TOWARD DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATIONS: A LAB ON LABS

Report 9th - 10th December 2019

IASS POTSDAM

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AGENDA

Day 1: 9:30 – 17:30 (Starting with registration and coffee at 09.00 and followed by dinner at 19:00)

9:00	Welcome Coffee and Registration
09:30	Opening, framing and introductions
10:45	Exploring lab methods and context of labs for democratic transformations
12:30	Lunch
13:30	Designing prototypes of labs for democratic transformations
17:30	Close
19.00	Dinner

Day 2: 9:30 – 14:30

09:00	Welcome Coffee
09:30	Reflection on Day 1
10:45	Coffee Break
11:11	Open Space: What needs to be more deeply discussed regarding Labs
12:30	Lunch
13:30	Where to go from here?
14:30	Close

DAY I: INTRODUCTION AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

Current times are characterized by an increase of wicked problems that challenge established forms of *democratic governance*. Problems such as environmental crises, growing social inequality, and problems of representation cannot be inscribed within territorial political boundaries or understood in organizational silos. They need timely actions. These responses need to occur from the local to the global level and go beyond the traditional divide in specific policy areas. In addition, in an increasingly complex world, such problems call for particular expertise. *How can we foster change towards sustainability in a democratic manner when problems are increasingly complex?*

In response to these problems, different types of labs, such as i**nnovation labs, living labs or transformation labs**, have been created world-wide. They bring together multiple stakeholders to create innovative solutions. These labs have been, however, hardly acknowledged by the scholarship on democracy and sustainability as one mode of change.

The IASS research project Democratic (Re)configurations of Sustainability Transformations in cooperation with the Science Platform Sustainability 2030 (based at the IASS) aims to explore the **limits and opportunities of labs** for addressing the challenges of democracy and for solving sustainability problems. The research group sets out to understand their potential as a democratic innovation. Moreover, it questions how labs can contribute to ways of social, ecological, and economical sustainability.

To this end, the IASS hosted a *lab on labs* to explore the **design, methods, and configurations of labs**. The Lab gathered a small and diverse group of people, comprising international lab experts, leading scholars of democratic innovations and sustainability research, and decision-makers in the field of sustainability politics. During the lab, participants explored and experimented with lab methods and principles that promote democracy and sustainability. Together, we questioned how can labs contribute to democratic innovation and sustainability in governments and design early prototypes for such labs.

LAB TOUR

Exploring the methods used within labs and the context in which they are set
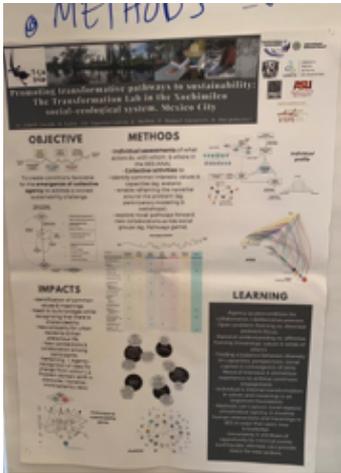
The Transformation Lab, Mexico, aims to create a coherent collective strategy to address urbanization impacts on the Xochimilco urban wetland in Mexico City. The purpose of the Lab is to identify individual agency in order to foster collective agency. It follows the principle of systems reframing by means of common values and emotions.

Link: https://steps-centre.org/publication/the-transformation-laboratory-of-the-social-ecological-system-of-xochimilco-mexico-city-description-of-the-process-and-methodological-guide/

The CitiLab, Spain, aims to democratize innovation and include various people, independent of race, gender, social or cultural background. Projects are designed upon needs ("What do you want to do?") and follow the principle of head, heart, hands-on.

Link: https://www.citilab.eu/

The GovLabAustria, Austria, aims to test how expertise from politics, administration, science, industry and civil society can be brought together and incorporated into legislative processes. It applies the principles of co-working, co-creating, and rapid prototyping.

Link: http://www.govlabaustria.gv.at/
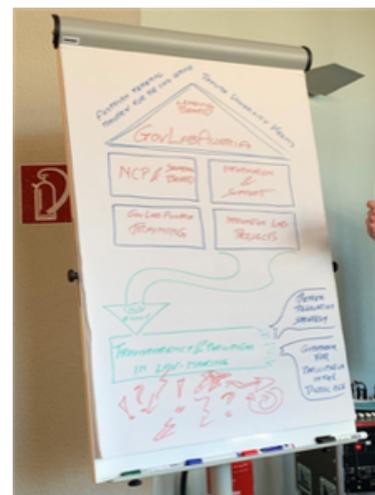
The Real World Labs, Germany, seeks to initiate societal transformations and sustainable development regarding various issues such as mobility, tourism, planning, energy, and the integration of refugees. It is designed as a real world experiment.

