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The Wisdom of Tupperware: On Field Building and Finding the Right Container

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THE WISDOM OF TUPPERWARE

ON FIELD BUILDING AND FINDING THE RIGHT CONTAINER

Drawing from the ongoing research in lab practices at Social Innovation Generation (SiG) National, **Geraldine Cahill** and **Satsuko VanAntwerp** acquaint us with the concept, role and structure of social innovation labs and field building work.

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Earl Tupper was an inventor. From fish-propelled boats to multi-use hair combs, he spent his days with a sketchbook and applying for patents for his ideas. In 1948, Tupper unveiled a watertight food storage container to an unreceptive public. This product languished on store shelves until a young mother called Brownie Wise saw its potential and took the initiative to meet Tupper to present a novel marketing vision. Within the next 10 years, Tupperware had become a household name in the United States and would soon scale worldwide, operating in 100 countries.

Brownie Wise was a self-taught saleswoman who never got past eighth grade but we have much to learn from her about scaling a good idea. Long before Facebook, Wise instinctively knew about the power of personal social networks and relationship building. The first insight

she took to Tupper was that his products should be sold not in stores, but at home parties, where hosts would demonstrate the revolutionary, unbreakable bowls to their friends and neighbours.

Ashoka Fellow and Co-Founder of Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network, Al Etmanski believes many innovations designed to meet our social and environmental challenges could be regarded in the same way: lying dormant on the shelf. These orphaned innovations lack the vision and energy of a Brownie Wise, and their designers often don't take into account the importance of relationship building to achieve scale.

Secondly, Wise knew that creating the right space for the sale was important. She chose homes for the parties, finding them to be the best container for successful outcomes. Similarly, the right container for designing solutions to systemic social and environmental challenges is key. How we create and design space, who participates in the process, how many people and with what skills, are important considerations when creating a setting and atmosphere that will help foster ideation and the conditions to see solutions take flight.

For some time, Social Innovation Generation (SiG) has been exploring the answers to these questions—how to find, adapt, re-deploy and scale *existing* innovations *or* how to creatively develop and prototype, and scale *new* innovations.

SiG is a unique partnership of four organisations in Canada committed to fostering a culture of continuous social innovation. We work from a definition of social innovation developed by our colleague, Dr Frances Westley, that assumes "the capacity of any society to

create a steady flow of social innovations, particularly those which re-engage vulnerable populations, is an important contributor to the overall social and ecological resilience." The definition doesn't consider the quality of the innovation alone, but that the innovation—a new initiative, product, programme or process—profoundly changes beliefs, basic routines, resources and authority flows of the social system into which it is introduced. Successful social innovations have durability, impact and scale.[1]

The issue of scale is fundamental. While it is important to acknowledge that many small scale innovations can and do enhance community resilience, the complexity of our greatest challenges require attention to complex solutions that intervene at more than one scale.

As Michele-Lee Moore and Frances Westley explain in an article for *Ecology and Society*, there is a direct correlation between social innovations expanding their boundary-spanning reach and those innovations' heightened impact:

Complex challenges demand complex solutions. By their very nature, these problems are difficult to define and are often the result of rigid social structures that effectively act as 'traps'... Therefore when a social innovation crosses scales, the innovation is crossing a boundary that separates organisations, groups, hierarchical levels or social sub-systems, whether they are economic, cultural, legal, political, or otherwise. **The more boundaries that the innovation crosses, the wider and possibly deeper the impact, and the more likely the result is more transformative change.**[2]
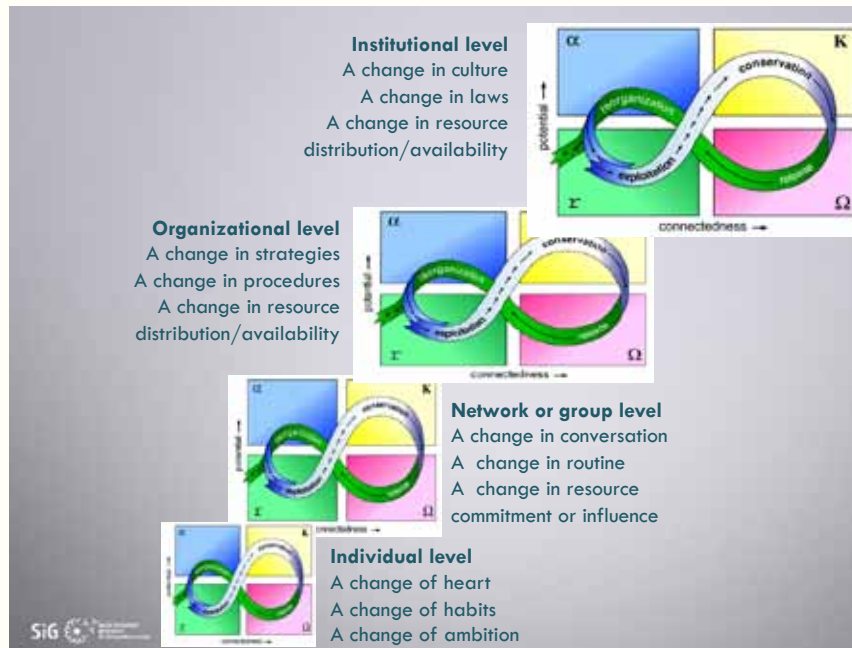
Figure 1: Scaling

