Exploring wicked problems in learning & innovation labs

Insights and challenges from 6 local labs in the Learning and Innovation Network (LINK) project

Co-funded by the European Union

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT ÖSTERGÖTLAND

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About the LINK project

The Learning and Innovation Network (LINK) project is a 36-month project (2022–2025) funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The project brings together partner organizations from seven European countries:

- Research & Development Östergötland, Linköping, Sverige (lead partner)
- Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway
- European Social Network (ESN), Brussels, Belgium
- Avedis Donabedian Research Institute (FAD), Barcelona, Spain
- University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia
- University of Belgrad, Belgrad, Serbia
- Zemgale Planning Region (ZPR), Jelgava, Latvia

These organizations also collaborate with the IT University in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Background

LINK was developed as a result of challenging trends in welfare models across European countries which require new, more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches. These challenges include:

- The growing pressures of demographic change and the increased demand for services, resulting in a drive for greater integration of services to enhance cost effectiveness and provide more holistic, person-centred services for the individual.

- The need to develop new working methods to provide these services, involving multiagency and multidisciplinary collaboration, and to overcome systemic barriers to change, providing staff with the skills required to do this.

LINK started based on earlier collaborations between partners working within social services, such as the LIFE project and the CASE project, both within the Erasmus program. The LIFE project developed a common framework of learning programmes for social workers around Europe working with families with complex needs (2017-2019). The transnational CASE project designed and developed a common learning programme about dementia for staff working in elderly care (2019-2022).

The idea of developing a model for learning and innovation labs in social welfare or in social services started within a collaboration between the R&D Östergötland and the IT University of Copenhagen (ITU). They worked with setting up and performing small-scale testing of learning and innovation labs in Östergötland, Sweden (2021-2023). Based on previous work and collaborations, the LINK project identified a range of challenges and needs among the project partners linked to the current challenges in social services across Europe. Six partners agreed to work with the R&D Östergötland to co-create a new model for learning and innovation labs in social care.

Why a learning and innovation lab?

When reading about innovation labs (innovation only, not *learning* and innovation) on the internet, one article states: “There is (...) growing evidence that labs can scale and sustain their impact through a unique process that is grounded in a philosophy of experimentation and learning, drawing on diverse stakeholders across and within various sectors and fields.”[1] The article highlights four social changes that labs can deliver: they create knowledge from and for the system, they build capacity for implementation, they build networks to sustain results and they create solutions with a deeper understanding of root causes.

Some examples of the broadness of possibilities working with innovation labs can be seen through questions such as how to improve youth employment; how to respond to the Ebola crisis; how to ameliorate the livelihood of small-scale fishing in Indonesia; and how to prevent food waste.[2]

Other researchers working with complex problems such as sustainable development (in an innovation lab within a university) finds that “among the notable principal findings is the collaborative work done voluntarily by all the participants who, instead of working with a proposal designed beforehand by one group or another, recognized that an OPENLAB_SI leads to the creation of links between society, academia, business and government.”[3]

Some later research from 2022 concerns socio-labs and states that they are poorly defined, but they usually use reflective ways of working on complex needs.[4]

1 Four Social-Change Results That Innovation Labs Deliver , 2014
2 Ibid
3 Open laboratories for social innovation: ”A strategy for research and innovation in education for peace and sustainable development” in International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education
4 Social Innovation Labs – Well-being through Collaboration and Conflict

It was through the collaboration between the R&D Östergötland and ITU that the concept of an innovation lab was developed into that of a learning and innovation lab. This was done by focusing on the learning process, with plenty of moments of reflection and knowledge and information exchanges between labs.

Aim and purpose

The LINK project aimed to develop a learning and innovation lab model by exploring the processes and results obtained from its six labs in the different participating European countries. It also explored barriers and facilitators for implementing and developing a lab in social service environments.

What is a learning and innovation lab?

A learning and innovation lab can be defined as a method for exploring a complex or "wicked" problem by inviting all the concerned actors, including the target group, i.e. the beneficiary group facing the problem directly. A "wicked" problem refers to a complex problem that cannot be solved by one actor or organisation, instead requiring a multi-actor and multi-perspective approach to find new solutions. A fundamental perspective of many wicked problems in social care is that of the care recipient, who knows their problems the best.

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In a lab, the different actors are invited to share their views on the problem and its possible causes and they then step-by-step propose different solutions. The labs allow the different actors to collaboratively explore different ways of solving the identified problem(s) by generating ideas and making prototypes to test. This process takes time and demands an open atmosphere where you don't rush, but where you try to build confidence and sustainability.

A learning and innovation lab is set up to explore and work with complex situations and wicked problems. A "wicked" problem can be defined as a complex problem where several subproblems are interwoven and where there is no one single solution that solves the situation at hand. Unfortunately, a wicked problem can seldom be resolved. Nonetheless, it can be worked with and improved. The learning and innovation lab process can take a lot of time and present many challenges due to different wills and other obstacles, but, at the same time, it can be meaningful as it widens your perspectives. The lab gives opportunities for exploring new ways of working by listening to others.

Innovation

The word and concept of innovation is used in many different contexts. Technological or medical innovations might initially come to mind. Such innovations are often more tangible and easier to identify. It can also be easier to understand their importance and value. For example, a medical innovation that helps to cure or prevent a disease or a technological innovation that makes computers work even better.

Innovations can be more or less transformative. Incremental innovation means improving something that already exists, such as creating more energy-efficient washing machines, while radical innovation entails creating something entirely new, such as the first airplanes.

Innovation can involve new products, services, processes, and business models. In recent years, the concept of innovation has also increasingly started to be used within welfare activities linked to societal challenges. Here, we talk about *social innovations* that help to influence and solve societal and social problems at different levels, from macro to micro, meeting unmet needs and improving the situation for target groups.

Social innovation

There are several definitions of social innovation that highlight, in different ways, what it is about:

> *"New services, goods, methods and ways of working that contribute to an inclusive and prosperous society."* [5]

> *"Social innovation is about new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs. We simply describe them as innovations that are both social in their ends and in their means. Social innovations are new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations."* [6]

> *"Social innovations are new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships and form new collaborations. These innovations can be products, services or models addressing unmet needs more effectively."* [7]

What then characterises social innovation? Central to social innovation is the integration of process and result.[8] This means that social innovation is as much about changing the social relations that produce the innovation as the product of the innovation itself.[9] Hence, social innovations are about processes, relationships, and results. Social innovations focus more on creating social and societal value than profit maximisation.