Link:
https://tinyurl.com/uxzkopp

PROTOTYPING LABS

1. **Lab in the Amazon Region**

This prototype was created in response to the question: **How should a lab for socio-environmental sustainability in the Amazon region look like?** The complexities of strengthening socio-environmental protection in the Amazon stem from the need to address multi-level challenges to the call to address power imbalances and diverse socio-economic interests among different actors. The lab focuses on innovative solutions co-created by citizens, indigenous leaders, NGOs, CSOs, Governmental institutions, and the private sector in the Amazon.

The main drivers of the Amazon Lab are local governments. Working together with academia, civil society, and engaging with non-humans and the industry, local governments set the space to find solutions to the power imbalances that permeate participatory processes in the region and imagine new sustainable solutions for social and environmental protection. They aim to include a vast range of views and methodologies to reach these objectives.

Questions for further exploration and to refine the prototyping model are: Are these actors doing something together, or are they just having a dialogue? How can mediators address power dynamics and lead actors to co-create sustainable solutions to socio-environmental challenges without reflecting specific economic interests? How can climate change skepticism be addressed?

2. **Designing a "One-Stop-Shop"**

This prototype followed the question: **How would a lab for public authorities look like?** Comparable labs already exist. For instance, within some German ministries, as cross-ministerial institutions (such as the Etalab in France) or "service" platform for public authorities with a 'disruptive agenda' (such as the MindLab in Denmark).

The proposed lab – in the sense of a "One-Stop-Shop" – would serve a similar purpose and would **allow public authorities to experiment in their daily work and to interconnect departments within or across ministries.** But what are pre-conditions and guiding principles?

The prototype builds upon existing experiences and knowledge. It integrates the perspectives of different groups of society. Furthermore, it acknowledges that developments and change need time and require patience. Core principles of such a lab are: flexibility, collaboration, power leverage, creativity, a "light" structure (not everyone needs to be physically present at all times), options for up-scaling, reflection on context and given conditions.

Crucial pre-conditions are the lab's mandate and political backing, available resources (financial, staff), and the courage of public authorities to follow through. In order for such a lab to really function well, another administrative culture would be needed even though it remains unclear what exactly that means.

Critical questions for further debate are: Where would such a lab be located – within or beyond governmental bodies? Who owns the lab? Would the lab be a service for one ministry or for inter-ministerial working? Is the lab connected to the public and civil society, and if so, how? How would and should such a lab be funded? What are rules of the game? Who decides which projects to take on? What are outcomes of the lab?

3. Framework conditions for designing a lab that has impact

The prototyping exercise addressed the question: **What are the framework conditions for an impactful lab?** As discussed, designing a lab needs to be understood as a process that is backed by a political sponsor. Accordingly, the lab would be a public-sector lab. The purpose of a lab needs to be collectively decided (multi-stakeholder) and constantly reevaluated with reference to indicators. A guiding infrastructure for experimentation in the public sector is needed. This includes legislation and funds, standards for co-creation. Labs need to be designed according to the cultural context in different countries and fields (such as public administration). Their process needs and demands crucial preconditions from the political system. An ecosystem of labs needs prominent faces, a network of supporters, a coordinated process, sponsors, conveners.

Questions for further debate include, Who establishes clear boundaries between the lab and its environment? Who learns from labs? Who are the enemies and who are the partners? How is learning shared among labs and publicly? How are objectives established? How can labs stay focused but open to new developments?

4. Inclusion in labs

This table questioned: **How can labs be organized in an inclusive manner? How can they face external power structures? And, How can they contribute to equality and inclusion in society?**

These questions are crucial when considering the democratic spirit of labs. Labs should aim to generate participation in an inclusive manner despite being situated in societies that are marked by stark inequalities in wealth and resources and by long-established forms of discrimination along categories of sex, race, class, sexuality, age etc.

The Lego exercise helped participants to realize the following: Labs need to build upon the framework of human rights in order to secure equal access to labs and equal standing in labs.

Moreover, a truly inclusive lab needs not only to consider the needs and demands of marginalized groups, but also of animals, plants, and other non-human agents. To achieve such inclusivity, labs need to be embedded in an active transformation of societal inequalities.

