

# Dancing between “Zoom In” and “Zoom Out” Perspectives to Evaluate Social Innovation Labs

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**Abstract:** *Social Innovation (SI) Labs are increasingly gaining attention as a specific class of social innovation promising to effect systems change. Evaluation of SI Labs is in its infancy, and so there is a limited track record of systematic evidence and learning to support the practice of SI Labs. This practice note shares insights and learning from the process of evaluating a certain model of SI Labs grounded in the “zoom in–zoom out” approach. This represents a hybrid approach that combines elements of developmental evaluation with elements of other evaluation approaches to enable the interplay between two complementary perspectives: a more in-depth look into each phase of the Lab (“zoom in”) and a broader look at the Lab in its entirety (“zoom out”), and its contribution to a more established place-based strategy.*

**Keywords:** *developmental evaluation, emergent interventions, learning and evaluation framework, social innovation, social innovation labs*

**Résumé :** *Les laboratoires d’innovation sociale retiennent de plus en plus l’attention comme catégorie particulière d’innovation sociale porteuse de changement pour les systèmes. L’évaluation des laboratoires d’innovation sociale n’en est qu’à ses débuts et, par conséquent, il existe peu de données probantes systématiques et de connaissances acquises à l’appui de la pratique de ces laboratoires. Cette note sur la pratique fait part des connaissances tirées de l’évaluation d’un modèle précis de laboratoire d’innovation sociale reposant sur une approche « zoom avant, zoom arrière ». Il s’agit d’une approche hybride combinant des éléments d’évaluation évolutive avec des composantes d’autres approches d’évaluation pour permettre l’interaction de deux perspectives complémentaires : un regard approfondi sur chaque phase du laboratoire d’innovation sociale (« zoom avant ») et un coup d’œil plus global sur l’ensemble du laboratoire et sa contribution à une stratégie plus adaptée au milieu (« zoom arrière »).*

**Mots clés :** *Évaluation évolutive, interventions émergentes, cadre d’apprentissage et d’évaluation, innovation sociale, laboratoires d’innovation sociale*

Social Innovation (SI), while it has been around for centuries, has gained significant traction in recent decades in the attempt to tackle complex challenges with no clear path to a solution (Mulgan, Tucker, Ali, & Sanders, 2007). SI is broadly

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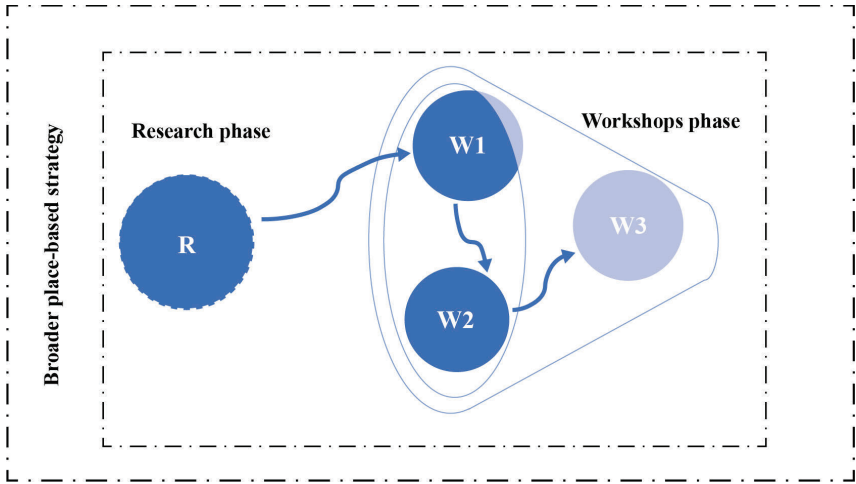
defined as a process or product aimed at achieving positive social change by enabling actors to collaborate across conventional boundaries and challenging the conventional wisdom about the nature of the problem and current solutions (Edwards-Schachter, 2018). Within the broader realm of SI, SI Labs are increasingly gaining attention as a specific class promising to effect systems change, which is understood as a process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions (Abercrombie, Harries, & Wharton, 2015). While there are different models of SI Labs, they share some common elements: SI Labs are social—they bring together diverse stakeholders to collectively tackle a complex challenge; SI Labs are experimental—they represent ongoing efforts at prototyping interventions; SI Labs are systemic—they work on solutions that address the root causes of complex challenges; and SI Labs involve a physical space conducive to co-creating innovative responses that will inform strategies for systems transformation (Hassan, 2014).

From the evaluation perspective, developmental evaluation (DE) has been regarded as being well suited for evaluating SI in general, given the collaborative and adaptive stance at the heart of DE (Patton, 2011; Preskill & Beer, 2012). At the same time, evaluation of SI Labs is in its infancy, so there is a limited track record of systematic evidence and learning to support the practice of SI Labs. While elements of DE represent a natural fit with the emergent and iterative aspects of SI Labs, there are other elements to consider in Lab evaluation design such as the stage of development of the Lab itself and whether the Lab is a component of a more established initiative.

