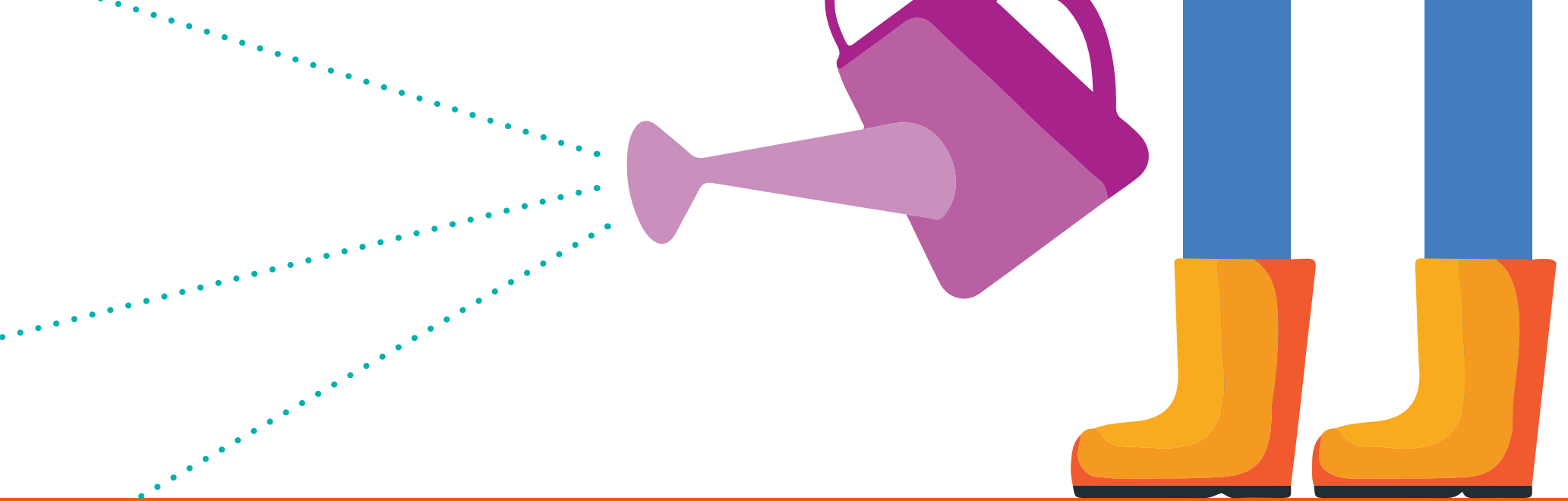




TENDING TO WHAT WE WANT TO GROW

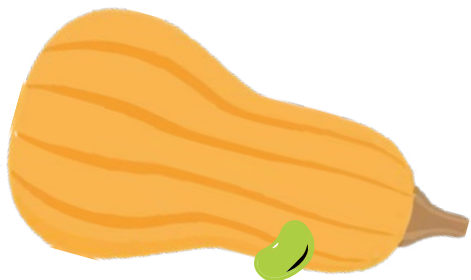
CONTINUING ON THE JOURNEY OF VANCOUVER'S SOLUTIONS LAB - AUGUST 2022

A collection of stylized beans in various colors (tan, red, green, black) scattered across the top of the page.

"The Three Sisters offer us a new metaphor for an emerging relationship between Indigenous knowledge and Western science, both of which are rooted in the earth. I think of the corn as traditional ecological knowledge, the physical and spiritual framework that can guide the curious bean of science, which twines like a double helix. The squash creates the ethical habitat for coexistence and mutual flourishing. I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledges. And so all may be fed...

They've all brought their gifts to this table, but they've not done it alone. They remind us that there is another partner in this symbiosis. She is sitting here at the table and across the valley in the farmhouse, too. She's the one who noticed the ways of each species and imagined how they might live together. Perhaps we should consider this a Four Sisters garden, for the planter is also an essential partner. It is she who turns up the soil, she who scares away the crows, and she who pushes seeds into the soil. We are the planters, the ones who clear the land, pull the weeds, and pick the bugs; we save the seeds over winter and plant them again next spring. We are midwives to their gifts. We cannot live without them, but it's also true that they cannot live without us. Corn, beans, and squash are fully domesticated; they rely on us to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours."

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS + AN INVITATION



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to be on the unceded and traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. We are working to innovate within a colonial institution, and are particularly grateful for the gifts of knowledge about Indigenous ways of thinking, being, knowing, and doing that we have received, and are doing our best to integrate into our selves and practices each day.



We are grateful to all of the people who have taken a risk and said yes to joining a lab team or being a part of the community of practice, and for pouring their hearts and minds into experimenting, building, and imagining something different together. In particular we are grateful to Moura Quayle, Sanmini Koffi, Leslie Ng, Brittany Morris, Lanny Libby, and Alexander Dirksen who were active co-creators of this iteration of SLab. Thank you to Mary Clare Zak, Doug Smith, and Brad Badelt for supporting the organizational space within which the SLab could work. Thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Union of BC Municipalities who - along with the City of Vancouver - provided funding for this work. Much gratitude to all of those working in- and for community-based organizations that contributed to this journey at every step along the way.

We are grateful for the generosity and hard work of the global communities of social, public sector, and Indigenous innovators in sharing their thinking, experience, and learning. This has allowed us to stand on their shoulders, learn from their experiences, and hopefully make our own contribution to a global movement for public sector transformation.



WHO ARE WE?

DR. LINDSAY COLE, SOLUTIONS LAB MANAGER

Lindsay founded and leads the Solutions Lab at the City of Vancouver, where she is motivated and inspired every day by her colleagues - both in- and outside government - who are doing their very best to make Vancouver more sustainable and just. She's worked on a variety of exciting projects with the city over her 12 year tenure, including leading the planning and public engagement process for the award-winning Greenest City Action Plan. Lindsay is also an Adjunct Professor at UBC, where she researches and teaches about transformative innovation for social and ecological justice.

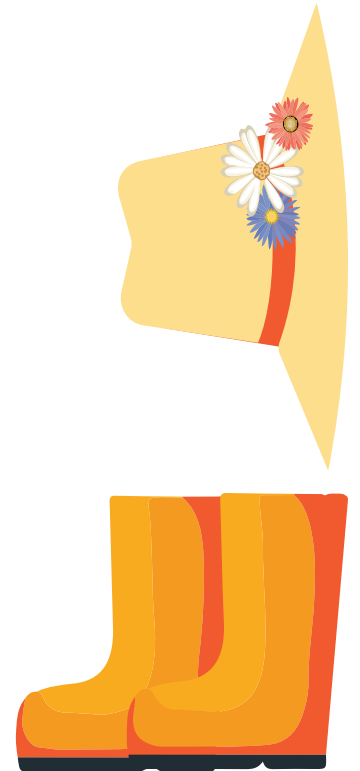
LILY RAPHAEL, DESIGN + EXPERIMENTATION LEAD, SOLUTIONS LAB

Lily Raphael has a background in community planning, design thinking, research and storytelling. For 10 years she has worked at the intersection of culture, ecology and community development, with an emphasis on co-creating with communities to address eco-social challenges. She is currently the Design + Experimentation Lead for the Circular Food Innovation Lab at the City of Vancouver. Lily is also a designer and facilitator for an action research project called Transforming Cities from Within at UBC. In both roles, she supports transformative innovation in the public sector, drawing on participatory, equity-centered and systems thinking approaches to design spaces of collaborative learning and experimentation.

STAY CONNECTED!

We've gathered up many of the foundations and tools that we use in our lab practice here [↗](#), so please use and share these resources generously.

Lindsay Cole - lindsay.cole@vancouver.ca
Lily Raphael - lily.raaphael@vancouver.ca



[↗](#) denotes a link, please click to be directed to the referenced material

YOU ARE INVITED!

Please pull up a chair and grab a cup of tea.

Join as we assemble fragments of the story that is the City of Vancouver Solutions Lab (SLab) and attempt to weave them together into a coherent story. Not 'the' story, but 'a' story, capturing what we've been doing, trying, and learning in this second iteration of SLab that happened roughly between the summer of 2018 and the spring of 2022 when this was written.

As we've written this, we have held the following people in our minds and hearts in the hopes that it will support your own thinking, work, and reflection:

- 
- » Those working on public sector or multi-stakeholder innovation efforts, and in particular those that are working on truly complex issues and holding an ethos of ecosocial justice, who would like more/different ways to think systemically about increasing the impacts of your work.
 - » People leading innovation lab efforts, and who are committed to continually learning and iterating what it means to be a "lab".
 - » People who are frustrated and emboldened, in equal measure, by the slow rate of change in stuck, legacy, public sector institutions and are constantly experimenting with ways to challenge and disrupt these patterns.
 - » Senior managers and others who may be at the beginning of understanding what it means to be doing transformative innovation and are curious to know more about how to enable this important work in their organizations.

We hope that reading about what we've learned, the stuck and problematic patterns we've tried to disrupt, and the questions that we're holding now about transformative innovation will (re)invigorate your thinking and practices. We hope that it stirs questions and invites reflections about how you show up in this work. Working in the realm of innovation is a true privilege and gift. We have the opportunity to try new things, take some risks, learn by doing (and failing!) and make a significant impact. ***So let's do just that.***

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FINDING YOUR WAY AROUND THE GARDEN



One way to help us make sense of the work we have been doing is to liken it to the practice of gardening. In the Solutions Lab we have witnessed and tended to various cycles of understanding transformative innovation since beginning in 2016. We have experimented with what could be grown under different kinds of conditions, playing in the messy and fertile ground of complex challenges in the public sector. We've nourished several great challenge spaces that have offered new questions, possibilities and insights within the City, while also allowing for some parts of the garden to decay, compost, and become something else, harvesting many fruits of our labours along the way.



This report shares stories and learnings from the second cycle of Solutions Lab, and includes the following sections:

CULTIVATING + BUILDING THE SOIL - 1

This section shares the context in which we work, key insights from the first iteration that shaped 2.0, and our theory of change. If you enjoy having some context about our work before diving into the details, you may want to start here.

PLANNING AND PLANTING SLAB 2.0 - 4

This section describes our overall approach to how we design and facilitate our lab processes, and then shares details about two specific labs including the complex challenge that they worked on, who was involved, the process that we used, and what we learned/what resulted from the work. If you enjoy details of how other public sector innovators approach their lab process, and/or how labs that focus on ecosocial justice topics design their approach, this may be the section for you.

GROWING AND TENDING OUR LABS - 10

This section describes our overall approach to how we design and facilitate our lab processes, and then shares details about two specific labs including the complex challenge that they worked on, who was involved, the process that we used, and what we learned/what resulted from the work. If you enjoy details of how other public sector innovators approach their lab process, and/or how labs that focus on ecosocial justice topics design their approach, this may be the section for you.

GROWING AND TENDING OUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE - 25

This section describes what a CoP is and does, and then share details about how we designed and facilitated our CoP over three years/iterations, and the kinds of things that we worked on, learned, and practiced together. If you're curious about how we've included this learning infrastructure in our lab, head to this section.

HARVESTING WHAT WE'VE LEARNED - 34

This section moves us into a reflective space by gathering up five “what if” questions for ourselves, as well as for the larger field of public sector innovation and labs. If you want to get straight to the heart of what we’re wrestling with as we move into our next iteration, head here.

ENCOURAGEMENT AND LOVE TO OUR FELLOW GARDENERS IN THE FORM OF ELEVEN INVITATIONS - 43

This section collects up our best thinking about the moves that we (individually and collectively) lab practitioners may need to make to deepen and grow the impacts of our practice. If you’re interested in our best thinking about where the field may need to go based on our experiences, check this section out.



EVALUATION INSIGHT

SLAB AND EVALUATION

There are many possible evaluation methodologies and stances to hold when trying to understand the impacts, outcomes, and learning from a lab. We used a developmental evaluation (DE) approach as it provides a process to continually act, reflect, learn, and try again when working on complex, uncertain, non-linear challenges with no clear and definitive solution or end point. The process of evaluation can be a systemic intervention in its own right, and we treated our evaluation practice in this way throughout the second iteration of SLab. The Developmental Evaluation Primer[↗] and its Companion[↗] are great resources for guiding this approach. Throughout this story you’ll see “Evaluation Insights” pop out along the way that capture some insights and reflections resulting from our work, and the last two sections gather up the fruits of our SLab 2.0 labours into one spot.

CULTIVATING + BUILDING SOIL



OUR SITE OF PRACTICE: THE SOLUTIONS LAB

The City of Vancouver, home to 662,000 people and innumerable more-than-human kin, is a municipal government in British Columbia, the settler colonial boundaries of which contain 115 square kilometres of lands, waters, and shorelines that are the traditional and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Peoples. The Solutions Lab (SLab) was established in late 2016, and focuses on transformative innovation in five policy domains: Healthy City Strategy; Greenest City Strategy, Climate Emergency; City of Reconciliation; and Equity Framework. SLab draws from a wide range of social innovation and systemic design theories and practices, and works co-creatively with communities. It is a small and non-permanent public sector innovation lab, led from 'the middle' of the organization, and each year needs to iterate its work and secure funding, permission, collaborators, and partnerships. It also holds a strong action research orientation to its approach, working in collaboration with researchers to generate and mobilize knowledge that is useful for practice.

