CRITICAL ACCESS LAB (Proposal)

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Table of Content

Executive Summary

Social (innovation, design, change) Labs are places, methodologies and approaches that address complex challenges in hope of creating larger system change. They are called "Labs" because they provide structures that allow for social complexities of one kind or another to be organized, systematized, analyzed, compartmentalized and rearranged by providing a mix of new ideas, solutions or experiments/ prototypes. In addition, Labs are typically places that prefer multidisciplinary colLaborators and user-centred (vs. institution-centred) approaches, inviting flexibility, creativity and hope. Also, unlike think-tanks, Labs are hands-on, emphasizing learning, making, and scaling. Labs, to be useful, must implement suggested recommendations, adapting them to the reality of bureaucracies, partnerships and politics. Labs could be a vehicle for change, but only if and when "solutions break out of the safety of the Lab". (1)

A great number of formal Labs or Lab-like approaches are already thriving all over the world, and in Canada, we should mention a few early social Labs adopters such as the United Way of Greater Calgary Social Impact Lab, Social Impact Lab Vancouver, LabIS Re-Code in Montreal, and Toronto's Evergreen's GTA Housing Action Lab and MaRS Solutions Lab. Most of these are almost exclusively funded by academic or government institutions and some, like MaRS, are hybrids, being "physically established on its borders … where escaping the 'innovators' dilemmas' is more challenging" (2).

This document outlines the rationale for creating a Critical Access Lab (CAL) as a self-standing non-profit or a grassroots initiative. The purpose of CAL is to be a place and/or methodology to clarify how "critical access" to information and services impacts the quality of life, particularly the "resilience factor" of either individuals and communities. For somebody willing and interested in using the proposed frame, this document also describes the mission, vision and purpose of the Lab, potential partners, key principles and types of solutions, workflow and staff competencies.

What Labs Are

"Complex systems are shaped by the interaction between scales so that what's possible at one scale (e.g., a community) is shaped by what's happening at another (e.g., in the broader culture). The effect can be dampening or constraining but it can also be amplifying." Social Innovation Lab Guide (3, p.7)

The prerequisite for the successful operation of any Lab within an organization is a workplace culture that is open to experimentation and *innovation* and values *learning,* acquiring and sharing new knowledge. The value of "learning", as a foundation for organizational research and development, supports innovation culture in its willingness to absorb a reasonable amount of risks through experimental trial and error.

The more mature the business is, the more difficult it is to maintain innovation and learning. The same applies to the social sector, and nonprofits (NPs) find it particularly difficult to justify spending on innovation and R&D to their funders and Boards. However, recent ruptures of the social safety net, amplified by pandemics, signal that perhaps the best solutions emerge from within and that the intentionality of Labs might help increase capacity for innovation in the sector. The good news here is that NPs have the prerequisites needed to run social Labs successfully.

First, historically, NPs were developed with strong governance and financial mechanisms in place to ensure that serious groundwork is done prior to any resource-intensive implementation. Excluding a few outliers, NPs are known to be "slow innovators" because their approval mechanisms must include a large number of sometimes conflicting stakeholders: funders, beneficiaries, the public. However, "slow innovation" could be useful in the later stages of development when ideas are tested in the real world as it may be cost saving. Further, as the culture of innovation is based on accurate problem definition and diversity of approaches (people and ideas), NPs are in a much better position to identify the essence of social issues. Due to their unrestricted access to diverse audiences through services and employment, NPs rapidly interact with the world as it is and morph activities based on continuously changing needs. Finally, as Labs are considered to be colLaborative and enterprising, many NPs hurt by the continuous funding cuts are finding ways to be (socially) enterprising while attempting to break funding cycle dependencies. As a result, these relationships and partnerships formed a glue that now holds a network of willing communities, organizations and individuals, providing a pool of potential

candidates willing to be early adopters of Lab solutions.