Along with many others around the world, SiG has recognised the growing field of change and design labs. They appear to offer the kind of container for both relationship building and the acceleration of system-tipping ideas. Westley and the SiG team at the University of Waterloo have been researching lab practices for the last 18 months and have generated a new lab methodology that more fully incorporates system thinking, has a cross-scale focus, and is meant to specifically address complex systemic problems. This research is fuelled by a desire to design the most useful container for problem-solving and/or scaling those innovations capable of having a dramatic and positive impact on a particular stuck-system challenge.

As the research team refines the process, the broader SiG partnership has entered a phase of field building with practitioners, funders, intermediaries and those working within government, community and private sector organisations. The field-building work involves deepening understanding of various lab-related processes, learning from international examples, fostering confidence in new ways of collaborating and building legitimacy for the new methodologies.

This field-building work is being recognised by those grantmakers (philanthropists or governments) who identify themselves as collaborators and funders in the process of generating solutions—especially those leading towards system innovation.

Before digging into the structure of labs and field-building activity in more detail, it is interesting to ask ourselves why we need a new process at all. While no one would disagree that our global challenges—poverty, climate change and water scarcity for example—are immensely complex, there may well be skepticism over claims that a new process will be more effective. Here we can look to Tupperware again for some insight.

In the early days of Tupperware's growth, no one at the company knew the standard business models, so the company invented itself by the proverbial seat of its pants. Staff meetings with Brownie Wise were brainstorming sessions that included the groundskeeper and the head of the model kitchen, as well as the heads of conventional departments like sales promotion and public relations. "Everybody attended and everybody put in their two cents. There was no idea that was too absurd and nothing was impossible."[3]

What works about this? It suggests that no one person ever has all the answers. This approach flattens hierarchy and creates safety; it empowers parts of the system that may be seldom heard and blends expertise from multiple angles. These factors are important to remember as we continue to develop lab process theory. In Al Etmanski's words, it reminds us that in order to solve intractable problems, we must move from a position of hubris to humility—acknowledging that problems are beyond the capacity of any one person, institution or government to solve.

So, we know we don't have all the answers, we know we must focus on cross-scale systems solutions, we know that building relationships is key and that the right container for collaboration and ideation may help generate transformative results. So let's consider what that space might look like in more detail.

> **Key Characteristics of Change Labs and Design Labs**
> **by Dr Frances Westley**
> - **Broad-based research** – "research in" helps deepen and focus the design brief (frames the work of the lab) and "research out" helps to determine how the focal problem is seen by a broader community.
> - **Co-creation of solutions** – works across sectors and silos. Aims to engage citizens in the process.
> - **Specialised physical environment** – space conducive to creativity.
> - **Clear process design and facilitation** – effectively harnesses participants' creativity, ensures participants understand how each phase of the work fits with the goal of systems change, provides direction and builds momentum.
> - **Rapid prototyping and experimentation** – generate multiple interventions, test solutions, test potential for scaling out and scaling across system.
> - **Multidisciplinary support staff** – researchers, designers (technical and process), facilitators, political / collaborative skills.
> - **Continual learning by lab staff** – experience builds the capacity of labs. Labs document, develop and adapt their processes and tools.