Public sector innovation labs (PSI labs) are a rapidly proliferating innovation catalyst emerging all over the world, and in different types of public sector organizations (PSOs). PSI labs are protected spaces with permission to operate differently than the regular day-to-day norms of the public sector. They work within, alongside, or at the edge of PSOs and use a variety of innovation processes and techniques to change or transform the public sector. The purpose of PSI labs is often described as a need to innovate, improve practice, and add public value by bringing design, creativity, and user-centeredness to the challenges of government. The more specific choices that SLab has made in its expression as a PSI lab are shared in the Planning and Planting SLab 2.0 section coming up.

SOLUTIONS LAB 1.0

Navigating Complexity [↗](#) shared the experiences and learning from the first iteration of SLab in 2017 - 2018. We will bring some of that nourishment forward here into the telling of this story, to help us begin well, and grounded in context. The purpose of SLab 1.0 was to seek breakthrough, transformative solutions to some of the city's most complex problems. SLab brought City staff, community members, and stakeholders together into teams of 10-20 people in co-creative and dialogic spaces. Four multi-month labs on complex challenges were designed and facilitated using a variety of frameworks and practices from social innovation, systems practice, strategic design, and others. Labs moved from problem (re)framing into systems mapping; through ideation and into low-fidelity rapid prototyping. Developmental evaluation enabled reflection and learning, and building collaborative relationships was centered throughout.

More details about the design, approach, and learning from SLab 1.0 can be found in the Navigating Complexity report and in this Medium blog post. [↗](#) Although there were many nutrients drawn from this experience, we've gathered them up here as five reframes and five successes that we carried into SLab 2.0:

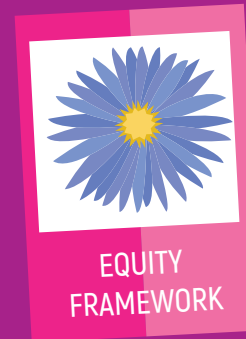
THE FIVE REFRAMES WERE:

1. From individual labs to growing innovation infrastructure
2. From expert-driven lab processes to a community of practice
3. Integration of decolonization, inclusion, and equity
4. From discrete lab challenges to a transformation focus
5. From City-driven to multi-partner collaboration

THE FIVE SUCCESSES WERE:

1. Cultivating leadership from the middle
2. Developmental evaluation to deepen reflection and learning
3. Participatory action research to aid in more rigorous practice
4. Remaining focused on complex challenges
5. Using a broad method set and holding methods lightly

SEEDING SOLUTIONS LAB 2.0: OUR THEORY OF CHANGE





The experiences with SLab 1.0, and the gathering up of these successes and reframes, led to beginning SLab 2.0 by articulating a clearer theory of change for our work. Theories of change can take several forms. Some are more linear logic models; ours worked with the complexity and nonlinearity inherent in social innovation challenges. We included a vision, or *North Star ideas*, about how we think change happens, the unique contributions of SLab toward this change, and the policy domains in which we worked. The theory of change continued to develop throughout SLab 2.0 and, in particular, there was further problematization of what ‘innovation’ might mean in the public sector and SLab’s position within that. This section shares the dimensions of SLab’s theory of change as it developed throughout 2.0.

A CALL TO ADVENTURE!

Our city is facing increasing pressure to address convergent and complex challenges like reconciliation, affordability, equity, climate change, sustainability, social isolation, falling trust in government, recruitment and retention of diverse and talented staff, and many others.

The go-to structures and processes of local governments were set up for a very different reality, and for significantly different work and responsibilities, and if governments don’t adapt we’ll be left behind. We’re being called, both as individual public servants and as an organization, to experiment, learn, and scale new solutions in response to these pressures. We’re being called to respond to the root causes of these systemic challenges, not just apply incremental quick fixes.

The Solutions Lab is a response to this call.

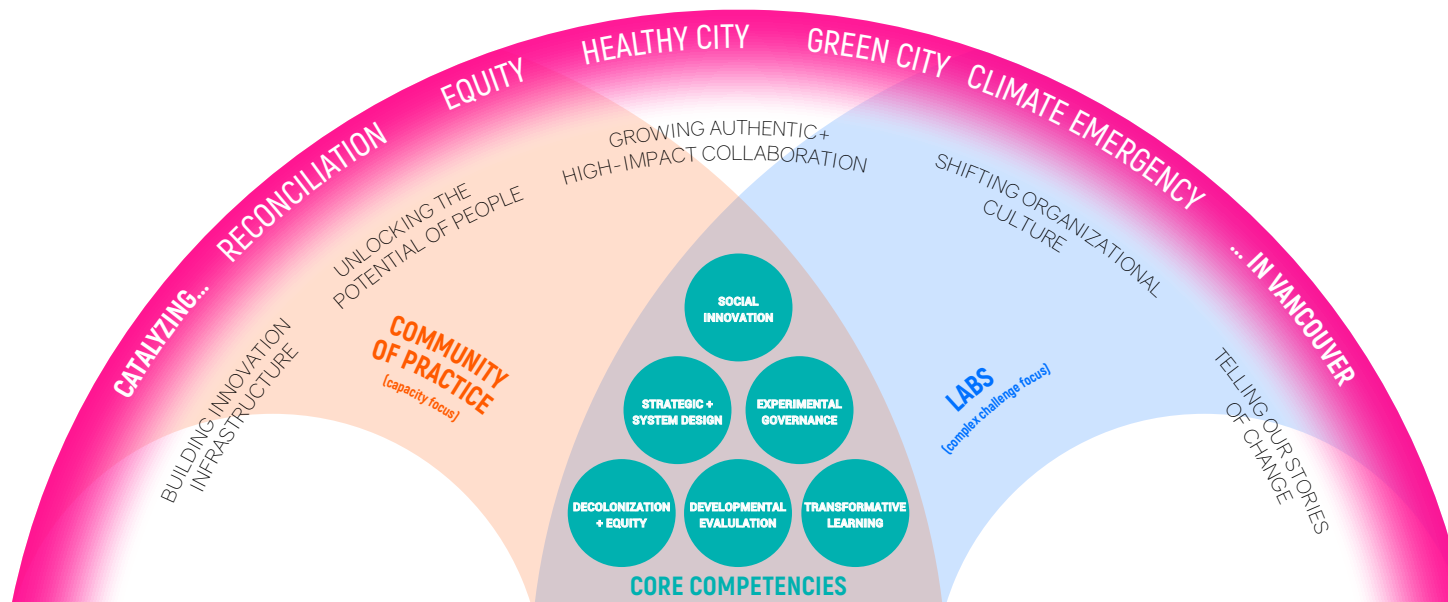


FIGURE 1: SOLUTIONS LAB THEORY OF CHANGE

SLab works in five policy domains: City of Reconciliation; Equity Framework; Healthy City Strategy; Greenest City Strategy; and Climate Emergency Action Plan. We work to build individual and collective competencies, capacities, and capabilities in six areas of focus: social innovation; strategic design; decolonization, equity and inclusion; and developmental evaluation.

SLab holds a transformative, emergent, and resurgent approach to innovation through co-creative and systemic interventions. What this means in theory and practice is described more through the following three frameworks about theorizing innovation, paradigms, and practices. These frameworks were developed in a sister project to SLab, where 85 action co-researchers from 22 labs in 7 countries were part of Lindsay's doctoral action and applied research project. [↗](#)

SLAB APPROACH TO INNOVATION

SLab's understanding, theorization, and approach to 'innovation' is captured in this framework. Dark petals indicate a strong commitment to a particular innovation orientation and approach, shaded petals indicate inclusion of that approach, and unshaded petals indicate that the approach is not part of SLab's position about how change happens. ↗

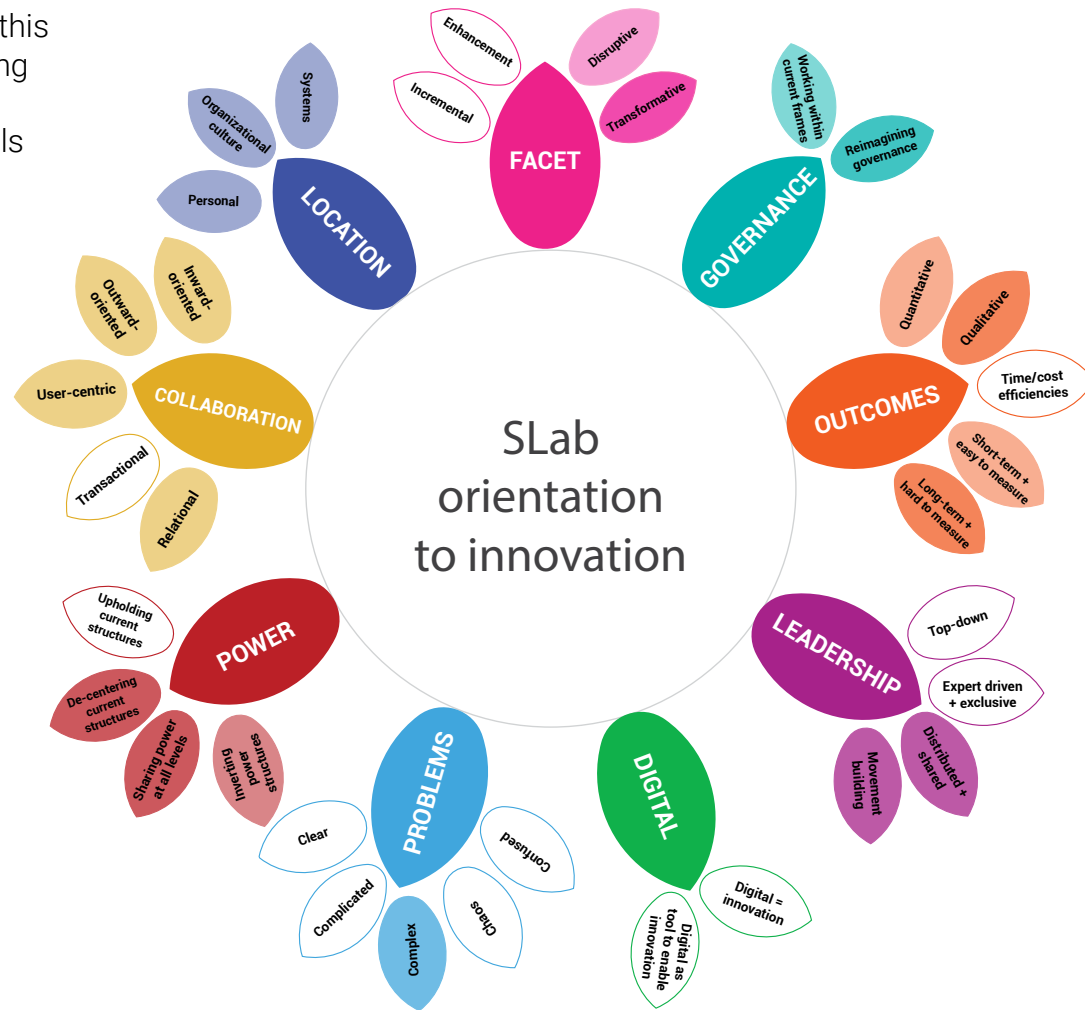


FIGURE 2: SOLUTIONS LAB ORIENTATION TO INNOVATION

SLAB + PARADIGMS

Systems practice tells us that working to transform and transcend paradigms is the highest point of leverage when attempting to change systems. In order to do this, it's helpful to articulate the current dominant paradigm of 'innovation' and 'governance' held by most Western governments, and also describe the paradigm of governance that we are moving toward through our work with SLab. This framework guided our thinking about this in our theory of change. [↗](#)