Theoretically speaking, social Labs are supposed to harness three intentional forces:

1. *Intention to transform*. Labs are built with the purpose to modify and transform "the rules and relationships that shape and govern the system being targeted" (3, p. 16). For that reason, Labs are most successful at times of political and economic crisis because they could provide alternatives rapidly and creatively.
2. *Intention to scale*. Unlike generating good ideas for the sake of ideas alone, the purpose of Lab-based brainstorming is to "pay attention to cross-scale dynamics… activities, trends, initiatives etc., at different scales" (p.98). The idea of "scaling" removes barriers to implementation by selecting scaLable ideas over others for broader impact.
3. *Intention to be strategic about cross-scaling*. To be able to function as a catalyst for communities, social Labs must be strategic about *when* to bring the *right* people together. For example, Social Lab Guides suggest three types of Lab-based people engagement: *sense-making* to create meaning to motivate for action, *identification of emerging patterns*, and *identification of opportunities* for partnerships and flow of resources.

In closing, the idea of experimenting with Labs within the context of social change is not new, and it has been implemented (although not named) in many instances in the past when rapid decision making was needed. However, as systems and our lives are becoming increasingly more disrupted than they used to be, one could ask if strategy development, as it is used today, has become inefficient in helping us understand surprising and unexpected elements. To create a sense of control, if not ownership of change, we need an undiluted, raw approach that goes beyond politics and agenda. This mechanism of raw "sense-making" channeled through Labs might help communities with the creation of tools necessary for responding to disruptions in an organized, colLaborative and controlled way, organically and from the bottom up.

The Case for the Critical Access Lab (CALab)

"Complex systems are not subject to the laws of cause and effect, so that sometimes a large effort will produce little or no result. Sometimes however, a small effort at the right time (e.g., a critical threshold) will create a ripple effect and a cascade of changes that produce a large result." Social Innovation Lab Guide (3, p.7)

1. *Why Critical Access?*

In information theory, access to critical information is defined as a right, sometimes a catalyst for ocial justice, often a necessary prerequisite for the creation of beneficial programs, strategies and policies. To be critical information literate means to understand how information is disseminated in respect to social and political dimensions and institutions participating in systems of oppression, and how stakeholders are empowered to approach the systems proactively. (4). One of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 16, Target 10 is specifically designed to ensure "public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms" (metadata). However, during the pandemics it also became clear how access to critical information is directly proportional to the success of national health strategies. For that reason, the expanded UNCR statement issued in March, 2020 included categories such as dissemination of only verified and truthful facts, language translation/ comprehension, unrestricted access to the internet, protection of journalistic rights and freedoms and control of surveillance, especially that of marginalized and vulnerable groups.

However, in addition to determining what critical access is, to ensure that the work will keep the practical dimension and continue to be relevant to people, the concept of *resilience* should be added to this mix.

Social scientists, such as Brand and Jax, noted that "resilience" is burdened by too many definitions in a plethora of fields such as "engineering resilience, ecological resilience, social-ecological resilience, psychological resilience, cultural resilience, community resilience, livelihoods resilience, among others." (5) Based on a partial critical review of literature of urban resilience within the context of Critical Access Lab I am proposing the adoption of Markus Keck and Benjamin Etzold's definition (6) of social resilience as a three-dimensional value of:

1. **Coping capacity** –the ability to cope with and overcome adversities;

2. **Adaptive capacity** – the ability to learn from past experiences and adjust themselves to future challenges day to day;
3. **Transformative capacity** – the ability to contribute or craft sustainable institutions that foster welfare and societal robustness towards future crises.

Within this frame, resilience is seen as "*social entities' abilities to tolerate, absorb, cope with and adjust to environmental and social threats of various kinds*."(7). Therefore, the coping and adaptive capacity, depends on understanding of "*the importance of the roles played by power, politics, and participation in the context of increasing uncertainty and surprise*" and transformative capacity on "*the question of what future sustainable pathways may look like, the question by whom, for what purpose, and with what consequences are important to address*."(8)

To understand how access to critical information and services can change the ability to cope, adapt and transform, the task of CALab would be to intentionally create opportunities (workshops, initiatives, gatherings) experimenting with accessibility, comprehension, avaiLability and other dimensions of access in relation to power, politics and control. In this context, for example, the poor or marginalized groups e.g. newcomers and refugees, would not be seen as "an issue" to be solved by a solution (e.g. technology, an app) but first examined as a political issue that acknowledges the power play of institutions maintaining marginality, power imbalance and the status quo, and what pathways need to be created in addition to "solutions" to make communities truly resilient..