LABS: A PROMISING CONTAINER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

At SiG, we describe labs as "intense meetings of diverse groups of people who are searching for breakthrough solutions to serious problems."[4] The labs we are seeing globally and nationally come in many shapes and sizes. Some operate via a series of pop-up style multi-day workshops while others have dedicated studio space running over years. Being exploratory in nature, almost all labs aim to create a safe, creative and collaborative space to examine a problem, generate and prototype solutions and navigate solutions through implementation. We see Labs as an optimal and versatile container for tackling some of our toughest whole system challenges.

LABS ACT AS A CONTAINER FOR ACCELERATION

Lab activities generally move between three different "spaces": research, solution development and implementation.[5] Labs enable teams to fast-track the understanding of a problem space through deep desk research, ethnography and interviews. By blending top-down expertise (gained through education and training) and bottom-up expertise (gained through lived experience) the lab teams are able to quickly map out and get a sense of the key influencers, opportunities and challenges at play in the system being studied. The lab team also brings a representative sample of stakeholders related to the challenge into the same room to develop solutions together. This high concentration of knowledge with varied experiences of a system significantly reduces the time required to check for feasibility, relevance and effectiveness of solutions as they are taking shape. Labs accelerate systemic change by providing a "safe" space to gain a deep and shared understanding of a systemic problem, blend expertise from across the problem domain and follow a facilitated process to prototype and test high potential solutions.

LABS ACT AS A CONTAINER FOR DEEP COLLABORATION

Throughout the lab, significant effort goes into creating a comfortable and safe space for expression of ideas, questions and critiques. Participant contributions are seen to be valued equally and much planning and effort goes into neutralising hierarchies and power differences. As participants get a broader sense of their role in the larger system, they are better able to suspend their judgment and put aside their differences in order to surface the facts and imagine a mutually beneficial future. The process builds champions for the long haul and potentially uncovers those "passionate amateurs"[6] or system disrupters who are crucial in the implementation of solutions coming out of labs. Labs create a space that enables diverse groups to form bonds and effectively work together.

LABS ACT AS A CONTAINER TO TAME "WICKED PROBLEMS"

Labs thrive in environments that have traditionally low risk tolerance and with challenges that are seen as resistant to resolution. Challenges that make good candidates for a lab approach include those where conditions are rapidly changing, where there is conflicting information, and where there are many unknown unknowns. Labs can offer a safe space for trial-and-error testing, since early failures inform later success. In the paper, "Change Lab/Design Lab for Social Innovation",[7] Westley, Goebey and Robinson identify not just the benefits of prototyping interventions through design and visualisation techniques, but the unique role computer simulation can play in testing multiple scenarios with those that would be most directly affected by the chosen intervention.[8] Walking the line between form and messiness, labs provide a structured, repeatable process for tackling the tough and seemingly intractable social and environmental challenges we face.

WHILE THESE DESIGNED SPACES PROMISE MUCH, THEY ARE NOT A PANACEA

Without a receptive network and field, there is nowhere for innovations to go. As many of us have found in working with governments, for example, it's not enough to protest decisions or deposit a solution on their doorstep. We must develop solutions while enhancing the receptive capacity of governments to act with us. To facilitate this shift, SiG has been working to intentionally build the field of social innovation and labs across and with all sectors.

FIELD BUILDING:
Creating the conditions for social innovations to flourish

SiG has entered into a phase of Canadian field building to help develop structure and build legitimacy for lab approaches and encourage collaboration among social innovators and lab practitioners. In deference to the cultural context of individual Canadian cities, we are approaching field building in different ways.

TORONTO
Intentionally curating and weaving networks

In mid-2012, SiG's national office staff interviewed lab practitioners in Toronto to get a sense of the activity underway. Two common pain points emerged: the marketplace was fragmented and there were few opportunities to build and practise skills for this type of work. Our approach has since been to act as an honest broker[9] to encourage collaboration. We have been weaving and strengthening ties among a network of 40 lab practitioners and creating (and pointing to) capacity building opportunities in the social innovation space.

The Toronto lab practitioner group learning from Bryan Boyer and Justin Cook of Helsinki Design Lab.

VANCOUVER
Throwing a wider net to enable self-selection

Vancouver's social innovation community has approached field building from a different angle. With the support of Al Etmanski, a self-identified group of lab practitioners, calling themselves Co-Lab or the Lab cooperative, came together to create a community of practice. By the third meeting, the Co-Lab group had swelled to more than 80 participants comprised of a mixture of practitioners and passionate citizens all wanting to make social change a reality. The network has since settled to about 20 dedicated members, who continue to meet semi-regularly and has changed its name to the "whole systems change group."