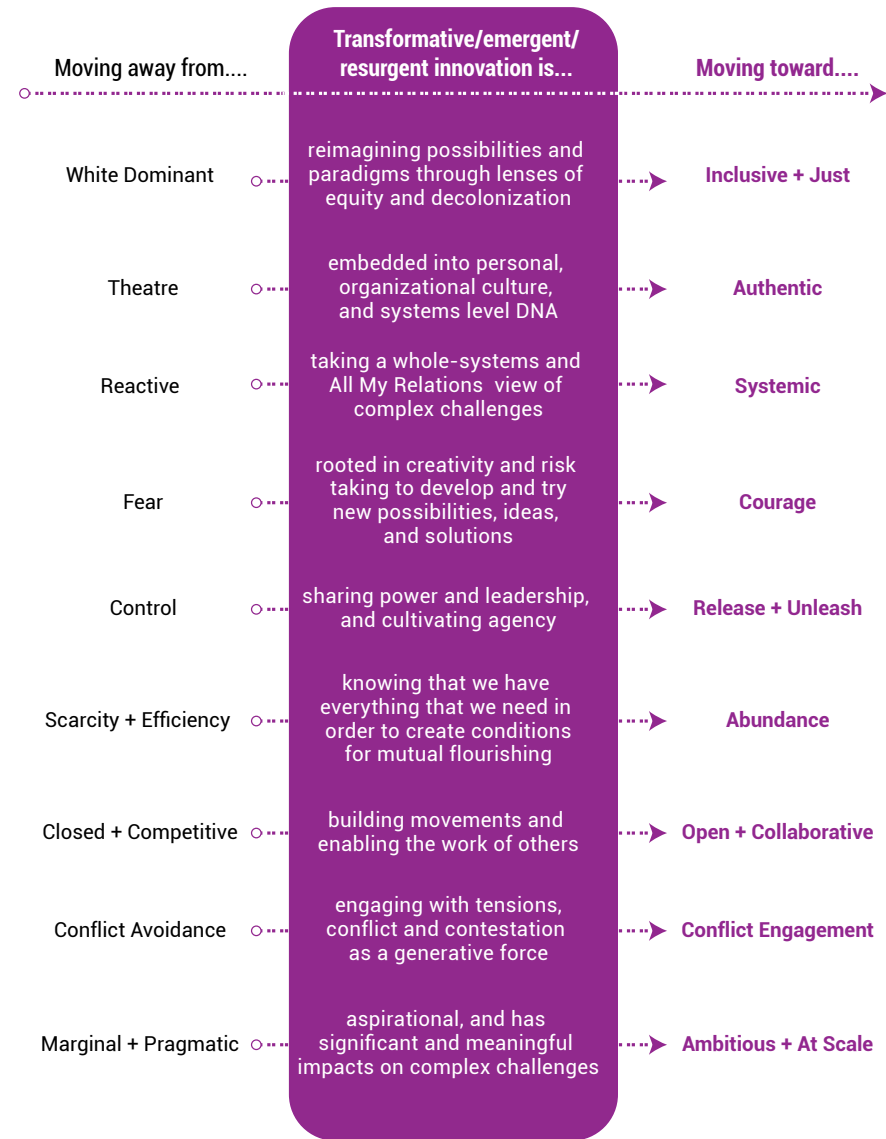
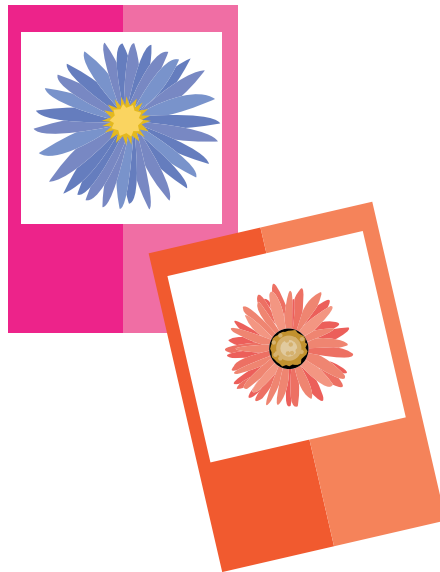


FIGURE 3: SOLUTIONS LAB ORIENTATION TO INNOVATION

SLAB ACTIVITIES + PRACTICES

So how does SLab translate all of these ideas about how innovation happens into the day to day choices about how we spend our time? We've captured this in the form of practices that describe competencies, capacities, and capabilities - at work together - as we actively practice so that we can learn how to be and work together within our PSI lab in ways that we hope/ think/dream the rest of our organization can become. SLab activates these theories and practices through two primary activities:

1. Co-creative lab processes that focus on complex challenges
2. Communities of practice that focus on building competencies, capacities, capabilities, and connections.

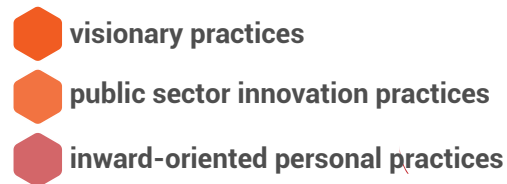
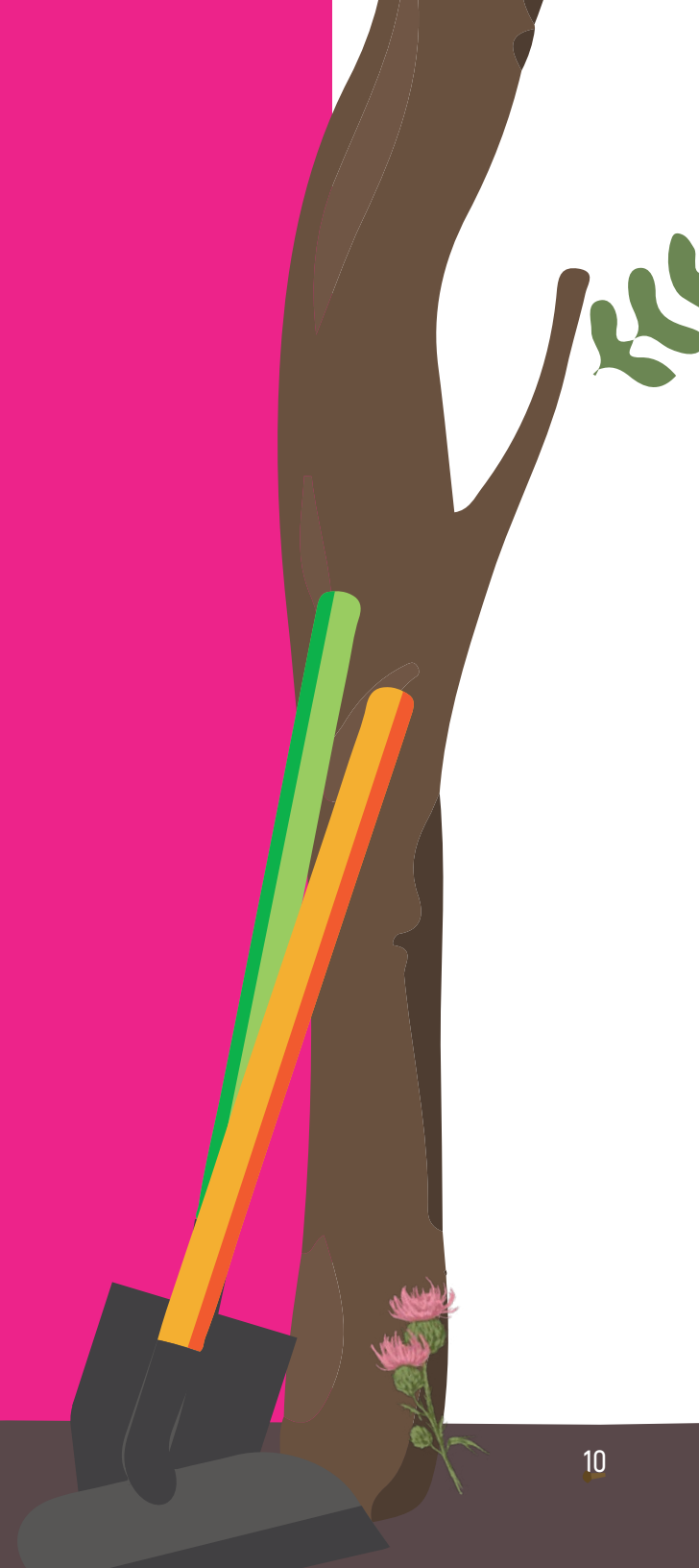


FIGURE 4: SOLUTIONS LAB PRACTICES

GROWING + TENDING OUR LABS



Whereas previous labs in earlier iterations followed more closely a particular process archetype (such as Theory U), in this iteration the process was more open to allow for multiple processes, tools, and frameworks to be played with depending on how our understanding of the challenge unfolded, the unique context and team involved, and also what dimensions of innovation were being explored. In this iteration of SLab, the lab journey began by figuring out who to bring into the co-creative process, both within the City and externally from the community. Participants established shared agreements on how they wanted to be in the space together. In the early stages of each lab, participants went through a series of systems mapping exercises to understand the patterns and paradigms that create and perpetuate a particular challenge, as well as learning journeys to understand how different users experienced said challenge. This work led to a reframing around questions at the individual, team, and systemic level, and working with fractals. As participants got more entangled in the challenge they were working on, they identified potential points of intervention to shift the system toward more desirable patterns and outcomes. The process flowed into ideation and prioritization of potential solutions, and then to very early and low-fidelity prototype concept development and testing. Following some evaluation and storytelling, the “lab” ended and regular work related to this challenge resumed.



GENERALIZED LAB PROCESS

The many learnings from the previous iterations of SLab guided us towards experimenting with how to shape the container of each lab. It was a bit like designing a garden, and what would be grown where. What would be the contours of each lab - where did one end and another begin? What needed to be present in each lab to ensure alignment with our theory of change, and where could we play a bit more? Different plants have different needs; what were the unique conditions and approaches for each lab?

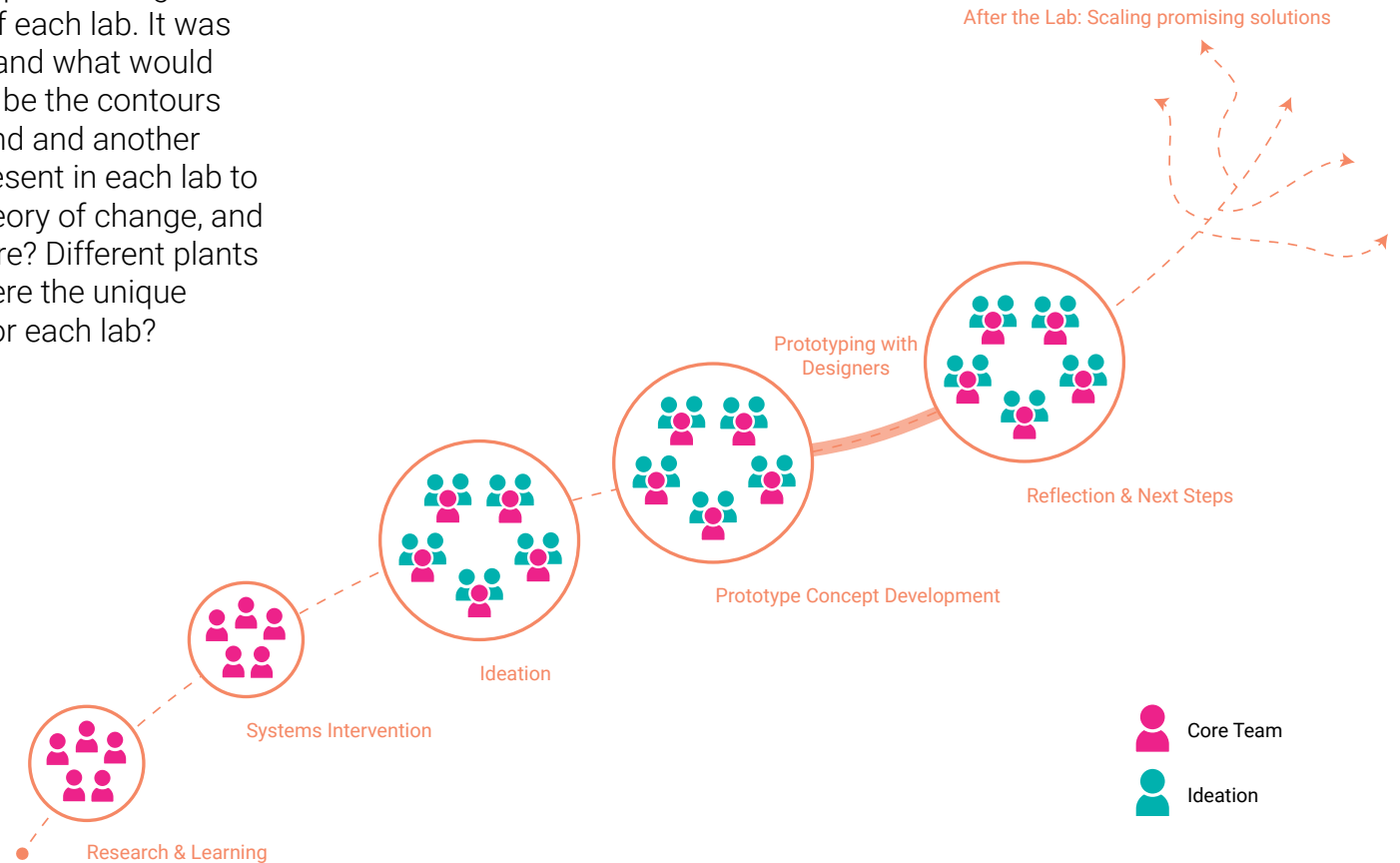


FIGURE 5: GENERALIZED LAB PROCESS



EVALUATION INSIGHT

'ENDING' A LAB

A common question that innovation lab practitioners have to wrestle with is how far a lab should go into prototype development? Should the lab be instrumental in scaling a concept all the way into implementation? What is meant by scaling anyway, and should that be the generalized goal and ambition for all labs or might there be something else to work on/toward? There is a lot of debate about this in the lab world, and what happens after a lab ends is certainly a question that we ourselves have sat with. SLab lab journeys stay focused on the activities of problem (re)framing, systems thinking, self-in-system reflection, early ideation, and early prototyping because too often in the public sector and elsewhere we are quick to jump to solutions without fully understanding the problem. It typically takes a little while for root causes, stuck patterns, and deeply ingrained mental models to surface, and spending more time in that space is where we notice that participants shift their understanding of the challenge and are able to unearth these more systemic aspects of the challenge, particularly when complex challenges are working toward social and ecological justice. In SLab there is also a focus on co-creating and relationship-building, since the solutions we are experimenting with are meant to be user-focused and collaboratively developed. All these things take time, and SLab is a space where we try to play with time so that we're slowing way down when it comes to systems mapping and problem framing, and picking up the pace when it's time to make some choices about what ideas to explore further and test.