As a general rule, social innovation originates in perceived social problems. Innovation tries to find solutions – solutions that work to a greater extent than the current established practices. Therefore, the idea of social innovation is generally driven by the practitioner's experience of their work.

Learning and innovation lab

The concept of a learning and innovation lab is more abstract. You can think of it as a platform where various actors can conduct innovation activities to find new solutions.

The word *learning* aims to emphasise the element of learning within the lab, for both those directly involved in the lab and the stakeholders outside the lab, who are nevertheless affected by the lab work. The learning in the lab is primarily development-oriented learning. This learning involves reconsidering and questioning our beliefs about the ingrained and traditional way of seeing and acting in relation to the problem that the lab aims to influence. We do this by allowing different voices to speak up, which can provide alternative ways of understanding the problem. This learning also includes systematically examining the problem from different angles, which allows to gain insight into what needs to be influenced. Additionally, learning involves trying new ways to solve the chosen problem. By trying, we gain new knowledge and experience.

The word *innovation* means that the results, effects, and proposals that emerge within the lab should be an alternative and different way of working with the chosen problem. It is the development-oriented learning that helps us achieve innovations. Innovation can be about how we work (method), how we collaborate and set up the work (process), but also affect different conditions (structure).

The word *lab* should evoke associations with the possibility of experimenting with different components and tools to find alternative solutions to a problem that we cannot solve or influence through the usual way of working. Components and tools in the lab are:

- The people, professions, and organisations (actors) that participate in the lab.
- How we organise and work together in the lab (the process).
- How we identify and use knowledge and experience to describe, understand, and develop solutions to the problem the lab is addressing.

5 The Swedish innovation agency Vinnova
6 The open book of social innovation, Murray et.al., 2010
7 The European Commission
8 BEPA, 2010; Moulaert, Jessop, Hulgård & Hamdouch, 2013
9 Moulaert, 2005

How we developed the learning & innovation lab model

A three-stage process was established in order to develop, test and evaluate the overall lab model.

1) A baseline analysis related to a target group's needs and context was conducted, which served as a starting point to map stakeholders and explore wicked problems for the lab to work on.

2) Transnational project meetings were held during which representatives of each country shared and discussed ways to explore potential solutions to needs and provided feedback on each country's lab process.

3) The final stage involved analysing the evolution of the model, comparing similarities and differences of each lab and designing a common framework to be applied to a wide range of social issues, target groups, and contexts. Facilitators, challenges, and lessons learned from each lab were also collected and analysed to get a common understanding of the model's potential implementation in different structures, and processes, considering micro, meso, and macro levels.

Setting up the labs

The labs within the LINK project had a flexible approach in choosing how to set up the lab process, depending on the local context and the needs of target groups, local stakeholders and professionals. A key issue for them was thus to share their experiences during the process, which is why this was added to the model.

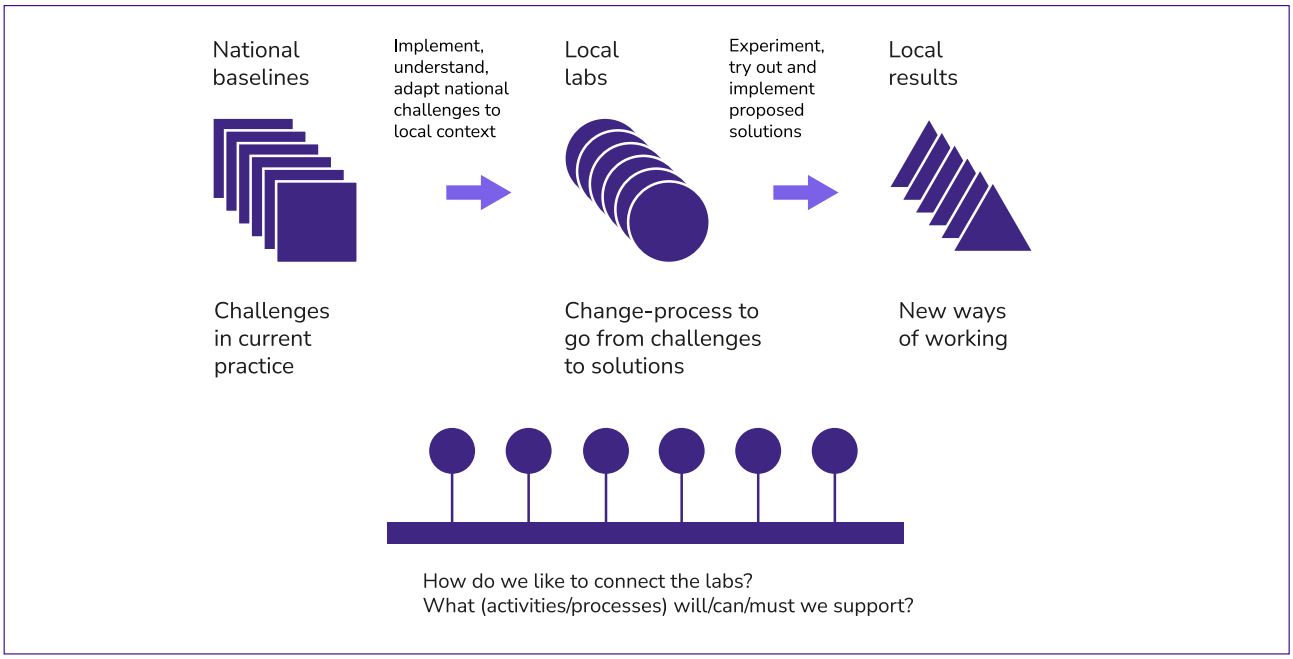


Fig 1. The project design for setting up the labs and share experiences.

The process to setting up a single lab

To assist in setting up a lab, the LINK partnership has created a learning programme for anybody who wants to learn more about how to work with social innovations. It is available on the LINK online platform (linklearning.online), where you can also find detailed information about the different learning and innovation labs set up by the countries participating in the LINK project, including the challenges they each encountered and the lessons learnt whilst setting up a lab.