WHY IS COLLABORATION IMPORTANT FOR FIELD BUILDING?
Strengthening relationships and trust among a network enables the rapid exchange of information. Practitioners quickly learn what works and what doesn't from one another, they tease out best practices and quash inefficiencies in their own practice. Moreover, collaboration among practitioners empowers the network by unlocking access to the network's hidden assets (such as meeting space, technology or lived experience).

Working together creates legitimacy that benefits all lab practitioners. Collaborating enables practitioners to deepen their knowledge, develop a shared language around the practice, and strengthen the value proposition for the role of labs. Greater legitimacy for the lab field overall amplifies practitioners' voices, increasing their influence and the social capital of the emerging sector.

Other lab-related communities of practice are sprouting up across the country, notably Calgary's Leading Boldly Network, Montreal's lab practitioners group and The Natural Step's cross-institution partnerships. The SiG partnership is promoting the lab approach to influencers and the general public through public talks, meetings, and communication resources. The partnership is also leading by example through the creation of the MaRS Solutions Lab and the funding of multi-stakeholder lab initiatives by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. In the course of SiG's field-building work around Labs, we maintain that a systems focus on outcomes must remain part of the process in order to ensure that the techniques are not applied to improve efficiency of the status quo.

Labs have emerged in response to our growing need to find new processes to support people in government, civil society and the private sector as they search for breakthrough solutions to serious social, economic and environmental problems. They take many different forms, but most strive to offer a place for creative, cross sector and cross-disciplinary decision-making and innovation.[10] As their numbers grow, lessons from success and failure will help inform future iterations.

In all its work, SiG is mindful that while we write of bridging silos between government, business and community sectors, much of the groundwork for

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change is laid by passionate amateurs; people who have a personal interest in and the energy to see a solution scale. These agents must be identified and engaged. They are the key to taking an initiative forward into the system. They greatly enhance the capacity to move from thought to action. Would we know Tupperware without Brownie Wise or would the unbreakable plastic container have gathered dust alongside Tupper's fish-propelled boat?

Most importantly, regardless of containers or innovations, the intention of the work must be to heal our fractured landscape. We can only do that by working together, by building new relationships and deepening old ones. To revive our democratic institutions, we must continue to build the capacity of innovators to propose ideas, and strengthen the receptive capacity of others to receive and scale them out and up through the systems we live in. As depicted in the work of artist Bill Reid, and consistent with *Haida* tradition in British Columbia, we must all get in the *spirit* canoe together, and be ready to read the rapids and react to the certain turbulence along the way. ■

Haida Gwaii spirit canoe

SiG is a collaborative partnership composed of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the University of Waterloo, the MaRS Discovery District, and SiG West, formerly the PLAN Institute. Our ultimate goal is to support whole system change through changing the broader economic, cultural, social and policy context in Canada to allow social innovations to flourish.

Endnotes

1   For SiG's definition of social innovation in full, see www.sigeneration.ca/social-innovation/.

2   Ecology and Society, www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss1/art5/.

3   "Tupperware Home Parties and the Jubilees," PSB, [1] www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-parties/.

4   "Introduction to Labs," SiG Knowledge Hub, http://sigknowledgehub.com/2012/09/24/introduction-to-labs/.

5   Tim Brown & Jocelyn Wyatt, "Design Thinking for Social Innovation," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2010, www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation/.

6   Passionate amateurs is a term championed by Al Etmanski. He writes further on their vital role in the innovation process here: www.aletmanski.com/al-etmanski/2011/04/the-role-of-passionate-amateurs-in-social-innovation.html.

7   Westley, F. Goebey, S, Robinson, K; 2012 Change Lab/Design Lab for Social Innovation, Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience, University of Waterloo, Canada.

8   The Waterloo team has been testing the use of computer simulations during ideation and has been publishing their reflections and journey on the Social Innovation Simulation blog here: http://socialinnovationsimulation.com/.

9   Matthew Horne, "Honest Brokers: brokering innovation in public services," The Innovation Unit, 2008.

10 For more on the research work being conducted by the team at the Waterloo Institute of Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR) see their lab resources here: http://sig.uwaterloo.ca/feature/social-innovation-labs.