COMPLEX LAB CHALLENGES IN SLAB 2.0

This iteration of SLab worked with co-creative teams on seven different complex challenges, including:

- » How might we accelerate movement toward the Healthy City Strategy vision by co-creating leadership, learning, and accountability across departments and sectors?
- » How might we deliver a healthy city for all seniors within the complete Healthy City Framework, and without creating another strategy?
- » How might we equitably increase access to food that is healthy for people and planet?
- » How might we reduce wasted and lost food in the grocery retail sector?
- » How might we foster collaborative leadership and support the community, other public sector organizations, individuals, and businesses in taking collective action toward the goals and targets of a new Greenest City Action Plan, beyond 2020?
- » How might we increase the circular economy of Vancouver's food system to increase food security, reduce food loss and waste, and grow ecological and social benefits?
- » How might we apply principles and practices of equity and decolonization and use a community-centered approach for all of the City's granting processes?

We'll get into the weeds with two of these labs next in order to more fully illustrate our lab process through sharing examples, as well as to describe the context, insights, and learnings from this work and the nature of the types of complex challenges that SLab worked on.

GETTING INTO THE WEEDS: PLANETARY HEALTH LAB



LAB QUESTION:

How might we equitably accelerate access to food that is healthy for both people and the planet?

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

Sustainability Lead (City of Vancouver); Social Policy Lead (City of Vancouver); and participants from different organizations and initiatives:
Vancouver Humane Society
Check Your Head
Simon Fraser University Food Systems Lab
Vancouver Economic Commission
SFU/Food Systems Lab
Vancouver Food Policy
Vancouver Coastal Health
UBC Sauder Marketing and Behavioural Science
SFU Sustainability
VCC Culinary Arts,
Choices Market
UBC Land & Food Systems

DESIGN BRIEF:

The food we eat, the ways we produce and consume it, and the social, cultural, and ecological contexts in which that happens have major impacts on both human health and environmental sustainability. This lab investigated ways in which the access end of the food system (i.e. consumption and procurement) could be leveraged to shift diets towards lower overall environmental impacts of our food system. It considered the intersections of *planetary health, human health, and food access, choice and equity*.

PLANETARY HEALTH

A growing body of evidence suggests that shifting toward more plant-based diets (e.g. by reducing meat and dairy intake, increasing legume intake) has the potential to limit or mitigate pressing environmental issues such as climate change, unsustainable water use, and biodiversity loss. The IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land found that a balanced diet featuring plant-based foods and animal-sourced food produced in resilient, sustainable and low-GHG emission systems, presents major opportunities for climate change adaptation and mitigation while generating significant co-benefits in terms of human health.

HUMAN HEALTH

Evidence also suggests that there are human health benefits, such as reduced incidences of heart disease and diabetes, of diets that rely more on plants and less on animal products. The recently updated Canada Food Guide recommends a diet focused largely on fruits and vegetables, protein foods (with a new focus on plant proteins), and whole grains, while limiting consumption of foods high in sodium, sugars, or saturated fat.

FOOD ACCESS, “CHOICE”, AND EQUITY

While some residents of Vancouver are able to exercise “choice” in the types of food they consume, this is not the case for all. Residents living on low incomes or in poverty, and those affected by systemic inequities, often cannot access affordable, nutrient rich foods and therefore lack agency over the types of foods in their diet. These same members of our society are often most greatly impacted by the population health impacts of environmental degradation, and have fewer resources to respond and adapt.

Furthermore, food consumption can be shaped or dictated by culture, religion, traditions, and medical conditions. For many, food habits are complex and deeply personal. Within this context, this Lab drew on an equity framework, committing to generating solutions that were sensitive to personal realities, did not prescribe a “one size fits all” approach, and did not place inequitable burdens on those most vulnerable in our society.

MUNICIPAL POLICY CONTEXT:

The Greenest City Action Plan (GCAP) and Renewable City Action Plan (RCAP) outline the City of Vancouver’s long term commitments to reducing its environmental impact, including its Scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and ecological footprint. The Climate Emergency Action Plan extends this work to include Scope 3 emissions such as those associated with the food system, and details an action to investigate ways in which the City can accelerate movement towards diets that are healthy for people and the planet.

Additionally, one of the Healthy City Strategy’s 13 long-term goals for 2025 is ‘feeding ourselves well’ through supporting a healthy, just and sustainable food system. The 2013 Vancouver Food Strategy outlines the City’s actions in this area, with a specific focus on food access. The 2017 - 2020 Action Plan update to the Food Strategy built on this by identifying new focus areas for diversity of voices and inclusion, financial accessibility and availability, and food system resilience.

WHAT DID WE DO?

The lab space for this particular question took place over a series of five half-day sessions between July and December 2019. Over the first three months, participants engaged in user research, learning journeys, and systems mapping related to the specific creative question developed, and identified where in the system it might be possible to intervene. In October and November, lab members generated ideas for potential solutions to specific creative questions, which were then prioritized and further developed prototype concepts. During the month of November, participants teamed up with designers to test these prototype concepts. The lab culminated with participants reflecting on learnings about the specific prototypes as well as overall learnings from the lab process, and naming some aspirations for how to continue along this innovation journey.

WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT THE PROBLEM?

Prototype concepts that were developed and tested included:

- » Creating, cooking, advertising, and selling pop-up plant based meal options in a large-scale university kitchen.
- » Exploring sources and flows of food donated to three downtown community centers offering meal programs to see if more collaboration could reduce costs, reduce friction, and increase quality and quantity of food provided to the community.
- » Exploring potential to change policy and practice toward more plant-based and healthy food options provided in the school system.
- » Testing readiness, willingness, and feasibility of increasing the use of public park land for growing fruits and vegetables for sale/use in community and/or health care facilities.
- » Developing a catering policy for the City of Vancouver that provides guidance on procurement of meals that are healthy for both people and planet.



EMERGING DIRECTIONS/QUESTIONS FOLLOWING THE LAB:

- » Income inequity and variability in purchasing power, and how this affects different people's ability to access foods that are healthy for people and planet.
- » Culture and tradition is a powerful driver of eating patterns, and this needs to be considered whenever there is discussion about food choices.
- » There are a lot of assumptions about "health" and "diets" that can result in food shaming, cultural appropriation, white veganism and other problems, so this topic needs to be treated with great care
- » There is a great deal of complexity in identifying what a potential goal or target related to this lab challenge might be.
- » One of the most valuable parts of the lab were the new collaborations that were created between people and organizations that had not worked together before, and in some cases had been in conflict with one another because of very different values and approaches to this topic.
- » What is the City's role in talking about dietary change/why do we have a hang up about that?





EVALUATION INSIGHT

RECURRING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Innovation definition: We use the term innovation in a fast and loose way, and also regularly. There's no clear definition, purpose, or values that are shared when we use this term at the City of Vancouver. Is it about finding efficiencies? Improving customer service? Does it work within existing neo-liberal and new public management paradigms of governance? OR is it about decolonization, equity and inclusion? Does it have ecological sustainability embedded in what innovation means?

Strategic innovation: Innovation tends to be a one-off activity, where someone has a good idea and they are encouraged to run with it. It's not strategic, with appropriate enabling conditions, systems, structure, supports or incentives to systemically and reliably enable innovation in our organization. We're also not strategically learning from and sharing our mistakes and successes in our innovation work.

Time: all of the people involved with the SLab so far report that they do not have the time needed to adequately and responsibly work on the complex challenges that they are tasked with. They are forced to tune to the urgent rather than the important, with an act-fast bias that results in more band-aid solutions rather than systemic ones. They report that they don't have time to be reflective and strategic, to think and work systemically, to adequately understand and collaborate with stakeholders, or to imagine, develop and test more effective, long-term, and game-changing solutions. This also impacts on equity, inclusion, reconciliation and decolonization - by regularly centering this sense of "time", building relationships and connections is sacrificed, reflection doesn't happen, and we stay in the well-worn grooves of current practice because there isn't time to get into a different track.

These are well-recognized, long standing issues at the City of Vancouver, and have been for years, yet we haven't adequately addressed them. A great deal of attention and intention is needed to shift these patterns. This isn't easy, and it's critically important, and making shifts in these patterns won't just happen on its own.

GETTING INTO THE WEEDS: REIMAGINING GRANTING PROCESSES TO EMBED EQUITY + DECOLONIZATION



LAB QUESTION:

How might we apply principles and practices of equity and decolonization and use a community-centered approach for all of the City's granting processes?

WHO WAS INVOLVED?

14 unique granting units within the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation were identified and invited, among them Homeless Services Grants; Renter Services Grants; Area Plan and Economic Development Grants; Greenest City, and others. This lab only involved municipal staff (which is rare in SLab work) in order to first get our own house in order before bringing community partners into a more co-creative process.

DESIGN BRIEF:

This lab will bring together City of Vancouver staff responsible for community-based granting and funding programs to determine ways to more fully embed commitments to equity and decolonization within the municipal funding context. Using a lab approach, the participants sought to collectively:

- » Delve deeply into the systems, thoughts, and beliefs that sustain and maintain problematic systems;
- » Become aware of our collective and individual roles and responsibilities in relation to equity and reconciliation as grantmakers;
- » Discover patterns and explore insights and creative interventions around the challenges ingrained in granting and giving systems more broadly; and
- » Facilitate opportunities to build internal capacity to support public benefit organizations.



MUNICIPAL POLICY CONTEXT

The City's Equity Framework (which was in development during the time of the lab) as well as its recent commitment to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its ongoing commitment to be a City of Reconciliation formed the policy drivers for this work.

WHAT DID WE DO?

Initially, this challenge was situated in a lab and the process was implemented over 4 half-day sessions with coaching in between. These sessions focused on:

- » Problem identification
- » Reflecting on our selves including positionality, motivations, and visions for changing the system of granting systems mapping, patterns, and feedback loops
- » Reframing problematic assumptions and identifying possible points of intervention
- » Reflecting upon the colonial patterns, attitude and structures that are deeply ingrained in systems of power that reinforce inequities related to granting by the City.

Based on the learnings that surfaced during the lab journey, the 'lab' process transformed into a community of practice (in spring 2022) for individuals interested in deepening their explorations around embedding equity and decolonial practices into granting processes.





WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT THE PROBLEM?



- » ***Systems change requires disruption, and a challenging of the existing (dominant/colonial) perspectives and approaches.*** For both participants and the facilitation team this experience exposed different levels of understanding around equity and reconciliation, different comfort levels with change and ways to go about it and overall a disconnect between theory and practice.
- » ***We need to build individual literacy on the meaning of decolonization, equity, and reconciliation at a personal, social and systemic level and the intrinsic connection between our understanding of these terms at all levels.*** Through the lab reflections and contributions there was a perception that teams already do equity and decolonization work through the existing granting programs. The lab's push to step back, reframe the perceived challenges and explore these concepts at a personal and deeper level felt unnecessary to some. Similarly, when exercises prompted participants to dream big and envision possibilities regardless of the current structures and limitations, discussions about the bigger picture and systemic change were taken as unrealistic and impractical. This speaks to the shared understanding (or baseline) held within some spaces of the city as to what meaningful effort and engagement in equity and decolonization looks like within the municipal context.
- » ***The Colonizer Virus.*** The facilitation team drew on the concept of the "colonizer virus" from Edgar Villanueva (Lumbee Tribe), who has witnessed the ways in which colonization has shaped our approach to grantmaking, becoming a tool that reinforced existing power structures and perpetuated inequities and

injustices.¹ Despite participants displaying a perceived openness and commitment to decolonization, this lab revealed resistance, fear and discomfort around the process and personal responsibility needed to disrupt dominant colonial practices. Using the colonizer virus as a tool, the facilitation team of this lab foregrounded patterns of behaviour that we were witnessing especially amongst white participants in this lab. Surfacing these patterns of behavior was a key role for the lab to play in order to confront them in a more direct way than what is possible day-to-day at the City. The lab setting enabled us to see these patterns showing up across multiple teams in the organization, which pointed to a larger, more systemic and paradigmatic challenge. We see the lab space as one in which we can name, reflect upon, unlearn and reimagine our approaches to our work. As we continue to collectively deepen our commitments to the principles of reconciliation and equity across all aspects of the city, it is our hope that the Solutions Lab will continue to be a space in which this important work can take place.

- » ***Leadership from staff with less formal authority.*** Throughout the group lab process, individual and small team invitations to practice and coaching sessions were available and suggested to participants as ways to act on the activities that took place. It was mostly racialized staff, and those with less formal/hierarchical authority, who were generally more comfortable with the lab approach and stepped most fully into the process of actually working on the complex challenge at hand, with community in mind.

1 Villanueva, Edgar. Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance. First edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2018.

EMERGING DIRECTIONS/QUESTIONS FOLLOWING THE LAB:

Even with a bumpy lab process, some promising concepts moved forward discretely and parallel to the lab process become of some lab participants applying the tools and recommendations learned from the lab sessions to existing pieces of work within their portfolios. These examples included:

- » ***Systems mapping of physical spaces:*** in order to add multiple layers and perspectives to a map of land use and amenities that was already underway, a series of discussions were led by a lab participant who invited representatives from other city groups to participate in a discussion about the different parts of the system and the structures and processes in place that need to be navigated in order to provide space-based/infrastructural supports to community partners.
- » ***Understanding barriers to funding access of BIPOC-led community organizations:*** one lab participant/department hosted a series of one-on-one check-ins with community organizations in order to collect information on the barriers that are faced by BIPOC-led organizations that want to access city funding. Through an action research approach, feedback was compiled and documented, with other city grants staff being invited to join the sessions in order to hear the community input.
- » ***Mapping and tracking connections to non-profit organizations and reaching out beyond usual suspects:*** a group of lab participants from one participating department took up on the invitation to practice to explore the meaning of a relationship-centred approach with community partners within the funding context. The team reviewed an inventory of non-profit organizations and individually mapped out the depth and breadth of the types of connections to different groups. This exercise became the foundation for a targeted outreach strategy and the beginning of a discussion about how to structure support for small, grassroots and informal organizations that work with equity-denied communities.