- Identify which overall wicked problem the lab will work with.
- Invite the target group and other relevant stakeholders to participate in the lab.
- Ensure that all concerned actors are invited to participate on equal terms.
- Study the problem and learn more about it from different perspectives before you discuss solutions.
- Be as open-minded as possible and listen to the participants.
- Start the process by creating an inclusive atmosphere based on participation which may take time.
- Reflect and document regularly during the process in order to learn about setting up a lab and about the development of possible social innovations.
- Don't just talk about possible futures: make experiments and try new things out.

Tool for monitoring progress in the labs

One way to monitor progress is to regularly document the work and progress done in the lab. A matrix was designed to be implemented in different types of labs that, at various levels, aim to address social problems. Initially, the framework foresaw four items: stakeholders and roles; problem domain; innovation potential; and process. The first draft then evolved to include implementation processes and became a six-item framework with the addition of: immediate results and main activities carried out. To facilitate completion, the form was also supplemented with concrete questions.

The matrix was one way to log the process and to follow the activities in the labs. It was also a tool for the partners to actually see the progress in the lab. At first, our suggestion was that the partners would fill in the matrix every three months to log the activities carried out in the lab. We later ended up suggesting they'd do so once every six months instead. Before this, we tried different ways of documenting the process and different strategies/timelines and found what worked for us.

To be compiled every third month. We expect this page to be rather dynamic.

LINK To compile every third month		
DATE: DDMMYY	LAB: LAB NAME	COMPILED BY: NAME SURNAME
We are currently working on	**Current problem domain**	**Who is involved and why**
INSERT YOUR TEXT HERE What activities are you currently doing in the lab? Main activities in the last 3 months? What is the motivation for doing this activity and what would you like to achieve with it?	INSERT YOUR TEXT HERE What is the overall challenge or problem that you are currently working on? How do you foresee that the ongoing and planned activities will adress and improve the selected overall problem domain and lab topic?	INSERT YOUR TEXT HERE Who are the active participants in the current activities and how are the participating? (Participate in meetings, tests innovations, implement innovations, active experimentation, making design solutions etc.)
INSERT YOUR TEXT HERE What innovation possibilities are you currently seeing based om your lab work? What challenges and possibilities are linked to these innovation possibilities?	INSERT YOUR TEXT HERE Where are we in the process? What are we currently doing now and what is the next step? Current challenges and possibilities from a process perspective (e.g. participants don't have time, we lack other resources, all is fine, we have got a new key actor involved)	INSERT YOUR TEXT HERE What results have you obtained in the last three months? It can for example be something you have learned through the lab work, a change in practice, you have changed how you work in the lab based on what you learned, a written report, you have done a test or an important workshop.
Innovation potential in our work	**Process**	**(Intermediate) results**

Fig 2. The project matrix to monitor progress.

Different types of lab ownership

When you bring together a large number of different actors and organizations it is important that someone takes the lead. It is essential to have someone responsible for the lab, so that they can keep the others on track, ensure the process moves forward, and also invite relevant stakeholders to join the process. This responsible person or organisation is called an owner. Depending on who owns the lab, the result could be different in terms of organisational outcome and process sharing.

A lab can be created and configured in different ways. There is no right or wrong, but different configurations allow for different relations and ways of working between stakeholders. The illustration showcases three possible lab configurations:

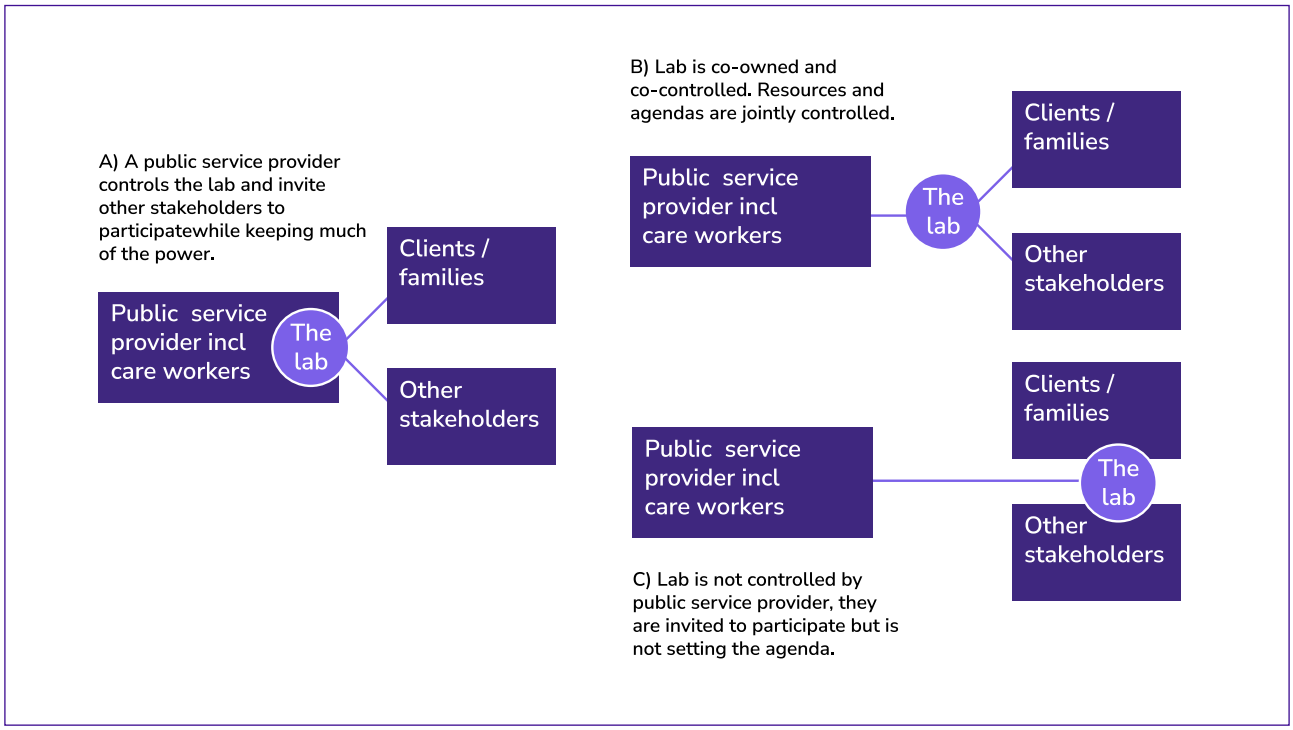


Fig. 3: Different examples of how to organise the lab ownership.