This practice note shares insights and learning from the process of evaluating a specific model of SI Labs, which was also a component of a broader place-based strategy with an articulated Theory of Change (TOC). That model was used by United Way Greater Toronto (UW) to convene multi-sectoral stakeholders to experiment with new ways of tackling the complex issue of a lack of inclusive local economic opportunity in low-income neighbourhoods. The views expressed in this practice note are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the organization.

## **LEARNING AND EVALUATION APPROACH: “ZOOM IN–ZOOM OUT”**

United Way set out to run, for the first time, its own SI Lab called the Strengthening Community Assets and Local Economies (SCALE) Lab. The SCALE Lab was initially grounded in a specific model designed by the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience (WISIR) (WISIR, 2017). It has been adapted throughout its implementation to reflect the particularities of its own process, morphing into a two-phase process: the Research phase and the Workshops phase. At the same time, the SCALE Lab represented one component of a broader place-based strategy that UW was implementing with community partners in several neighbourhoods over a longer timeframe (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Visual representation of the SCALE Lab integrated into a broader place-based strategy

A TOC articulated the vision and the outcomes for the broader strategy. At the time of developing the TOC, the SCALE Lab was a placeholder within the broader vision articulated in the TOC, the inside of the “black box” remaining to be figured out through an SI Lab approach. The latter was considered appropriate to capture the emergent nature of the work of diverse stakeholders brought together to incubate innovative solutions. The most promising solutions were meant to be further tested and piloted at a later stage in certain neighbourhoods as part of the broader strategy. This paper, however, focuses on the SCALE Lab only.

Within this context, the evaluation design had to capture the interplay between two main perspectives: a deeper dive inside the “black box” of the SCALE Lab while it was unfolding, and a more elevated perspective on the contribution of the Lab as a whole to the success of the broader strategy. With these considerations in mind, we developed a hybrid “zoom in–zoom out” learning and evaluation framework that enabled the movement back and forth between these two equally important perspectives.

The “zoom-in” part of the hybrid approach operationalized a conceptualization of the SCALE Lab as an emergent intervention composed of a sequence of two interrelated phases—Research and Workshops—with the shape of each phase being informed by the previous phase. It incorporated elements of DE to support the trial-and-error nature of the SCALE Lab and to capture information in real time to inform the design of each subsequent phase.

The “zoom-out” part of the evaluation frame enabled a higher-level perspective to capture the contribution of the SCALE Lab to the outcomes of the broader strategy as articulated in its TOC. This line of sight set the boundaries within

which the “zoom-in” part facilitated a complementary and more in-depth look into the Lab.

## **INTROSPECTION INTO THE JOURNEY OF EVALUATING THE SCALE LAB**

The rest of this practice note shares the introspections of an internal evaluator embedded upfront in the process of designing and implementing the SCALE Lab. The evaluator was a member of the SCALE Lab team, which comprised an external consultant with expertise in designing this model of SI Labs and internal staff from the Strategic Initiatives team and the Neighbourhoods Team responsible for implementing the entire place-based strategy. The evaluator also brought intimate knowledge of the broader strategy, playing a key role in developing its TOC. The “zoom in–zoom out” evaluation approach was applied throughout the whole process of designing and implementing each phase of the SCALE Lab. [Table 1](#) provides detailed steps related to each phase and the corresponding evaluation methods under the “zoom in–zoom out” approach.

## **RESEARCH PHASE**

The Research phase represented the entry point into the new territory of the SCALE Lab process by the Lab team. Upfront at the planning stage of this phase, the evaluator facilitated a mapping session with the Lab team to map out the envisioned contribution of the Research phase to the outcomes of the broader strategy (“zoom out”) as well as a deeper look into this phase to identify the key elements that need to happen for its success (“zoom in”). The diagram and assumptions laid out during this session were periodically revisited by the Lab team and adapted to reflect the status on the ground. The evaluator also employed a range of other methods throughout the Research phase to gather and synthesize relevant information to both capture evolving work and inform the design of the next phase: reviewing documents developed by the Lab team to keep track of the interviewing process with diverse system players, periodic check-ins with different members of the Lab team, observing and sense making during various planning meetings. Critical to the success of this phase was to reach out to cross-sectoral stakeholders and synthesize their perspectives into a challenge brief. This product was then used as the main mechanism for recruiting stakeholders to the Workshops phase. The evaluator didn’t participate in the interviewing process, but members of the Lab team involved in that process also brought an evaluative lens into their interviewing. They shared valuable insights on interviewees’ hopes and expectations from the Lab and how the Lab could advance their mandate, informing the gradual design and implementation of the Lab. The Lab team also paused, looked back, and reflected on the journey so far before embarking on the Workshops phase. In this sense, the evaluator facilitated a retrospective session with the Lab team at the end of the Research phase grounded in the Appreciative