It is yet to be seen how lab participants will further integrate these learnings into practice and action. A key insight gained from the lab process was the need for more direct, active and applied learning that precedes the readiness needed to participate in a lab process. To meet these learning needs, a second stage of convening has emerged from this initial lab question in the form of a Community of Practice beginning in 2022. This CoP, dedicated to personal learning and accountability and equity and decolonization, testing solutions, and sharing learnings and insights and will draw from different process interventions generated from the small group lab work across granting streams.



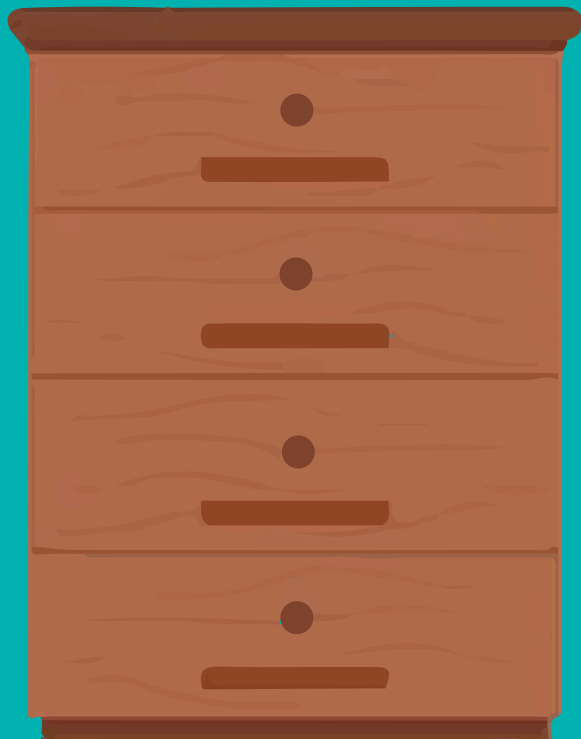
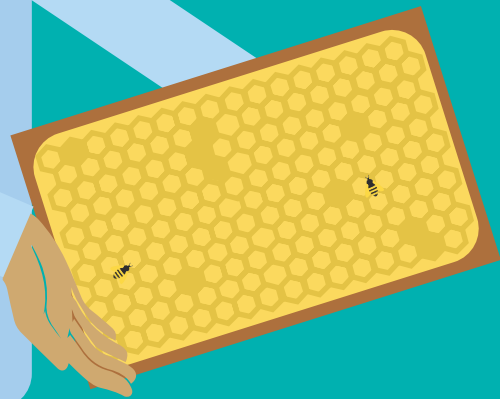
EVALUATION INSIGHT

LAB FOCUS: EXPERIMENTATION AND LEARNING



The journey that this challenge has taken us on has brought up questions about when to engage in a lab process which focuses on building experimentation infrastructure, compared to a CoP which focuses on building learning infrastructure. When setting up a lab, what kind of readiness might be needed to step into the particular challenge space? In this particular example, convening in a lab became an intervention that led to formation of the CoP, involving some deep attunement to the patterns that were surfacing related to this challenge. Some bigger SLab moves into these ideas of building learning infrastructure through a community of practice are shared next.

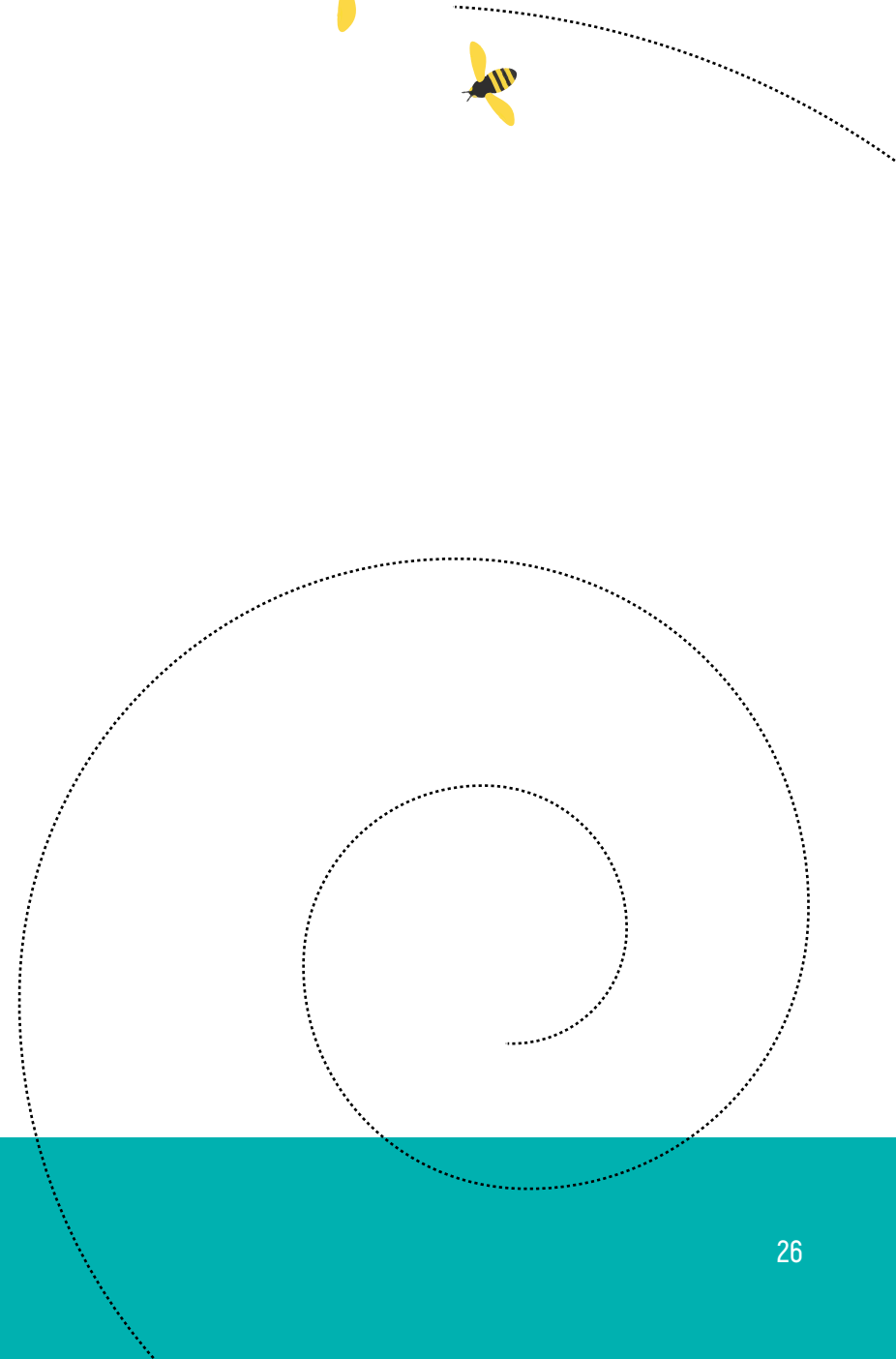
GROWING + TENDING OUR COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE





As mentioned earlier on, two key dimensions of the theory of change for the second iteration of SLab were to move towards building innovation infrastructure and unlocking the potential of people. The creative questions that guided this move included:

- » How might we build the capacities, competencies and confidence in experimentation-as-learning practices within the City of Vancouver SLab?
- » How might we move away from a common 'tool and technique' orientation to professional development in the public sector, to artful and conscious foundational framing built upon transformative, emergent, and resurgent innovation approaches and then builds practice and application from there
- » How can we evaluate the impacts of these learning-focused innovations in structures, processes, and culture?



WHAT IS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE?



FIGURE 6: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Communities of Practice (CoP's) are a helpful way of thinking about building innovation infrastructure and unlocking the potential of people. CoP's are a way for groups to come together to share knowledge, build practice in their shared interest area, and implement new learnings that have been generated as a result of coming together. Etienne and Beverley Wenger-Traynor's work describes CoP's as an intentional shared learning structure that includes the following (figure 6):

A **domain**, or practice area, in which the cop operates and works;

A clearly defined **community** that participates and co-creates the shared learning experience; and

A set of **practices** which the community may be sharing, developing, and/or implementing with high fidelity.

As a result of convening, members of CoPs tend to learn more quickly than if they worked in an isolated way. CoPs can also share the roles and responsibilities of creating a shared learning environment so that the structure is democratized and brings in the skills and talents of group members. We used this structure to shape our thinking, design, and implementation of the growing innovation infrastructure and unlocking the potential of people dimensions of our theory of change. Wenger-Traynor's book called *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, and this website [↗](#) were helpful guides.

SLAB COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

PURPOSE

Our CoP was designed to invert the idea/construct common in many PSI labs that there is an 'expert innovation team' that does all of the novel and exciting innovation work, and that they have specialized expertise, roles, responsibilities, and permissions that differ from everyone else in the organization. Instead, the purpose of our CoP was to enable and unleash innovation leadership in people and teams throughout the organization.

The purpose of the SLab CoP was:

- » To learn, discuss, practice, and teach new theories, frameworks and methods that support public sector innovation
- » To generate, test, implement, and potentially scale meaningful and innovative solutions to some of the city's most complex challenges; and
- » To build a creative, engaged, and joyful community of shared learning and practice with a cohort of City staff where we support each other's personal and professional development.



EVALUATION INSIGHT

LAB LONGEVITY THROUGH LEARNING

Another idea that we were testing through convening a CoP was that this approach might help to ensure that the work of SLab would live on even if this specific manifestation of an innovation lab attempt was shut down, as many labs have experienced. A shared language, vision, ambition, and set of foundations and tools would connect people together in ongoing relationships, across departments and teams, so that this social innovation work would have impacts, and an afterlife, beyond the specific boundaries of what is called Solutions Lab.

DESIGN

During SLab 2.0, three iterations of the CoP occurred: prototyping (2018); full CoP (2019); and the pandemic version (2020). The details shared here will focus on describing the full CoP in 2019 and some features of the 2020 iteration based on what we learned.

The 2019 CoP was a nine month long, in person learning journey. The five policy domains and six areas of competency, capacity, and capability development described earlier in the SLab theory of change (figure 1, p.6) were the same areas of intervention for the CoP work. It was designed and delivered as a collaboration between the City of Vancouver and the University of British Columbia, with some external funding support.

Theory U and transformative adult learning [↗](#) were used as the core process archetypes to design the overall journey, and at a high level it followed this arc of topics and experiences:

- » Strategic design; public sector innovation landscape; and crafting your creative challenge
- » Social innovation foundations; stories of empathy building practices; and building your design brief and action and user research plan
- » Decolonization, inclusion, and equity; systems practice; and building your systems map and identifying places to intervene
- » Leadership, transformation, and self-in-system; retreat and reflect; iterate design brief and creative question - who am I? What is my work?
- » Creativity and experimentation in the public sector; and ideation and prioritization of potential solutions
- » Prototyping as a way to experiment and learn; and build prototype concept 1.0 and create plan for testing
- » Prototype testing and iteration
- » Telling stories of transformation; and gathering up learning and evaluating outcomes
- » Celebration; storytelling; and embedding - what comes next for me and this work

The CoP included two levels of engagement:

1. The Constellation was a group of 70 people, and included both City staff and community partners. They were invited to the first 90 minutes of each monthly session, and could join based on their interests and availability.
2. The Core included 18 people, all of whom were City staff. Their level of commitment and engagement was higher, and they brought complex challenges into the CoP that they were applying their learning through. Some people were there on their own, and others joined with one or two others from their departments to work on a shared challenge. This group committed to the full learning journey, which meant participating in all of the monthly sessions as well as active practice in between.

The sessions were generally organized in three parts: learn; dialogue and reflect; and practice. The Core and Constellation groups attended the Learn session together, which generally involved a theory, example, or framework to help build literacy about public sector innovation approaches. After the Constellation group departed, the Core group held a Dialogue and Reflection session followed by Practice, where they connected theory to actually doing and experiencing one of the techniques on their applied challenges. This Practice time always included a delicious lunch, to honour our work and build connections with one another.

In between sessions, Core members applied the theories, frameworks, and methods learned in the half day sessions to their creative questions and prototypes, and also shared their learning and progress with colleagues. The CoP facilitation and support team were available for 'office hours' in between sessions as needed to coach, curate resources and tools, give feedback, help navigate stuck situations, help with research, prototyping and user testing, and whatever other support may have been needed. We used Slack as a way of communicating among CoP members in between our in-person sessions. We were fortunate to have the use of the City of Vancouver CityLab creative and public engagement space for our CoP sessions.