Old entrenched power structures need to be challenged and governments need to be opened up to the voices of the many. While such structural changes might help mitigate inequality, the presence of inequality and power asymmetries always needs to be considered in the design and execution of labs.

5. A lab for Germany's Science Platform Sustainability 2030 at the Science-Policy Interface

This prototyping effort focused on the design of a successful science-policy interface to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals at the national level in Germany. **How can scientific evidence inform and guide policies for sustainable development? How can knowledge be condensed for policy recommendations? How can different forms of knowledge be integrated?** The prototyping exercise was done by re-configuring certain elements of the platform's formats – e.g., labs on the implementation of the German Sustainability Strategy.

The prototyping exercise concluded that the process design for a successful science-policy interface will need to take the perspectives of several scientific disciplines into account. Furthermore, it should include views brought forward by practitioners, e.g. in public administration, parliament, civil society organizations or the private sector. The key lesson learned from this lab prototype underlined that it takes additional steps to carve out a potential lab format for Science Platform in more detail (which is currently being done). At the same time, the prototyping exercise stressed various interconnections that a lab format would have to have if it is meant to be effective with the overall "environment" of the Science Platform and its structural, epistemic, as well as thematic cornerstones.

DAY II

Dialogues on day two started off reflecting on the feedback shared by participants on the activities of day one, and a short contribution by the IASS on the relationship between democracy and sustainability. As it stands, societies all over the world are confronted with **multiple and interconnected sustainability issues.**

Ecological crisis, growing social inequality, and fissures in political representation pose challenges to find ways for societies to transform towards sustainable and democratic futures. Labs are discussed as transformative process in academic and political debates.

Building upon this framework, the morning debate focused on questions of how to **bring along change towards sustainability in a democratic manner.**

It highlighted that "sustainability by design" needs to be characterized along three dimensions:
1) sustainability as a response to environmental problems and societal challenges such as climate change and threats to democracy;

2) sustainability as a normative orientation towards certain values such as justice and freedom;

3) and sustainability by design as an intentional intervention.

Based on this debate, the group collectively decided to use an open space methodology to dig deeper into the specific issues and questions raised directly by the participants.

Working groups formed around the following topics:

- **Experiences from lab failures**
- **Developing indicators to measure the performance of labs**
- **Labs as democratic innovations**
- **Better funding structures for labs**
- **A government lab for sustainability**

FINAL REFLECTIONS

- Labs provide a playful space to experience and learn. What can we find in learning through play that can contribute to democratic innovation?

- The big differences between labs create a challenge for its conceptualization. While some labs are located within governmental structures and aim to enhance political decision-making (more legitimacy, knowledge integration, etc…), others seek to enhance individual and collective agency for political decision-making.

- Networking (in labs) has a big potential. The combination of different experiences, opinions and backgrounds can lead to more creative and possibly better solutions.

- Certain labs operate beyond politics and seek to contribute to policymaking by changing the underlying social structures.

- Context matters. Ownership is crucial.

- Open questions remain regarding the parameters for a good lab, and for deciding on the necessity to implement a lab or not. Furthermore, we need to learn from labs' failures.

- Communication is a challenge for labs. We need to think about methodologies to reach common understandings.

- Labs can enhance sustainability and democracy by following themselves criteria of sustainability and democracy.

- Thinking of labs as being too tangible is not always helpful. They should rather be thought of as a set of behaviors and a mind-set, and as ways of working. There is also a tension between labs being too tangible and the freedom for things to emerge. How can we interact both with concrete settings and the possibilities of the unknown?

- Thinking about labs as a project with a limited funding posits several challenges. There needs to be a way to carry on with labs even when the "project" is over.

- There are different "galaxies of labs", for example labs for technology development and digitalization. There is a lot to be learned from labs in other policy fields.

- Different spheres, such as the digital and the sustainable spheres, often remain un-connected in labs.

- The need for labs might need to emerge from the political system in order to ensure its impact and possible institutionalization.

WHAT IS THE IASS GOING TO DO WITH THE RESULTS?

The IASS and the research project Democratic (Re)Configurations of Sustainability Transformations is currently working on various publications about labs. For example a journal article that discusses the potential of labs for democracy and the wider democratic implications.

The IASS invites participants to continue collaborating on potential lab formats for specific contexts. Further collaborations can be (but are not limited to): labs that respond to socio-ecological changes in the Amazon region, or labs that address address sustainability issues at the German science-policy interface.