- The municipality or another public sector controls the lab, which is typically managed by municipal employees. To realise the agenda with the lab, they invite other stakeholders (clients, their families, or other organisations) to collaboratively work on the lab agenda.
- Different organisations and stakeholders come together and collaboratively decide to create a co-owned and co-controlled lab. The lab is not linked to a specific organisation (like the municipality in example A) and lab goals, agendas, and steering are done collaboratively and in a democratic manner.
- One or more stakeholders create a lab and invite the formal care provider (typically the municipality) to join as an additional stakeholder in their lab. In this case, the municipality can provide input and perspectives, but the lab and its activities are set by those who started the lab.

There may be other configurations, but these examples illustrate that labs can be configured and managed in different ways. The agenda can be defined by the municipality, but also by other stakeholders. When setting up a lab, it can be useful to discuss with the various initial and potential stakeholders how to work in the lab, how lab activities can be financed, and which “wicked problems” or topics the lab should explore.

Engaging stakeholders and target groups in different ways

Co-creation among the target group of lab can take place on different levels. The main actors of the labs were professionals and staff, but another actor was beneficiary groups such as youth, older adults, minorities and families with complex needs. Co-creation can occur at both surface and deep levels, depending on the process owner's understanding of how to create the process and how to create equal power conditions between the different participants of the lab, including public and private stakeholders, NGOs as well as the target group.

Depending on the chosen methods for the learning and innovation lab and the interest of the participants, the lab model can work better or worse in realising equal grounds of understanding and creation. There needs to be a mutual interest and a variety of ways in gathering the voices of the target group/beneficiary group so that everyone feels comfortable in making their voice heard.

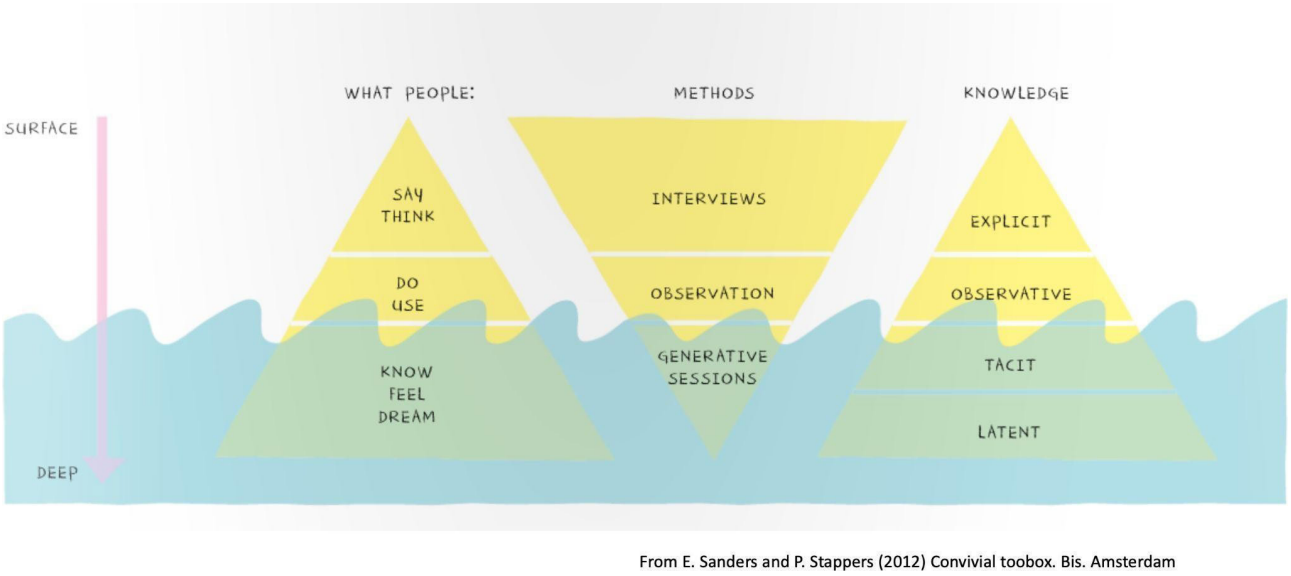


Fig. 4: Co-creation with stakeholders and target groups can occur at both surface and deep levels.

It is important that the target group is not only invited to the lab process, but plays an active role in it from time to time, in specific steps in the model.

The learning programme created within the LINK project contains further information about different tools for co-creation, depending on which wicked problem you choose to examine and which target group you identify in the process. Examples are the World café method, the Five whys method, and the Another one's perspective method.

The different labs in the LINK project have worked in both similar and differing ways. When it comes to the specific way of working, they have had some differences throughout the process:

The Spanish and the Lativan labs both worked with youngsters and with community agents. They both worked with creative tools such as pictures, teams-dynamics and working sessions, in order to catch the attention of the target group.

In the Slovenian lab, regular and ongoing meetings with Social Work Centre's professionals were held, characterised by a collaborative working relationship and support in establishing and leading an intervision group within the local community professionals. In addition, interviews with families and focus groups were conducted with professionals participating in the interview.

The Norwegian lab tried out different ways of working as they worked with various labs that did not share the same target group. Tempesnakk, for instance, represented a meeting point in a community for anybody, while another lab focused on families with children.

The Swedish lab worked with the Double diamond method (an innovation model) to address loneliness among older adults. They both examined what factors make you engage voluntarily and what factors are hindering people from meeting, /gathering or /engaging.

The Serbian lab worked with a mother in the target group, within the Roma community, who worked as an influencer. She assumed the role of creating a link between the social workers at the university and the Roma community, as they provided her with knowledge about children that she could bring out to a further circuit.