**Table 1.** SCALE Lab phases: Key steps and corresponding evaluation methods under the “zoom in–zoom out” approach

SCALE Lab phases	Steps	Learning and evaluation methods
Phase 1 <b>Research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulate a research question as a key tension or dilemma</li> <li>• Identify and interview diverse system players</li> <li>• Synthesize interviewees’ perspectives into the SCALE Challenge Brief, the main mechanism to recruit potential participants for the Workshops phase</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of a range of documents prepped by the Lab team</li> <li>• Mapping session to articulate the contribution of the Research phase to the broader strategy and dig deeper into this phase; articulate assumptions and check periodically</li> <li>• Check-ins, observing, and sense making at different planning meetings throughout this phase</li> <li>• Reflection and learning session with the Lab team grounded in an Appreciative Inquiry approach</li> <li>• Learning and evaluation brief to synthesize findings and insights from the Research phase that informed the Workshops phase</li> </ul>
Phase 2 <b>Workshops (W):</b> W1: Seeing the system W2: Co-designing solutions W3: Prototyping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit workshop participants</li> <li>• Design and facilitate three two-day workshops; the outcomes of each workshop informed the design of the next workshop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapping session to articulate the contribution of the Workshop phase as a whole to broader strategy and dig deeper into each workshop; articulate assumptions and check at the end of each workshop</li> <li>• Check-ins, observing, and sense making at different planning meetings throughout this phase</li> <li>• Social network analysis to map relationships between participants’ organizations</li> <li>• Surveys conducted at the end of each workshop to get participants’ feedback on each workshop</li> <li>• Final survey conducted at the end of workshop 3 to get feedback on the SCALE Lab as a whole and the WISIR model’s elements</li> <li>• A series of learning and evaluation briefs to synthesize findings from each workshop</li> <li>• A final learning and evaluation brief that summarized key findings and learnings from the entire SCALE Lab</li> </ul>

Inquiry approach (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). The session created a space for reflection and honest discussions on what was done, what was learned, and how to use this learning in the future. It also was an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments so far. The evaluator synthesized the key findings and reflections from the Research phase into a learning and evaluation brief that fed into planning the next phase.

## WORKSHOPS PHASE

The combined “zoom in–zoom out” approach continued to be applied throughout the Workshops phase. The evaluator facilitated another mapping session with the Lab team to articulate what success means for this phase as a whole, to advance the broader strategy (“zoom out”). Different diagrams were also developed to dig deeper into each workshop and identify key elements to be in place to enable successful implementation of the chain of the trio of workshops (“zoom in”). Assumptions were also laid out and then checked and adapted after each workshop.

Strong connections among workshop participants were essential to create collective will to work together and innovate. The evaluator designed a survey completed by participants prior to workshop 1 to map pre-existing relations between organizations coming to the workshops, using the Social Network Analysis approach (Innovations for Scaling Impact and Keystone Accountability, 2010). The findings signaled to the Lab team that they needed to consider more activities throughout the entire Workshops phase that would foster interactions and build trust among participants. The evaluator also designed surveys completed after each workshop to capture participants’ feedback on both content and flow. The evaluator also participated as an observer in each workshop, had conversations with participants during breaks to gather further insights, and participated in debriefs with the Lab team after the first day of each workshop, agreed-upon adjustments being implemented the following day. Information gathered through the surveys was compiled by the evaluator right after each workshop and discussed with the Lab team at the meetings held to plan the next workshop. Data helped the team understand what aspects of the Workshops phase were valued the most by participants and what required closer look and adaptations. A series of learning and evaluation briefs was also developed to capture the journey along the Workshops phase as well as the contribution of the whole phase to broader strategy.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The SCALE Lab offered a unique opportunity to employ a hybrid “zoom in–zoom out” learning and evaluation approach, which brought together elements of DE and more traditional forms of evaluation. The approach enabled dancing between two complementary and equally important perspectives: a more in-depth perspective into each phase of the Lab to capture phase-specific granularities (“zoom

in”) and a broader perspective of the Lab in its entirety to capture its contribution to a more established place-based strategy (“zoom out”). Embedding evaluation upfront in the Lab process was critical to capture information in real time, document the emerging process, and feed what was learned into the next phases of the Lab. Close collaboration and mutual trust between the evaluator and the other members of the Lab team represented another critical element to the success of the Lab process and its evaluation.

While exciting and rich in experiences, this process was also challenging. The evaluation methods required constant adaptations to capture the Lab journey. This process also involved a significant time commitment from the entire Lab team, which was not possible without the buy-in and active support of the organizational leadership. At the same time, organizational commitment had to be sustained through intense communication to maintain momentum. It was very challenging to articulate a clear message and regularly update internal teams while functioning in a trial-and-error mode and trying to focus on what seemed to be taking hold. Furthermore, the overall time and financial resources involved in designing and evaluating the Lab might be overwhelming for smaller organizations, especially in the current environment characterized by increasing cuts for the nonprofit sector.

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