There are challenges, however, to creating a place such as CALab, and some of those are as follows:

1. The idea of having a Lab that replicates a technical or engineering Labs working on technical challenges might harm honest exploration with insisting on a "solution-oriented" approach. Sometimes, there is no solution, and the "sense-making" process in itself could be sufficient to create a perception of positive change.
2. Labs are social, experimental and systemic (4, pg. 3), which makes them difficult to align with traditional grant making. The sustainability of the Lab might need to be overly dependent on the commitment of one hosting organization/ NPs, eventually turning the Lab into yet another funded program with a set agenda.

3. Labs need time to build community and partners' trust (the currency of Labs) and relationships (the way of operating that is mutually beneficial and transformative). For Labs, relationships, communication and durability are essential and the greatest challenge is to find the way to maintain the loose network of people despite gaps.

2. The Objectives of the Lab

The Lab space, if formalized, would have a few formal frames as well such as a set of adequate policies and procedures, especially around knowledge mobilization and exchange, communication strategy, objectives, mission and vision.

For example, the primary objective of CALab is "sense-making" or **understanding** how critical access impacts the perception of resilience the Lab-like methodologies (experimentation, inclusive design, transformation, scaling, cross-scaling) could be used to prototype a variety of access-resilience models. However, what would be needed even more are the partners to implement, document and measure success of these prototypes. One of the possible mission statement could sound like this: "*Through deep listening, creative problem solving, research, workshops and prototyping we will co-create collectively binding tools (programs, partnerships, platforms, pilots) to improve access to critical information and services for the purpose of increasing community resilience (capacity for coping, adapting and transforming).*"

3. Who are the CALab's Partners?

The following are some of the partners anticipated to be involved in colLaborative environments, and the roles they might play:

NGOs and NPOs - Local NGOs and NPOs are the Lab's most valuable partners because of the type of expertise and outreach. NPOs in particular have direct access to communities and sometimes rely on open source technologies. They are in sectors that overlap with the Lab's focus. NGOs and NPOs can

connect the Lab to specific stakeholders and issues while bringing in a diversity of perspectives due to their individual, distinct value.

Government - Government is a very important partner and colLaborator that can aid by sharing data, experience, or resources or connecting their own Labs for shared research. CARL can also identify gaps in research and collect quantifiable information that will benefit government partners when they are planning to launch new initiatives or evaluate existing ones.

Academia - Academia as a potential partner provides unprecedented research capacity and intellectual curiosity combined with enthusiasm (students from partnering departments). For students and researchers the partnership provides opportunities to gain real world experience by participating in meaningful community projects, partnership with research or innovation teams supporting recurring academic courses. The opportunity for academia is to get an insight into the government and private sector while working more closely on understanding the needs of communities.

Communities - Communities benefit from Labs because colLaborative solutions are developed by using public consultation. Labs can close the physical and cultural gaps between organizations or institutions and individuals whose voices would otherwise be repressed. Also, communities can acquire a much greater understanding of how governance and institutions work and how they can be influenced to change perspectives and change policies.

Private Sector - Private sector contribution offers a multitude of opportunities for engagement that is technology-based (e.g., mobile solutions, technology providers), manufacture-based (physical products) or competency-based (space or equipment exchange for a service, professional knowledge, job skills, jobs).

4. *CALab's Key Principles and Types of Solutions*

The Key Principles are adopted from the UNICEF Innovation Labs (8):

1. *User-Centered and Equity Focused*

- Responsive to user needs and built-in colLaboration with end-users
- Appropriate context and design
- Developed incrementally (using iterative user testing and modifying)
- Designed for the most difficult to reach first, and built for a global scale

2. *Experience-based*

- Incorporates best practices into the design of products, services and processes
- Shares knowledge gained and prioritizes openness as a problem-solving approach
- Has a focus on lived-experience and "radical inclusion"

3. *Sustainable*

- Viable in the long term (factoring infrastructure, maintenance, and running costs)
- Involves governments in developing solutions
- Encourage the involvement/ training of local "experts" with relevant experience (technical, other)

4. *Open and Inclusive*

- Built around free and open source technology for easy sharing and adaptability
- Facilitates access to information (documentation, content and learning shared and easily accessible)

5. *ScaLable*

- Replicable and customizable (language, culture, contexts)
- Factors in partnerships from the beginning (early negotiations)
- Looks towards locally avaiLable technologies and processes (use what already exists)

Types of Solutions

a. *Services and Product Development* - This type of innovation/ research involves the development and deployment of tools. It is based on rapid prototyping of solutions and continuous testing to refine functions to make implementation cheaper and more quickly attainable.