As every partner in the project identified wicked problems during the baseline study, the motivation was high to develop and test the learning and innovation lab model and to hopefully manage to find solutions for the identified wicked problems.

The local learning & innovation labs

In the LINK project, the lab work in each country started in 2022/2023 with a baseline study, after which the labs were set up. Each lab chose different problem areas and target groups, though they still shared quite a few similarities and learnings.

The various labs worked with the following main challenges: involuntary loneliness among seniors in Kinda, Sweden; emotional challenges among youth in Barcelona, Spain; lack of influence among youth and collaboration between specialists working with them in Jelgava, Latvia; testing out new ways of working with families with complex needs in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and in Trondheim, Norway; and lack of participation of the Roma community in society, especially among families with small children, in Belgrade, Serbia.

The six labs within the LINK project were designed based on the idea of a learning and innovation lab model, but with some local differences depending on the following elements:

- The participants involved in the lab process.
- The specific nature of the wicked problem and its target group.
- The local context which influences those working with the process, such as economic conditions.
- The ownership of the lab.
- The choice of specific tools/methods within the lab.

The following pages describes the different labs and lessons they each learnt or the possibilities and challenges they each observed during the lab process.

Location: Barcelona, Spain.

Objective: Approach youth emotional well-being from a community perspective.

Target group: Adolescents and young adults facing emotional challenges or distress.

Konsulta'm Lab

A continuous activity in the lab allows a framework to work together, solve problems, and innovate and analyse how the services are running and how to improve them. Data collection is a key tool to identify variability in service provision, new problems, and solutions that work (or not), and to create a common goal and task-oriented team motivation.

The last challenges approached by the lab were based on two main categories:

1) Related to the service provision, identity, and evolution of the Konsulta'm programme, as it is a new approach to interacting in a greater community network of social, educational, and health services.

A. How to refer young people with mental health needs for treatment or a more extended intervention. The Konsulta'm programme is a preventive community service, and early detection of mental health conditions is key, as is the need to respond quickly to a request for support. When someone needs special support, there is a protocol for referring the person to mental health services through quicker access. The protocol and communication systems among teams and community stakeholders are reviewed periodically to be improved when needed.

B. How to better explain the aim of Konsulta'm to users (youth and professionals working with them) to avoid misunderstandings about the services, false expectations, and common mistakes about the services provision. Disseminating and improving communication about the goals of the services regarding community agents is key to reaching Konsulta'm's main objectives in the community. A strategy of communication messages tailored to the target group and keywords was developed to better approach youth needs. These messages would be applied mainly in professional explanations to community agents, youth, or adult users.

C. How to improve the community-based approach: learning to work in the community and reaching other stakeholders' needs is one of the main traits of Konsulta'm's services. As multiple providers are collaborating to run the services, a common approach would facilitate equity in service access in all the territories. The community model has been reviewed to better approach target needs, sharing common interventions and other strategies applied by stakeholders.

D. How to improve the understanding of intercultural needs and how to approach mental health conditions with an intercultural approach.

E. How to prevent and detect early sexist violence among youth and young adults.

2) Related to important issues for the main target users detected in a continuous follow-up of needs, based on qualitative and quantitative data collected in meetings and indicators of the services. These topics are worked on using different methodologies (case studies, problem-solving dynamics, interactive training, etc).

Location: Ptuj (Spodnje Podravje region), Slovenia.

Objective: Support families facing various internal and external stressors through their active participation in the process (co-creation), instead of by deciding on the needed support on their behalf.

Target group: Families facing multiple challenges.

Challenges of families and social work: with polyphonic community to desired outcomes

In the Slovenian lab, our main way of working was based on the concept of co-creation and we learnt that co-creation brings challenge into the work process. If we want to co-create, we need to open the space for new, different, unexpected perspectives. However, if we manage to open a space where all voices can be heard and considered, then we can create the ideas and the steps to realise them. This does not mean that we have to give up our own views: we just have to allow others to contribute theirs. Co-creation means that together we create a new puzzle, one that contains all the pieces and is richer than the picture we imagined, even with the best intentions, as a good outcome.

The most important lesson that helped us understand the development process of our lab and that contributed to a qualitative shift in the cooperation of the lab members was the question we asked ourselves after a few months of operation, namely the question on the motivation for participating in the lab. What motivates us to develop the lab? Is our motivation (the motivation of each individual member) external (e.g., expectations of superiors, invitation from the Faculty of Social Work, etc.) or internal (e.g., the desire to contribute to the development of innovation, the desire for professional development, etc.)? Most members reported a gradual transition from external to internal motivation. Once this transition was made, it was easier to plan and implement activities in the lab, and members had a stronger sense of connection and belonging to the lab, in the sense that the lab is shared, that it is ”ours”.

Our members identified the following as being crucial elements of the lab process:

Patiently invite co-creation. At least at the beginning of the lab, it is necessary to patiently, slowly, and repeatedly invite all lab members into a joint process, exploring the possible contribution of everyone rather than starting from one’s own ideas and pace of action.

Question: What is needed to make the lab meaningful for each member, taking time to reflect when planning and implementing activities (where am I in the process? What do I feel comfortable with? What do I need to be able to participate?).

Maintain flexibility of action, as opposed to rigidly defined steps.

Promote a strong sense of belonging to the lab, as opposed to, for example, researchers delegating ideas to be implemented by practitioners and families.

Location: Trondheim mostly; collaboration with Oslo, Alta, and Austevoll Municipalities, Norway.

Objective: Deal with families' structural and unjust living conditions at all levels.

Target group: Families facing complex problems and are in contact with Child Welfare Services (CWS).

FamWel Lab (Family Welfare Lab)

One of the labs in Norway is about creating an inclusive Tempesnakk (dialogue about the residential area Tempe), whose ultimate goal is to enhance awareness of the challenges and needs in the area, allowing for further development of this initiative. Additionally, we aim to propose new ways to structure and market Tempesnakk to reach a broader audience with various cultural backgrounds, thereby facilitating their participation. We anticipate initiating a thought process and providing a proposal that can be utilised or built upon. This proposal will likely include recommendations for informational materials, a new video about Tempesnakk, and suggestions for organising and conducting the meetings effectively. In their work on the innovation project concerning Tempesnakk, it is essential to emphasise that the focus is on enabling all cultures to participate, not mandating participation. The term "various cultures" is used to signify inclusivity and avoid categorising groups. The aim is not to highlight those who do not participate but to address the challenges of accommodating and including all cultures in Tempesnakk. This is crucial to avoid creating problems.