In 2020, the CoP built on this experience and also evolved in several key ways, summarized here:

- » Community partners were invited into the Core CoP if they were working in the policy domains of focus, and expressed interest and a willingness to commit to the full journey. Their engagement changed the overall dynamic in an interesting and fruitful way, and made sure that an outward, community orientation to everyone's complex challenges was much more central.
- » The Core and Constellation sessions were separated as it was too difficult to meet the needs of both groups in the same sessions. This allowed the Constellation to follow its own path of topics based on emerging interests of that group (in monthly 90m sessions), and also allowed the Core to go more deeply into what they were needing to focus on (in monthly ½ day sessions).
- » After a very exciting and dynamic open house to start the CoP in March of 2020, which is marked forever in our minds as the last big in person event that we participated in (with shared food even!), the whole CoP pivoted on-line because of the pandemic. There are many things that could be said about all of this, but we all have already lived through that experience so let's leave this there. One significant upside to this whole experience is that a whole suite of virtual creative, collaborative learning infrastructures have now been built that have helped to grow our practice.
- » The 2020 CoP was designed and delivered without the external funding of the University partner. We experimented with adding two City staff with experiences in previous labs and the CoP to join the CoP convening team, even though SLab work was not a part of their primary job. This was a way to grow the SLab team without adding new, dedicated jobs. Although it was difficult for those people to make time for this work, it added some diversity and resilience to the convening team. We also had two small consulting contracts to support the CoP design and delivery of the 2020 CoP, again adding more diverse skills and experiences to support everyone's learning.

Some of the challenges that individuals were working on through the CoP were as follows:

- » How might we mindfully, meaningfully, and equitably include place-based narratives in park planning and design processes as a platform for change for those who share intergenerational trauma and experiences of systemic violence so that they can feel safer and more welcome in parks, heard, valued, and represented in Park Board processes?
- » How might we manage used clothing in Vancouver in a way that is safe, economically viable and aligned with community values while diverting materials from landfill and incinerator?
- » How might we shift the way we use data to understand different social, cultural, economic and geographical groups of people from talking about them to elevating their knowledge and voice so that they can be meaningfully reflected in policies, plans and projects in a safe, equitable and inclusive way?
- » How might we re-envision the Community Librarian team so that they can advance change at the Vancouver Public Library on behalf of the community?
- » How might we disrupt (and ultimately eliminate) the pathways into poverty and the cycles that trap people there so that all Vancouverites can thrive?
- » How might we use Engineering's Diversity & Inclusion staff working group to create meaningful and measurable change in the work culture and experiences of City employees?
- » How might the Data, Finance & Growth team create the foundational Employment Lands & Economy Review in a way that incorporates social equity and environmental resiliency and illustrates Vancouver's economy in terms of the three pillars of sustainability (social, environmental & economic)?
- » How can the four Business Improvement Areas in the Downtown Eastside (Gastown, Strahcona, Chinatown, Hastings Crossing) and their membership (property owners + tenants) be part of the system change needed to create an equitable and inclusive local economy?



EVALUATION INSIGHT

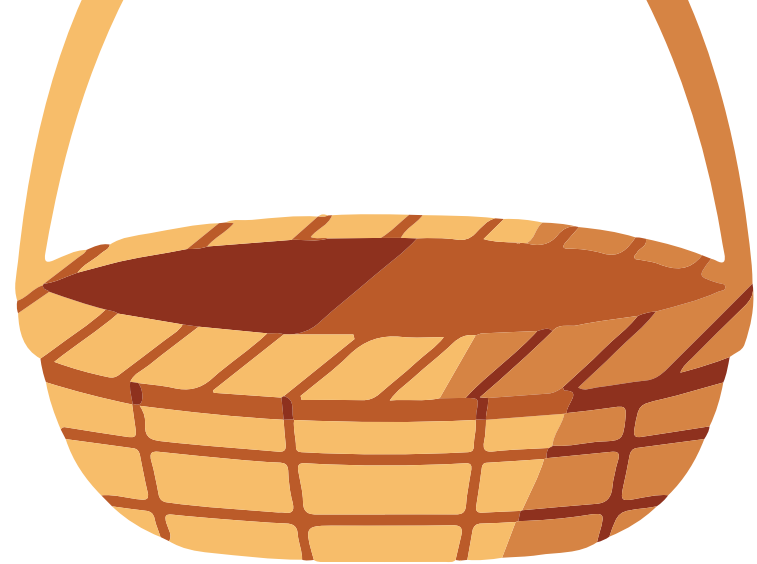
WHAT DID WE LEARN ABOUT THE COP?

Another problem that we hoped the CoP would help to solve was that of challenging existing mindsets and practices of skill building and development within the public sector. Much of the professional development on offer for the majority of civil servants focuses on adding tools to people's tool kits, helping them to do their existing jobs more effectively and efficiently, (i.e. horizontal development). This approach does not adequately respond to the fact that the public sector is rapidly changing and growing in complexity, and that we need our public sector workforces to develop, and not just skill up in response. Our model of a CoP that was open to City staff and affiliated organizations, and at all staff levels, roles, and departments, aimed to work across and around the typical silos and hierarchical layers that the organization reproduces every day. This was so that anyone who wanted to deepen their learning, practice, and development to better respond to complex challenges could access that opportunity, not only those in the most senior roles in the hierarchy, acknowledging that leadership for public sector innovation can – and needs to – be cultivated everywhere.

The CoP was an idea to solve the problem of the limited impact that the SLab would be able to have with its resource constraints and limited positional authority. If the thinking and practices that the SLab used were made more open, democratic, and accessible, and if we supported, connected, and enabled other City staff to actively apply these approaches in their day-to-day work alongside their teams, then hopefully the impact of the SLab could be scaled deeper and more broadly than would be possible if we did not include a social innovation infrastructure-building aspect to our work.

HARVESTING WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

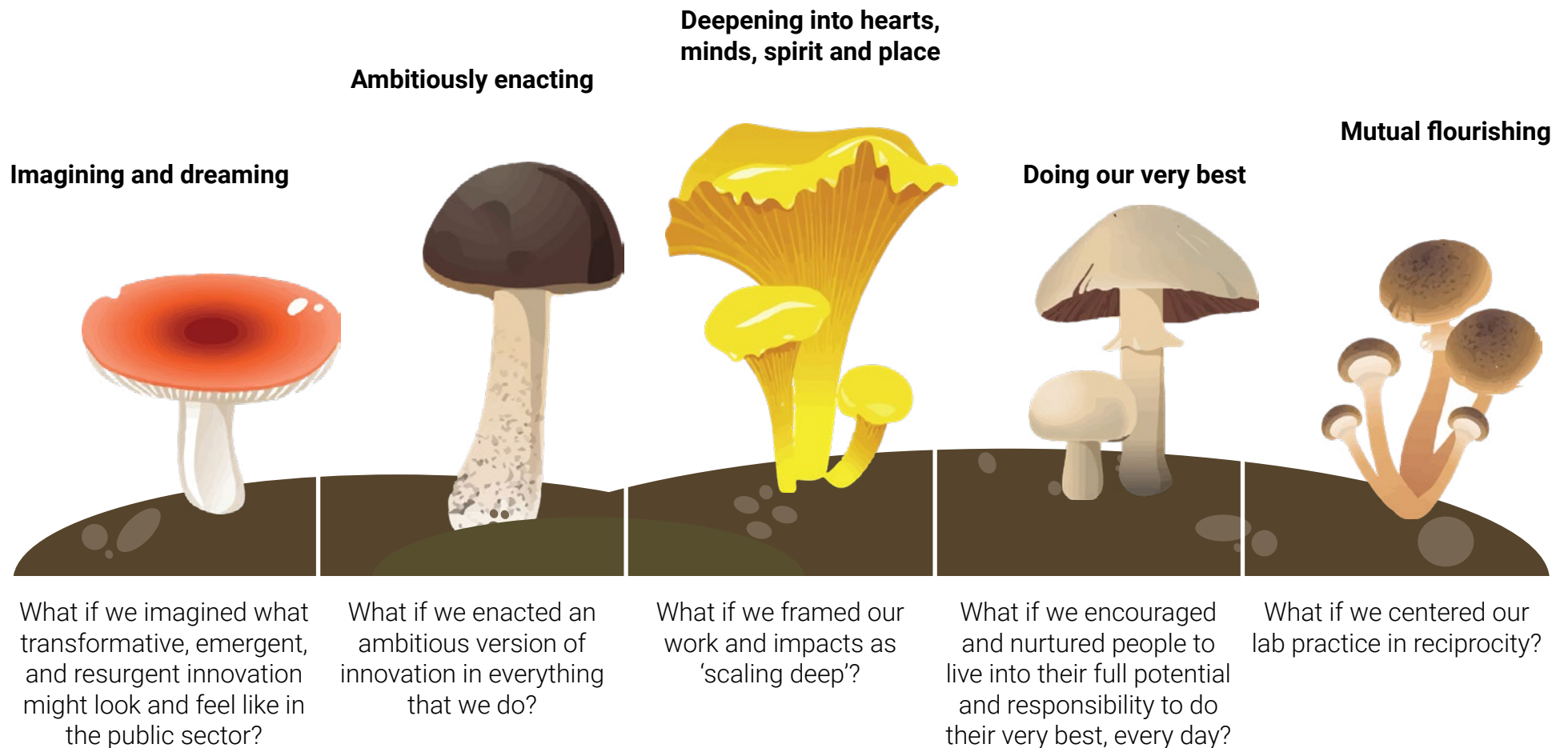




With the spirit of abundance and mutual flourishing, we'll close the story of this iteration of SLab by sharing some of the patterns, themes, and reflections that have emerged in the form of imaginative and hopeful 'what if' questions. Many of these questions address a fractal 'we' that we wanted to invite into the garden: the 'we' of SLab convenors and co-creators; the 'we' of our organization; the 'we' of collaborators working toward ecosocial justice in different ways; and also the 'we' of the larger field of public sector and social innovators.

This section takes an intentional, aspirational, and evaluative stance that stays focused on what we want to grow through our work. So much of the transformative, emergent, and resurgent innovation work happening within big, legacy institutions can feel like running into the same stuck pattern over and over again. We intentionally held/hold an orientation of moving toward people, possibilities, conditions, and paradigms where there was/is an openness to imagine and enact other possible and desirable futures. These questions aim to capture our current best thinking about what this looks and feels like.

Taking inspiration from adrienne maree brown and Melanie Goodchild, we've gathered these insights, patterns, and feedback loops, saying similar things in different ways, followed by some detail, nuance, and story that we've been harvesting along the journey of SLab 2.0 to describe each of them further.



IMAGINING AND DREAMING

WHAT IF WE IMAGINED WHAT TRANSFORMATIVE, EMERGENT, AND RESURGENT INNOVATION MIGHT LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

Change happens through incremental adaptations. The foundations of the current systems remain unquestioned and unchanged, and the focus is on making things work better through small improvements. Much innovation work in the public sector contributes to change. We think that innovation holds greater potential than this, so we need to imagine and describe what that might be.

Transformation is a more significant shift in people, structures, processes and systems. It is often triggered by a growing problem, challenge, or crisis, and this pressure is what is required in order to shift or dislodge a stable or stuck approach into a different state.

Emergence is a dissimilarity (rather than a difference), where the parameters themselves change. Emergence is creation sparked by aspiration, the 'becoming' of a vision for a new opportunity that was not there before. Emergence vastly expands the potential, capacity, and capability of people, organizations and systems to work on the challenges that they face.

Resurgence is catalyzed by work to recover and revitalize possibilities of being and relationship that have been suppressed and marginalized by the dominant system. Resurgence is most often associated with Indigenous cultures and is deeply grounded in context and place. As Jeff Corntassel observes, "*processes of resurgence are often contentious and reflect the spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political scope of the struggle.*"



In working with this more nuanced, descriptive, and ambitious version of innovation focused on transformation, emergence, and resurgence, we learned that it is very difficult for people working in the public sector to imagine possible futures that operate with different values, goals, and paradigms than the New Public Management, colonial forms of governance that they are used to. Donella Meadows tells us that systems transformation has the biggest potential impact when working to change and transcend paradigms. So we started to work much more directly with paradigm-level interventions in the systems that were trying to shift by surfacing and challenging things that felt fixed for people. We opened up creative, imaginative, visionary, and speculative possibilities and futures. We named the systems, structures, and mindsets that hold stuck and problematic feedback loops in place and identified interventions at those levels. This work is nascent, difficult, uncomfortable and also liberating and important.

AMBITIOUSLY ACTING

WHAT IF WE ENACTED AN AMBITIOUS VERSION OF INNOVATION IN EVERYTHING THAT WE DO?

We can see the seeds and sprouts of transformation in our SLab work, although they aren't often nourished properly and are even weeded out before they can take root. Emergence and resurgence are harder to spot in the public sector innovation context.

Consistently holding an ambitious approach to innovation was fundamental to our practice in a variety of ways. It enabled us to craft and enact a theory of change that was different from the one held by the organization that we work within and are trying to change. It helped us to practice articulating how and why SLab needed to be different from the usual ways of working if we were to have any chance at transformative, emergent, or resurgent innovation. It emboldened us to ask different sorts of questions, and to create different enabling conditions for our work in the labs and the communities of practice. It also put SLab into stronger relationship and allyship with other transformation efforts, in particular those working toward equity, justice, reconciliation, and decolonization as these also demand imagining and enacting other possible futures. Holding this frame also aided us in remaining hopeful, aspirational, and imaginative in our practice, and guided decisions and strategy about what work to do, what challenges to tackle, who to work with, and what theories and methods to use.