Types: infographics, reports, exploratory research, system mapping, usability studies

b. *Community Engagement* - If a Lab's work is oriented towards community engagement, it will involve the development of colLaborative co-creation, mentorship, skills training and facilitating growth in a way that ensures the community at large will be positively impacted.

Types: hackathons, convening, workshops, un-conferences, pop-up Lab events

c. *Research* - Research activities involve working with strategic partners interested in the coordination of the efforts for data collection at a large scale to identify the roots of issues.

Types: qualitative, quantitative, mixed, advocacy/ participatory research

5. CALab Generic WorkFlow

	What	How
I	**Project Initiation**	• Determines the process and problem focus that is the most appropriate
II	**Research and Preparation (empathizing - defining)**	• Extensive ethnographic research ("design brief") • Identifying and framing the question (research) • Exploring across scales and a diversity of stakeholders (gathering stories and examples, broad policy recommendations) • Determining early data input (orienting CARL participants, open-source software)
III	**Education and Prototype (ideation – prototyping)**	• Determining the number of interactions and the desired length of time for reflection and research (to see the system from the perspective of design and prototyping strategy) • Prototyping • Implementing
IV	**Testing and Post-Lab Reporting**	• Following up and developing strategies for stewards (find the best positioned in the system) • Ongoing evaluation of impact across scales in the system • Competitions, further training, scholarships

6. Capacity and Competencies

The successful completion of several "Lab-like"projects before the Lab space itself is formalized would indicate that capacity for cross-sector engagement, prototyping and partnership development is present. Once funding is in place, qualifications and requirements for the staff working at CALab would be as follows:

- *Assignments-specific qualifications* - design thinking methodologies; talent for rapid prototyping; ability to co-create quality (design or system thinking) curricula; project and program management; administration; mentorship.

- *Competencies* - flexibility in program planning; open-mindedness and creative problem solving; passion for DIY, making, and creating (belief that the most powerful asset for transforming opportunities is natural curiosity); ability to work effectively in a multicultural team environment; effective communication to varied audiences; high standards for quality of work and consistent project goals; ability to translate strategic direction into plans and objectives; ability to negotiate effectively by exploring a range of possibilities; ability to quickly build rapport with individuals and groups; ability to maintain an effective network of individuals across organizational departments.

*7. **Budget and Communication Outlets***

The Lab's budget would assume 1.5 F/T.

The Lab will publish monthly newsletters, and use all communication channels (podcasts, videos, social media) for continuous communication, as appropriate, to bring awareness or communicate about the issues current projects are focusing on.

Image by pasja1000 from Pixabay

Conclusion

The first version of this document, an outcome of my sudden interest in resilience as a key factor in evaluating access to and "criticality" of services, was ignited three years ago. Yet, I failed to inspire interest in the organisations and people I was working with at the time and was unable to bring the Lab to fruition.

Aside from my obvious lack of persuasiveness and ability to influence, one of the key components of this failure was that Labs are at their best when the economy is rapidly changing, and rapid change was not on the horizon in 2017. However, a matter of years later 2020 came and suddenly a lot of things changed, and this change was rapid beyond what we would imagine.

When you work with vulnerable populations one thing you come to realize is that people without sufficient (financial, services, networks) buffers often respond to catastrophes with more resilience than others who are initially in more favourable conditions. The idea around CALab over the past couple of years imagined using a Lab format to figure out how resilience is maintained. However, what pandemics showed us is that without trusted information and access to services, adjacent to financial support, resilience rapidly diminishes. In other words, it became clear that "critical access" is needed for, so to say, *sustainable* resilience.