With 25 different languages represented at Nardo School, determining which languages to include in informational materials presents a challenge. An information sheet in 25 languages would likely be too cumbersome for residents to read. It may be more practical to select a few languages that cover the majority. However, this raises the risk of excluding individuals whose languages are not represented.

Other risks associated with the innovation project may include inadequate collaboration with the various actors we intend to partner with, which could result in outcomes that are less favourable than the current situation. Another significant risk is the potential for assimilation, where the project may be perceived as an attempt to homogenise cultural and linguistic differences. Our goal is not to erase these differences but to create a space where various cultures can meet through Tempesnakk. This meeting is designed for the residents of the Tempe-Sorgenfri area, and it is crucial that there is diverse participation, reflecting the area's makeup. Additionally, economic and administrative responsibilities pose a risk. Questions about who bears the financial and administrative burden, how costs will be allocated, and who will cover various expenses are vital considerations in the planning of this innovation project.

The lab was generally successful and was seen as a positive when it involved:

- Participation of the team in planning and implementation.
- A concrete and "easy" innovation activity.
- Possibilities for participation and involvement for the parents and users.
- Creating enthusiasm and belief in innovation (WHY question).
- Repeatedly performing the activity and following the innovation plan's structures.

On the other hand, the lab experienced challenges when:

- There was not enough to implement the innovation.
- The workplace did not implement the plans.
- The target group was too challenging to implement short-term innovations.
- There were too many unpredictable factors involved, such as illness, lack of common targets, staff not believing in the project, etc.
- The partners/staff members had different expectations.

Location: Kinda Municipality, Sweden.

Objective: Reduce involuntary loneliness among older people and challenge the current structural conditions for performing voluntary work.

Target group: Older adults, although associations, volunteers, and business representatives can also benefit from involvement in the lab.

Meeting in Kinda

The lab has shown us the power of collaboration and what can be achieved when different actors – associations, municipal officials and other stakeholders – gather around the same table. Just creating this forum has led to consensus and a common goal that everyone is striving towards.

An important success factor is the joint planning between associations, which has enabled coordinated activities and helped to avoid activity clashes. This has also created synergies, where associations, the municipality's meeting points, and property owners now work together to organise larger events. Examples of such initiatives are the Friday Café, which has different themes each week, local markets, and the popular Christmas mingle. The church and municipal officials have also successfully organised dinners based on demand, such as lobster rolls, pizza nights, and Christmas parties. These activities have become important meeting places for creating community and enhancing wellbeing.

Another exciting result is the identification of the need for a joint day for the elderly/seniors' day. Such a day would provide an opportunity for various activities where all actors can showcase their organisation, and where you can also register your interest in contributing.

We have also identified the need for a common platform/calendar that gives an overall picture of all actors' activities, and where you can register yourself if you want to contribute, called "One way in": a website where citizens can match their interests with activities, regardless of associations or organisations.

In order to increase the mix of people and make the efforts more sustainable, we have identified a need to offer the opportunity for shorter commitments. Instead of being expected to contribute over a longer period of time, for example 6-12 months, you can instead choose to get involved for shorter periods, from a couple of weeks to two months. This makes it easier for several to contribute without feeling that it is too big a time investment.

The lab has also discussed the importance of creating a reward system for those who choose to get involved/contribute. In addition to the joy of helping others, there can be concrete appreciation, for example a diploma or a symbolic gift paid for by the municipality.

Another idea is to involve the local business community in Kinda. One suggestion is that volunteers, for example, those who help with escorting, receive a stamp for each contribution. Once a certain number of stamps have been collected, they can be redeemed for something nice, like a free pizza at the local restaurant.

A challenge for the lab work has been that they did not want to build on paid employees in order for development work to be less vulnerable and sustainable over time. This has meant that the process has probably taken longer than if it had been rigged from the municipality's side, but, as one of the partners put it, it feels as if, for the first time, this work will live and is built on a stable foundation.

Location: Jelgava City and Jelgava County, Latvia.

Objective: Address lack of collaboration between specialists and organisations involved in youth work, involve youth in decision-making, and develop a more inclusive and diverse local community.

Target group: Marginalised youth who experience exclusion or disadvantage in society due to various factors. Their marginalisation can arise from economical, social, cultural, gender, disability, geographical, or other barriers.

Community meeting for youth inclusion

Our lab process involved young people working with professionals. They know their own situation and that of their peers best. By listening to young people's perspectives, professionals can better understand the world they live in. As a result, decisions made and services offered are more targeted and help achieve better outcomes. Lab meetings should be planned carefully, taking into account the workload, priorities, and opportunities of the parties involved. The challenge in the initial phase of our lab was to ensure the involvement of educational institutions. We achieved this only later, by building contacts over a longer period of time and also by involving representatives of the education system in the lab team. We realised early on that, in our case, the lab would be a guided process. This means that a few key people collaborate with each other to plan, organise, and analyse the lab process, and then involve a wider group of community representatives in the creative process.

At the end of the community meetings, participants admitted that their greatest value was the new contacts they made. Various specialists and representatives of various organisations came together and learnt to collaborate, got acquainted with new working methods, evaluated networking opportunities, and acquired skills for the active involvement of young people in the development of services for young people.

The laboratory participants admitted that since their involvement in the laboratory, they have changed their approach to working with young people:

- Specialists listen more to young people, delve into their situation, and try to understand their needs.
- Specialists have wider opportunities to reach more young people with their services.
- Professionals are aware of the importance of community and are much more actively seeking opportunities for collaboration.
- The approach used in working with young people has become more holistic and inclusive.
- An understanding is being developed about youth participation and involvement in decision-making.
- A laboratory participant stated: "The higher the young person's participation in any process, the more important and meaningful the result will be for him".