Holding this orientation was also difficult. Our paradigm, language, processes, practices, analysis, approaches - basically everything about us within the SLab - wasn't often recognizable to the dominant ways of working, knowing, and being inside a public sector organization. Measuring and evaluating impacts was difficult to capture and communicate in a way that was understandable to our organization. Holding the big question of whether public sector organizations are capable of the transformation, emergence, resurgence, and the imagination required of us can be heavy and heartbreaking at times. Being in generative tension, or conflict, with who we want to/need to become (personally, organizationally) and the systems that we're working within and trying to transform is difficult work.

DEEPENING INTO HEARTS, MINDS, SPIRIT, AND PLACE

WHAT IF WE IMAGINED WHAT TRANSFORMATIVE, EMERGENT, AND RESURGENT INNOVATION MIGHT LOOK AND FEEL LIKE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

Innovation often operates without appropriate enabling conditions, systems, structures, supports, incentives, or learning practices to systemically and reliably generate, test, and scale promising solutions. Five types of scaling are described here (figure 7), with potential for strong and supportive interactions between them when looking to advance social innovation impacts. It is also important to consider the different paradigms, assumptions, and values at work within each of these conceptions of scaling and how they may (mis)align with a theory of change for a lab.

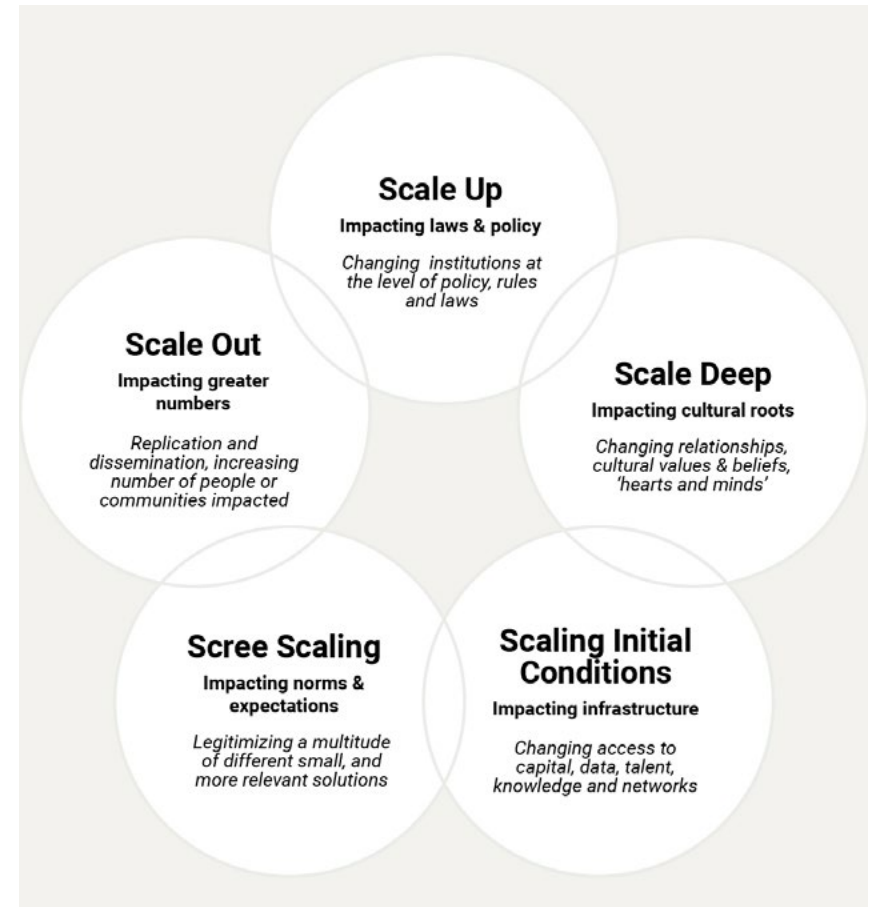


FIGURE 7: FIVE PATHWAYS TO SCALING SOCIAL INNOVATION ¹

¹ Adapted from: Tulloch, 2018, Moore et al., 2015

Scaling up and scaling out have received the most attention in social innovation initiatives, evaluation, and study and they are also familiar within various approaches to innovation. Scaling scree and scaling initial conditions are emergent and nascent conceptualizations of scaling that need more study and examples. Given the orientation and enabling conditions for our work in SLab, we had a particular interest in a conception of labs as an education process for the system, and in building a structure that exposes people to the processes and experiences of innovation in order to make them real for them; labs as places to practice, rehearse, and learn. Scaling deep offered a useful framework to aid in this thinking and practice.

Scaling deep¹ is about impacting cultural roots, and the powerful roles that culture plays in shaping and changing the ways in which complex challenges are understood and acted upon. Some of the main strategies for scaling deep include spreading big cultural ideas, reframing stories to change beliefs and norms, and to invest in transformative learning by sharing knowledge and practice through networks and communities of practice. Scaling deep involves activations intended to promote transformation at the sociocultural level of individuals, organizations and/or communities. Scaling deep is about the power in transforming culture and meaning to leverage change.

The big move in this direction for SLab was to add a community of practice as one of two primary activities, and to add a strong learning/capacity building dimension to all of the labs. This orientation toward scaling deep changed everything for us; it was a paradigmatic shift in purpose, methods, and understanding of outcomes. Focusing on scaling deep requires taking a much longer and more patient view of impacts and outcomes. Outcomes when scaling deep tend to begin with the inner work of transformation, emergence, and resurgence that lives within each person that is part of the process. This inner work then takes time to show up in the outward project, team, complex challenge, or organizational activities that scaling up and scaling deep make more visible and easier to measure. Our hunch is that scaling deep is more durable, relational, resilient, and will have much greater ripple effects over time. Many labs operate within highly constrained and high pressure environments, and are expected to deliver results quickly. This is fundamentally at odds with what scaling deep requires.

¹ with special thanks to Penny Hagen for help with sharpening our thinking about scaling deep

DOING OUR VERY BEST

WHAT IF WE ENCOURAGED AND NURTURED PEOPLE TO LIVE INTO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL AND RESPONSIBILITY TO DO THEIR VERY BEST, EVERY DAY?

Attending to where/in whom leadership for transformative and emergent innovation arises rather than working within the formal structure of power and hierarchy is a promising strategy for a lab. PSI labs tend to hold an orientation toward leadership that operates within the dominant systems of government, looking to/waiting for the people that sit in positions of formal authority to lead this work. We took an orientation of leading from everywhere, with big and hopeful hearts, following where people were saying an enthusiastic yes to this work, and then learning from them about what they needed. Of helping them to find each other, build and practice new literacies and skills, create enabling conditions for one another, and to see where there were openings and emergent possibilities and to then move into those spaces.

We continue to be curious about who is called to travel this path and why, how they stay with the work when it inevitably becomes unbearably difficult, and how they/we support one another along the way. Many are systems intrapreneurs, leading without authority, and often have one foot inside the public sector and the other deeply rooted in community, lived experience, or another aspect of their identity. The hustle and heart that these people bring to their work every single day is truly inspiring. It is such a difficult, thankless, high-risk, and largely invisible career path – to try and change one of the most stuck systems, from within. Although these people have chosen to work inside a big and stuck system, they often work at the margins and edges within it to try and push, pull, provoke, midwife, and imagine something else. These people model what it truly means to be of public service, and we are so thankful for every single person that is following this difficult path.

We are excited about the potential that public sector innovators hold – in our roles, responsibilities, permissions, and power as well as our hearts, minds, and ambitions. It is important for public sector innovators to commit to do the very best that we can with the opportunities that we are given, and to not fall into the traps that the dominant paradigms will persistently and pervasively set. Let us continue to hold this potential together, and to nurture and support the conditions for transformation, emergence, and resurgence within ourselves and with each other. What a gift it is to learn with, from, and alongside thoughtful, talented, resourceful, and tenacious colleagues in our individual and collective journeys toward transformative innovation.



MUTUAL FLOURISHING

WHAT IF WE CENTERED OUR LAB PRACTICE IN RECIPROCITY AND ABUNDANCE?

The public sector tends to keep themselves at the center of power, decision-making, shaping agendas, and determining areas of interest and focus. They (we) set the rules of the game and expect everyone to follow them. Commitments to justice, equity, diversity, decolonization, reconciliation and/or inclusion are often viewed as discrete policy targets and action items rather than as fully embedded in, and integral to, innovation. Engaging with the systems and structures of power inherent in a political organization is often absent or ineffective in lab work. All of this, and more, limits the possibility of reciprocal and relational practice. Co-creative, collaborative, and collective approaches are core to innovation efforts, and may unlock larger scale transformation. Letting the winds stir up stuck and problematic conceptions of who does and does not hold power in public sector systems is necessary for transformation.

Cultivating and nourishing relationships and reciprocity needs time. Public sector staff are regularly forced/compelled to attend to the urgent rather than the important. This tends to result in short-term and small-scale fixes rather than systemic and durable systemic shifts. Many public servants feel that there is never sufficient time to be reflective and strategic, to think and work systemically, to adequately understand and collaborate with stakeholders, or to imagine, develop, and test potentially game-changing solutions. Holding hearts, minds, and practices rooted in abundance has great potential to reframe lab strategy.

In this iteration of SLab we held this pattern closely in several ways. When beginning a new lab, we slowed it right down and took the time to build relationships, connections, and determine a shared sense of purpose, process, and potential with the staff co-convenors of the lab before beginning. We took the time for one on one conversations with potential lab team members to invite



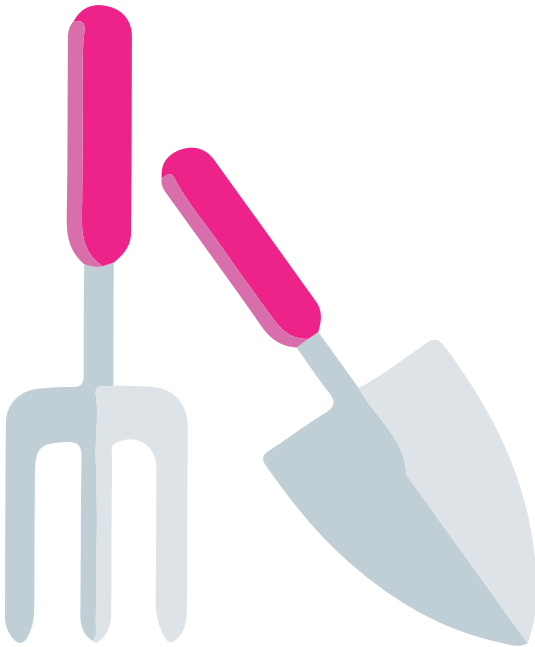
them into the process, and to also make sure that the ways that we were forming our initial framing of the lab also met their hopes and goals. In the community of practice we made sure that there was time for members to connect with one another in each session, and to become more entangled in each other's challenges, contexts, and experiences. When the pandemic began, we checked in with members of the SLab community to see what might best serve them in that time of disruption, and we slowed everything right down and made room for nourishment, reflection, and rest. Over time we have grown our integration of embodiment and connecting practices as a core part of our work. In order for people to imagine and enact other possible futures, our bodies, hearts, and minds need to be nourished and supported, in deep relationship to place and to each other.

ENCOURAGEMENT AND LOVE TO OUR FELLOW GARDENERS IN THE FORM OF ELEVEN INVITATIONS



1

Take time to strongly theorize the purpose of a public sector innovation lab (PSI lab), and connect this to activities, methods/techniques, evaluation, and learning approaches. It is always the right time to do this, whether a new lab is being conceptualized or a lab is well-established. Build, test, revise, and reframe a theory of change as a regular strategic activity. This will ensure active and ongoing learning from what the lab is doing over time and enable dialogue, generative debate, contestation, and coherence amongst PSI lab actors. It will also ensure a regular renewal of the lab as it learns from its interventions, the landscape of actors evolves, and priority issues, opportunities, and contexts change over time.



2

Be clear, specific and honest about what 'innovation' means in the lab, and use appropriate language to describe this. If the lab is about making existing services more efficient, or if it is focused on improving customer/ user experiences with various services, then describe it as such. If it is about working on complex challenges, seeking transformation, or cultivating emergence then describe innovation this way. This will help the lab team to be coherent and to choose activities, techniques, and evaluation approaches wisely. It will help with setting and communicating expectations to the larger ecosystems of actors that the lab is a part of, including the hierarchy that it likely exists within. It may help with limiting the innovation hype and emulation traps that many labs fall into. It will also help PSI labs to learn from one another in the most helpful ways, as labs taking similar approaches to one another will be much easier to identify and find one another. We need more of all types of innovation - proliferation and diversity is important to the larger field - but this must come with clarity, transparency, appropriateness, and honesty.