Understandably, the idea of using a "Lab" in the context of "creating real social change" sounded like an odd choice of methodology although the rise of social Labs over the past decade demonstrated our hidden desire to apply "solutions-oriented" thinking to pressing societal challenges. However, to align Labs with traditional grant-giving is difficult and the question soon becomes how will they be funded? NPs are slow and have no R&D funding, and Labs also need time to build community/partner *trust* (the currency). For these reasons, although social Labs would benefit the most from formalised spaces, dedicated staff, missions and visions, etc. this may not be possible or avaiLable at the moment.

Yet, whether it is called a "Lab", "idea pool" or partially controlled "spaghetti strategy", something different is needed if different results are expected. The system is broken and services are suffering from the colonial top-down design and delivery. Distribution chains are inequitable and racialized.

Corruption and incredible privilege of some make decency of work and fair wages impossible for the rest. If we want systems to genuinely serve us, we need to come forward and mix ideas and people more freely. In Zaid Hassan's Social Labs Revolution, the source I referenced throughout, Labs are "platforms" that are social (diversity, mixed social strata), experimental (ongoing, sustained, iterative) and systemic (looking at the issues beyond the symptoms and details). He continues:

> "These characteristics are not arbitrary. Nor are they convenient. Getting really diverse groups of people to simply step into a room together is hard, let alone trying to get them to act together. Taking an experimental approach requires not only discipline but also a degree of stability and commitment rare in a project-obsessed world. .. While none of these characteristics is convenient, each is necessary, deeply so. They represent hard-won conclusions wrestled at great cost from many thousands upon thousands of hours of trial and error. And perhaps more than anything else, they represent integrity and honesty— they are not what we want solutions to look like, but what we have found they actually look like when effective."

The "hardly won" conclusion could be that solutions about us yet without us will not work for most, be it wages, environment, health, social services or pandemics. If Labs look like exotic animals on the run, it is because they try to escape existing structures and infuse them with a dose of wilderness and youthfulness. These "Labs",methodologies and processes and not the outcomes, are sense-makers, translators and interpreters of alternative futures and brokers of new partnerships. They are also places where sensitive dialogues can take place, starting in our backyards, our kitchens and living rooms, in lines with strangers and within groups and initiatives of people we know and trust. I certainly have no idea what the next step here should be, but I feel hopeful because we have figured it out before, and we are going to figure it out again.

Let's continue this conversation.

Appendix A: CALab High Level Project Template

1. Name of the project:

Objective:

Partners: Government/ Academia/ Sector

Funding: Internal/ External

Time Frame:

	PHASE	Notes
I	**Project Initiation**	
II	**Research and Preparation**	
III	**The Workshops**	
IV	**Post-Lab Reporting and Testing**	
ALIGNMENT		
SCALabILITY		
TYPE		

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I have been in the role of Social Impact Manager with MCIS Language Solutions for nearly seven years. Apart from this, I organize community events and research and write about non-profits, social innovation and language and digital rights. I also have the privilege of consulting for a few brave women-led social enterprises in Eastern Europe.

My prior professional experience includes adult education, libraries and archives (oral history), marketing, event planning, partnership development and knowledge management. I explore issues surrounding the role of language professionals in "smart cities" and funding Labs and am interested in non-profit R&D and innovation. I have actively contributed to several community initiatives and advisory groups, addressing needs of people with access barriers and those interested in creating community-led archives and collaborative technologies.

However, these days my focus is mostly centered on two areas: digital co-operatives and language rights, specifically regarding how they translate or relate to sustainable development goals.

I have a master's degree in Information and Environmental Sciences (UofT),BA in Slavic Languages, and a number of postgraduate certificates, some related (project management, Social Impact Practice , Executive Coaching through my practice Dharma Associates) and some seemingly unrelated (300RYS Yoga Teachers Training, Shiatsu Therapy) to the nonprofit field. I tend to believe, however, that this "unrelated" education in particular helped me maintain holistic focus, open-mindedness and continuous growth.

I am always happy to share and have conversations about how we grow and maintain our life with purpose and, if you are interested, please feel free to contact me if you have questions, comments or suggestions about how to collaborate or partner!

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