In turn, the young people who participated in the laboratory admitted that, thanks to these meetings:

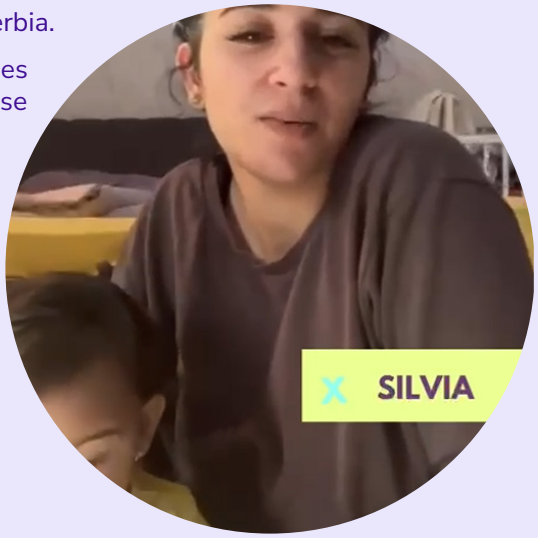
- A more positive understanding of the services available in the municipality has developed.
- Young people personally meet various specialists, which can increase motivation to turn to them if necessary ("I met good people, I realised that some of them are very good").
- Young people's communication skills and their ability to express and justify their opinions among adults were promoted.

Unfortunately, the lab's work failed to involve young people facing social problems. However, discussions between the lab's active youth and representatives of social services and the State Probation Service on how to reach at-risk youth so that they benefit from the lab's work were valuable. The youth in the lab share the information space and the physical environment with at-risk youth. The youth in the lab serve as ambassadors for services provided by specialists in the youth community and, at the same time, as ambassadors for the youth community in conversations with specialists. They are a valuable resource to learn from and to strengthen in order to reach those who are unreachable through conventional methods

Location: Zemun Municipality (City of Belgrade), Republic of Serbia.

Objective: Address the lack of support services for Roma families in the field of parenting and early development, and ensure these are adapted to their needs and contexts.

Target group: Vulnerable Roma families with children ages 0-6 experiencing challenges in early development.



Zemunsko čavororo (Zemun Little Child)

The Serbian lab identified an array of possibilities:

Elevating awareness, knowledge, and skills among policymakers, professionals, and practitioners for supporting early development of those who work with Roma families in the municipality of Zemun.

Inclusion of a greater number of children from vulnerable Roma families in development counselling centres and in the Family Centred Early Childhood Intervention (FCECI) programme in a culturally sensitive manner.

Engaging in advocacy efforts for greater coverage of children aged 1-6 years from vulnerable Roma families in kindergartens and preschools aimed at parents and decision-makers.

Enhancing intersectoral collaboration for improved early development outcomes of children from vulnerable Roma families.

Regarding outcomes 3 and 4, the Faculty of Political Sciences strives to develop partnerships with UNICEF on several innovative initiatives with the ultimate aim to bring closer and improve early development services and programmes for vulnerable Roma families with children in the Zemun municipality, City of Belgrade.

The challenges we have faced since the inception of the project primarily stem from a persistent lack of financial resources, which are crucial for addressing such significant and complex issues. This financial constraint remains a substantial hurdle, impacting various aspects of our work and our ability to maintain momentum.

Moreover, there is a potential risk that stakeholders and influencers might lose interest or reduce their commitment during vacation periods or times of intense workload in their primary jobs. These challenges and flow of engagement can disrupt the consistency and effectiveness of our initiatives.

Another significant challenge is the limited resources available for engaging more mom influencers. Without sufficient funding, our capacity to recruit and sustain the involvement of additional influencers is restricted. This limitation can lead to periods of reduced activity on our social media networks, diminishing our outreach and impact.

Additionally, the team responsible for supporting our influencer moms in their posting efforts currently comprises only two members. These team members are consistently present and dedicated, but their small number could potentially affect the continuity and stability of our social media presence. A larger team would provide more robust support and ensure a more seamless and uninterrupted flow of content and engagement.

Addressing these issues proactively will help maintain the project's momentum and achieve its long-term goals.

The impact of the labs

Impact of the labs

Several labs highlight a deeper collaboration between the different organisations of the lab and also a higher degree of consciousness and knowledge about the needs of the beneficiary group. They also learnt a lot from being in this open and flexible process about not being able to control everything and about building trust and confidence.

Several labs also point out that they were quite sceptical at first about working so directly with the beneficiary group in new ways. They were also pleasantly surprised by how much value it brought to give a voice to youth, minorities, etc. and how much this contributed to empowering the beneficiaries. The collaboration between organisations in the lab helped highlight all the activities and services available to the target group, which made them more informed about different possibilities in service and help.

The project partners appreciated the cross-lab learning and sharing of experiences that have taken place (in different forms) throughout the whole project. In the project and among the project partners, we also extensively discussed at what level the labs were operating: micro (individual level), meso (group-based level), or macro (systemic/societal level). The labs within the LINK project had an impact at different levels:

- In the Slovenian lab, there was a commitment to support frontline workers for innovations at the micro level (working with users) and meso levels (organisation, community) with possible implications at the macro level (system, legislation).
- The Serbian lab worked on a meso or even macro level with the whole Roma community by engaging a Roma influencer.
- The Latvian lab worked at a meso level, improving the service delivery process to youth in the municipality.
- The Swedish lab worked mostly on a meso level. However, sometimes the labs can be present at different levels, depending on the posed question. For example, the Swedish lab also made some effort in visualising the whole civil society, which is a gain not only for involuntary seniors but for the whole population in Kinda.
- The Spanish lab worked primarily at the meso level by strengthening collaboration between the large number of actors tasked with supporting the target group of young people with mental illness, but also at the system and structural level by making the work at the meso level visible the need for changes in systems and structures.
- The Norwegian labs (there were several) had different focuses, with several working at the micro level to improve holistic support for families. The Tempesnakk lab worked at the meso level by starting from a residential area perspective where both residents and area actors were in focus.

Level of structure	The Spanish lab	The Swedish lab	The Norweigian lab	The Slovenian lab	The Serbian lab	The Latvian lab
Micro			X	X		
Meso	X	X	X	X		X
Macro	X			X	X	

Fig. 5: The lab work took place at different levels.