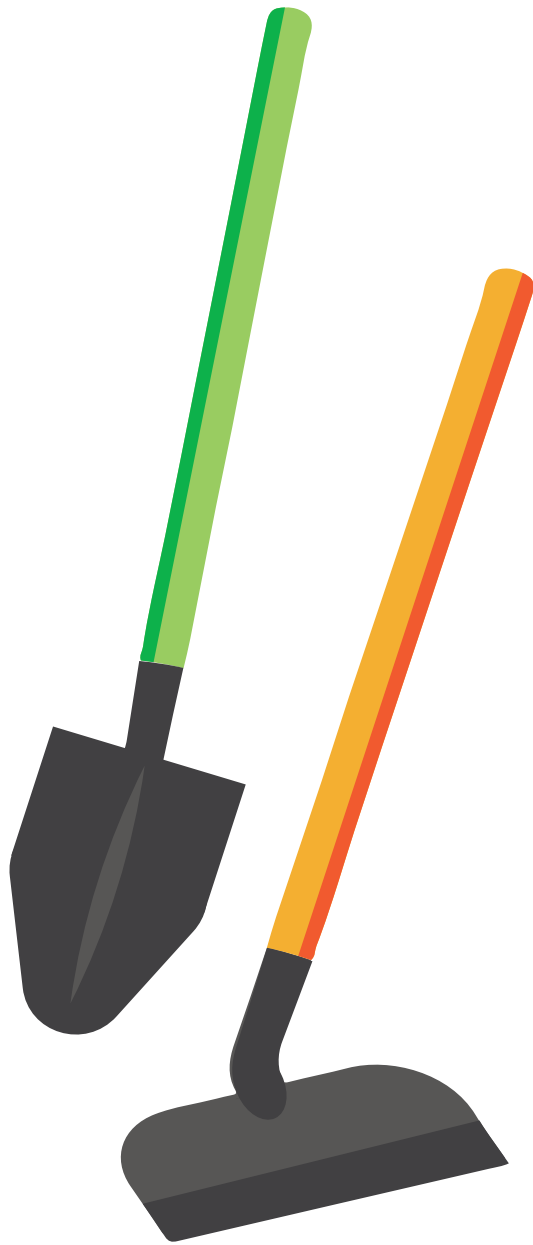
3

Work skillfully, strategically, compassionately and with full awareness of how the forces that relentlessly pull and push practitioners into working within and maintaining the dominant systems, structures, and paradigms of governance and power are influencing and shaping your thinking and work. An equally relentless lab response is needed to see, name, and describe these forces in relationship to what a PSI lab is trying to do. Lab purpose, goals, activities, and evaluation that imagine and enact alternatives to these dominant forces is important work to do. Making intellectual, social, creative, and emotional spaces that literally make room for these alternative responses – for yourself and for others - is fundamental work for a lab to do as a continuous reflective activity. There is a need for both accountability and compassion when you find yourself stuck in or reinforcing some of these dominant patterns, and for ensuring that you are resourced in all the ways you need to be in order to continue, such as surrounding yourself with your familiars who get it, prioritizing rest, listening to your body, and so forth.



4

Do your very best with the opportunities that you have. Most of us working in innovation labs are extraordinarily lucky - in some way we've been given permission to work differently than the rest of our organizations. Even though we just said that we need more of all types of innovation in the public sector, it is also important to be courageous and to stretch as far as we can with the gifts that we've been given. Very few people that work in the public sector are given this kind of permissive space. Even though lab work often feels difficult, constrained, risky, and challenging, it is a responsibility of PSI lab practitioners to be as courageous and ambitious as possible with this opportunity to help to expand these permissive spaces for others now and into the future. This is not the time or place to take the easy and well-trodden path.



5

Know when it's time to leave or close up shop. Sometimes the enabling conditions for the work are simply too difficult. Maybe they weren't great from the beginning but it was worth a try, or maybe conditions shifted along the way. There is no shame in calling it a day, and thoughtfully and lovingly closing a lab down. Perhaps this is the systemic intervention that is needed to create some compost and seeds for another iteration in the future. This can be personal too - maybe the lab is fine but your time working in it needs to come to a close. Perhaps you're tired or burnt out and need to take some time to go fallow and rest. Perhaps you've reached the limits of your skills, experience, talents, hustle, patience. Perhaps it's time to make room for a different leader/ship. Perhaps there is an opportunity somewhere else that has emerged and is better suited for you at this time. It's important to continually tune yourself as an instrument of transformation; this is a long game, and sometimes leaving, ending, or resting is the next wise move.

6

Enable and engage in network-, field-, and movement-building work. There is an important role for network-serving organizations in PSI lab work, particularly as the field is in rapid development. This work might include codifying practice, mobilizing knowledge, building connections, creating stronger enabling conditions for collective PSI lab work and unlocking resources in the forms of funding, adding legitimacy and credibility, and creating learning opportunities. Network-serving organizations that have historically supported the public sector (e.g. professional associations, government-to-government networks) can take an active and important role in enabling PSI alongside networks emerging for this specific purpose.

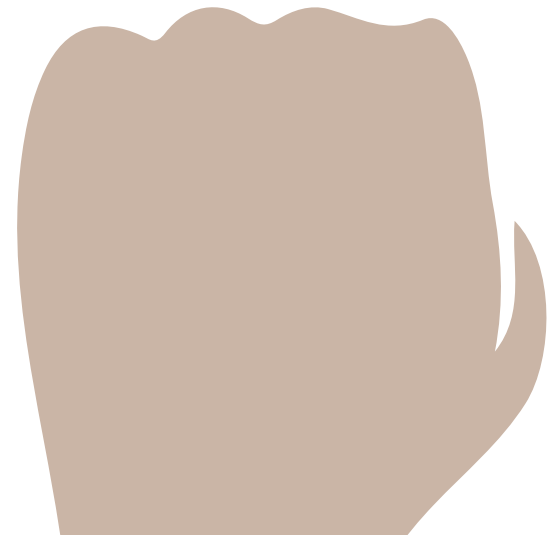
7

Build relationships of reciprocity and allyship with others working toward transformation. Lab work is hard, and often marginal and poorly resourced. There are very likely others in your organization and/or community that have related ambitions in different domains, and also have similar struggles. A colleague of ours described this as being in different canoes but heading in the same general direction - in our case it was the social and transformative innovation ambition of our lab pulling alongside colleagues working toward reconciliation, decolonization, and equity. Explore what you have in common, how you can be in allyship with one another, and lift each other up.

8

Make sure that your lab does not become an exclusive club for special people, but is instead an energetic hub and catalyst for building innovation infrastructure in the form of people and relationships.

The exclusive club model of a lab is inherently limited when thinking about organizational and systems transformation, no matter how close to power it resides. Take inspiration from parallel movements that are about openness, transparency, civic engagement, co-creation, collective impact, communities of practice, and sharing and build this ethos into the design of the lab. Take an outward, capacity-building, and open approach to building innovation infrastructure in the form of a diverse, engaged, multi-skilled, and engaged movement of people working toward innovation together. This will likely mean much more durability and impact of the work of the lab over time.



9

Consider designing multiple accountabilities into the lab's strategy and decision-making structure. PSI labs that are wholly within and accountable to the organization that they are trying to influence are likely to find it difficult to create their own enabling conditions for more transformative work. Some ways to do this might include: having external funders; bringing a diversity of users directly into decision-making roles; and building a leadership/governance structure that has other people and organizations on it.

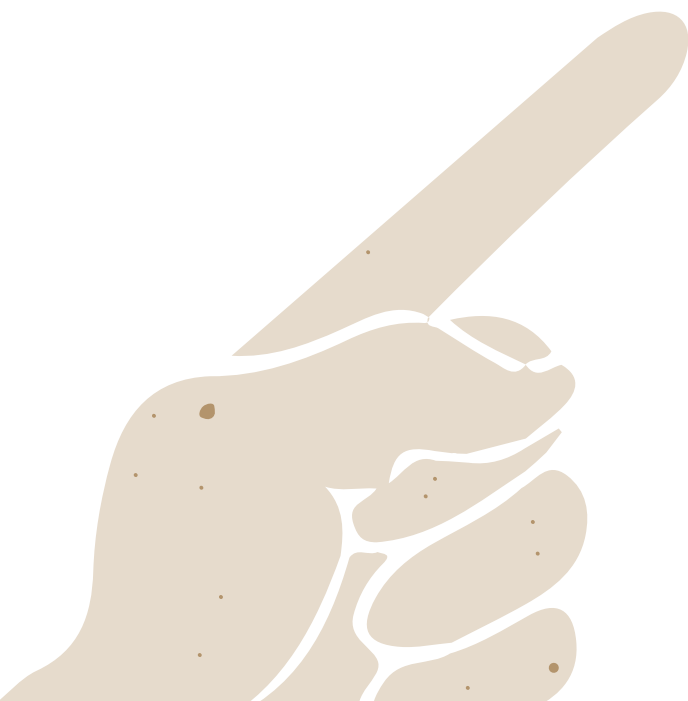
10

Understand and fully exercise your agency regardless of your formal or positional authority. Everyone has agency, even though most public sector organizations (PSO) reinforce top-down, hierarchical, patriarchal, and colonial forms of what power and leadership look like and where it resides. If a lab team has access to this formal and positional authority that's great, and at the same time there are many other forms of leadership to cultivate. Agency takes many shapes: who you are in relationship with both in- and outside the PSO; foundations in lived and cultural experiences and identities; unique knowledge and expertise; access to resources; time and space to work differently; or holding particular privileges based on the body you were born into. The public sector has a tendency to point elsewhere when asked about who is responsible for innovation – what happens if you point to yourself and your lab team and stretch your agency as far as possible?

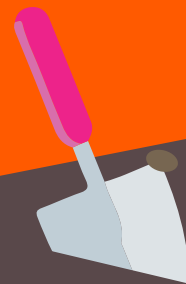


11

Do not leave evaluation until later. Most PSI labs are not paying enough time and attention to evaluation, and/or are attempting to evaluate the work of their lab using measures and methods that may not be appropriate for their theory of change. This means that active, intentional, reflective, and strategic triple loop learning is likely not happening as fully as it could be. Think strategically about what the lab needs to measure to satisfy those that enable it, and to be legible to the organization and decision-makers that it is accountable to. Also think strategically about what the lab needs to evaluate in order to really understand if it is having an impact on what it is attempting to influence, change, or transform. This will most likely mean that evaluation will involve principles, practices, and skill-sets outside of what the public sector typically uses in its dominant performance management and quantitative approaches to understanding outcomes and impact.



IN CLOSING



A series of brown footprints of varying sizes and orientations, scattered across the top right portion of the page.

We hope that this walk through the garden with us was fruitful, and that you found some nourishing insights along the way.

We can't quite say that we "enjoyed" writing this, as it wasn't easy at times, but it was certainly some good medicine for us both. In a typical report it is common practice to conclude with some exciting next steps to show how the work is continuing, and describing how the work is scaling ever upward to more robust and high impact outcomes. We have none of those things to offer you here, as this isn't the point. There is no neat conclusion, and in fact in many ways things have only gotten murkier for us. Rather than having a clear new design for the garden or a list of what to plant next, it's more accurate to say that we are in the weeds. But we're lovingly staying with the struggle, with the mess, and are excited to meet you there, so stay in touch.

STAY CONNECTED!

We've gathered up many of the foundations and tools that we use in our lab practice here [↗](#), so please use and share these resources generously.

Lindsay Cole - lindsay.cole@vancouver.ca

Lily Raphael - lily.raaphael@vancouver.ca

A small yellow bee with black stripes, positioned at the end of a dotted line that starts from the left edge of the page.

WITH GRATITUDE TO CHRISTA CLAY
FOR THE BEAUTIFUL DESIGN OF THIS STORY.



FOR ASINYKWE

"this story takes place a long time ago or maybe right now. the world was thrown. the mother was shaken so hard that everything cracked. shattered. we cracked. everything fell to the ground in thousands of pieces. and when everything hit the ground the pieces flew through the air scattered all over everywhere.

no one knew what to do.

some people didn't survive.

some people gave up. moved on. buried. forgot.

some people found ways to cope.

some people worked hard at just breathing. just breathe.

maybe it went on for a few generations like this. just holding on.

waiting for something better.

just breathing.

then there was a woman. an ogichidaakwe, but not yet. she started traveling around our territory and in the west, picking up those things that we'd forgotten. picking up all

those shattered pieces of nishnaabewin that had been taken from us, or lost or forgotten. she had a big black ash basket that she used to pick up these things. and so she traveled around visiting with the old people. and at first the old people in her own community were too busy to help her. but she persisted, and she was led out to the west. she found old people there that remembered their stories, the ceremonies, their dances. she recorded and memorized and learned those ways until she knew them in her heart, and into her basket they would go. then she came back to the east, and she started waking up those old people that had forgotten. what about this? who remembers that? she recorded and memorized and learned those ways until she knew them in her heart, and into her basket they would go.

by the time she got here, to michi saagiig nishnaabeg territory, she had a big basket full of songs, stories, ceremonies, a language we'd almost forgotten. she came here because of all the gizhiikatig and those teaching rocks. she came here to work with our young women. she came here with seeds to plant, and she planted them in our soil. she took care of them. and over time, those seeds grew into the most beautiful flower garden you've ever seen - roses, makazin flowers, trilliums, pitcher plants.

her voice healed us every time we heard it.

those that could see quietly called her "the woman who changed our nation," because she woke us up, and she's got so much humility she doesn't even know it.

she never asked for any recognition, because she wasn't doing it to be recognized. she did it because it filled her up.

she just carefully planted those seeds.

she just kept picking up those pieces.

she just kept visiting those old ones.

she just kept speaking her language and sitting with her mother.

she just kept on lighting that seventh fire every time it went out.

she just kept making things a little bit better, until they were."

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson,
Islands of Decolonial Love

