can use? Any people that would be interested in prototyping change in your community? Any organizations that would be willing to support these efforts? Creating an [Asset Map](#) for your community can help to identify where there might be the most support for a Lab approach, and give you a starting point for bringing others on board.

## GOING DEEPER WITH LABS

If you are thinking about implementing a Lab-based approach in your community, the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience has compiled a [comprehensive, step-by-step approach](#) to exploring and launching a Social Lab, complete with additional resources and case studies to explore.

## INTEGRATING THESE APPROACHES

Design-based approaches provide exciting and challenging potential pathways to Community Innovation, and they are best leveraged when integrating them with other practices. Design-based approaches provide ways to surface and support new ideas within Collective Impact or Community Engagement efforts, and in turn the practices of Collaborative Leadership and Evaluation are important to anyone hoping to use these approaches effectively.

In the papers that follow, I'll explore some of the other trends within the practice of Community Innovation to round out the palette of tools that you can draw upon: Scope and Scale-focused methods, Finance-focused methods, and Inclusion-focused methods. If there are others that you encounter that you would like to know more about, or think that others should know about, share your thoughts with us! You know your context best, and as Community Innovators we all grow when we can learn from what works and what doesn't in each of our communities. You can reach me directly at [galen@tamarackcommunity.ca](mailto:galen@tamarackcommunity.ca)

### TAMARACK'S FIVE IDEAS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Tamarack has focused expertise in five idea areas that our experience has shown to be central to the work of community change.

1. **Collective Impact** – One of the biggest challenges facing community change leaders is impacting systems and policies to improve the well-being of citizens. The Collective Impact idea provides a useful framework for community change that promotes a disciplined form of multi-sector collaboration that enables different sectors to work together effectively, in a comprehensive way, to address complex social and/or environmental issues with a focus on systems and policy change,
2. **Community Engagement** – Community Engagement is the process by which citizens are engaged to work and learn together on behalf of their communities to create and realize bold visions for the future. Tamarack stresses the importance of approaching engagement with an outcomes-based lens, of always involving context experts, and to provide broad community ownership of solutions whenever possible.
3. **Community Innovation** – We see Community Innovation as a particular form of social innovation that is place-based within the specific geography of a community. As dynamic “living labs,” communities offer the perfect container for innovation.
4. **Collaborative Leadership** – The premise of Collaborative Leadership is that if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways, with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of organizations and communities. At Tamarack, we believe that collaboration is the new leadership and we work with communities and organizations to implement it.
5. **Evaluating Impact** – New approaches to community change require different ways of evaluating impact. We are experimenting with new ways of measuring change, exploring who is responsible for outcomes, developing methods that adapt to the pace of community change, creating alternate ways to involve change-makers involved in the assessment process, and using the results to drive new thinking, better strategies and deeper impact.

## ABOUT GALEN MACLUSKY

Galen is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Community Innovation Idea Area. He is passionate about working with community organizations to help build and scale new ideas that deepen their impact. An experienced design, innovation, and co-creation consultant, at the core of his work are approaches that help organizations engage with those who are impacted by their services and test new programs and services with minimal investment.



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