Some final thoughts

The LINK project's learning & innovation lab model

The LINK project aimed to develop a learning and innovation lab model by exploring the processes and outcomes of the labs in the different participating European countries.

Our ambition was also to integrate *learning* into the innovation lab concept. The focus was not solely on establishing innovation labs, but to an equally high degree on the learning that the process enabled. The exchange of experiences between the project partners was of great importance- However, learning also meant gaining a deeper understanding of the wicked problems by involving the target groups, the true experts of their own situation. This exchange of perspectives ensured that the labs remained relevant, inclusive, and firmly grounded in real needs. Each lab's unique constellation of stakeholders contributed valuable insights, enriching the entire partnership. This emphasis on mutual learning was essential to addressing complex social challenges in an effective and adaptable way.

As described earlier, the six labs within the LINK project differ in terms of methods, target groups, and at what level they operate. Nevertheless, all of them appreciated the opportunity to share and discuss experiences throughout the process. They also concluded that working in a lab context requires a high degree of flexibility, openness, and humility in order to foster genuine learning. During the project, we freequently discussed the need for a common ground and a common model, but we agreed that there isn't one model to fit all and different labs can indeed apply different innovation approaches. That said, there is still a need for a flexible framework that can accomodate such diversity.

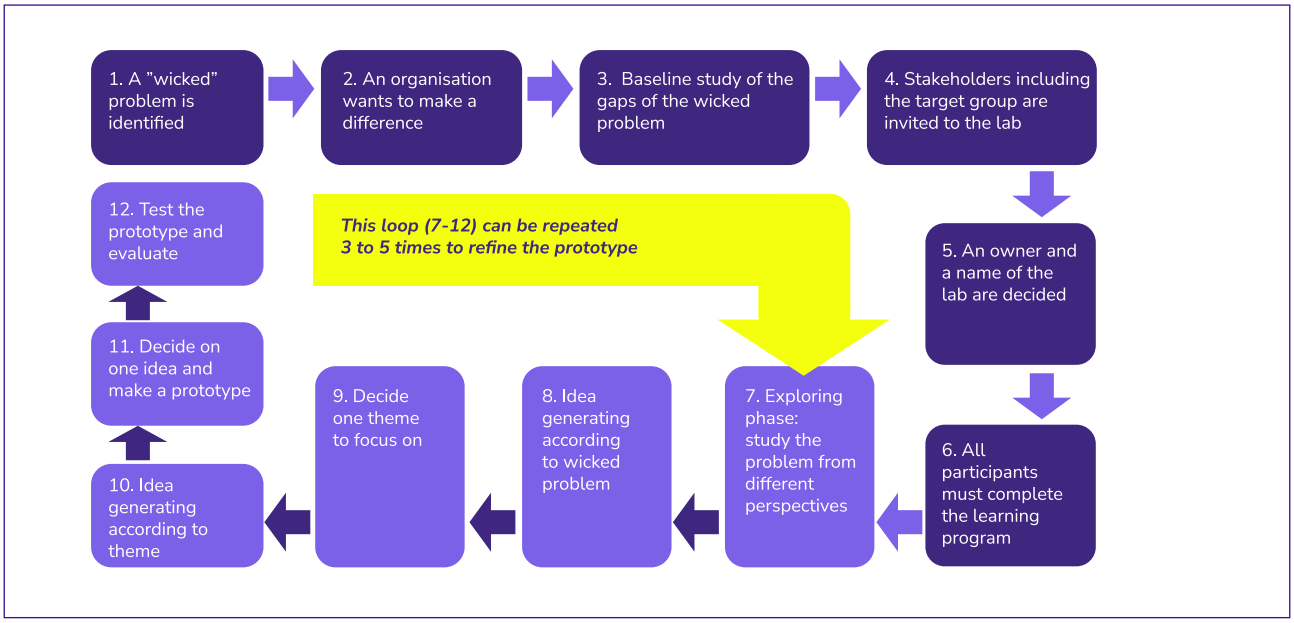


Fig. 6: The LINK learning and innovation model.

There are quite a few steps to set up a lab: half of these steps (pictured in dark purple) can be done once, while the rest (pictured in light purple), which start with the exploring phase, can be undertaken again and again, about 3-5 times, in order to achieve a prototype/solution as good as possible. A new element introduced by this model is that all the participants prepare themselves for the process by completing a digital learning programme on how to set up a lab and how to work innovatively in the social field. This gives the whole lab a common view of how to work in a lab process.

Within the LINK Learning and innovation lab model, each lab maintained a high degree of freedom to adapt and choose specific methods for problem analysis, idea generation, and evaluation. This balance between a common structure and local methodological freedom was central to maximizing the impact of the lab work and consolidating the collective knowledge generated through the project. This ability to choose and modify the approach based on the problem and context is part of developmental learning (in contrast to adaptive learning) which requires joint reflection and explicit choices. It is thus not solely about choosing a way to meet a problem but also about how the lab is organized.

Conclusion

Regardless of how you choose to customize your learning and innovation lab, we identified some key factors, such as the need for:

- Someone to take ownership of the process.
- Relevant and concerned stakeholders within the lab.
- Interdisciplinary and holistic collaboration.
- Managing structures according to the principle that every voice counts as much as the others.
- Competence in working in an open-minded and equal way, which requires a lot of courage and patience in not knowing where we are heading.
- Being conscious and humble in the process of co-creation with beneficiary groups as it can be hard to meet on an equal footing.
- Knowing about gaps and handling barriers such as hierarchies and lack of motivation.
- Being ready to test again and again and therefore being patient as the process takes time.
- Being agile enough to stop the process if there is a lack of impact - if it doesn't seem to lead to any impact.
- Thinking about sustainability on day one, so we don't start anything that can't be implemented and cannot last after a project is over.

An identified dilemma concerns the balance between structure and openness. While it is important to take clear steps forward, it is equally necessary to remain open to the unexpected. A learning and innovation lab is not a traditional development project. We believe it is essential to maintain a clear process structure and to continuously reflect on progress, yet setting measurable goals is not necessarily beneficial in this context.

The LINK project aimed to develop and test a learning and innovation lab model for the provision of more integrated and people-centred care services. Innovation competencies of professionals are important to approach growing pressures and increased demand in health and social services.

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