

London Creative Labs: Pioneering the Venture Society

This is a draft paper for an upcoming conference. Feedback welcome at info@londoncreativelabs.com

1. At a time where many communities are broken, Inclusivity and participation are at the heart of the labs, by design.
2. London Creative Labs as a Lablet? We happen to be in line with the freshest public policy around work creation and communities stepping up to what the state can no longer do best.
3. We are practical and emphasize the experiential over the theoretical. Our labs will increase the necessary Social Proof/confidence to scale up collaboration.
4. Social Startup Labs tackle separation across silos by bringing the whole system into the room and longer term, stimulating the emergence of diverse organizational ecosystems.
5. We are not working alone! A Social Startup Lab is a rich seed informed by the input of over 100 movers and shakers.
6. In this time of recession, the labs are about uncovering new markets that include the disenfranchised at every level.
7. The labs are dynamic and meet people where they are: bringing in to play Muhammad Yunus' dormant "social action" ideas from "Creating a world without poverty".
8. We are not skating over the surface of issues. Social Startup Labs are complex systemic interventions, something society needs to get much better at doing to tackle issues such as worklessness.
9. Our approach follows Elinor Ostrom's multi-scale approach to challenge the old collective action adage that only a local actions coordinated by a top-down approach can work for global challenges. Our practices will feed back into policy.

1. At a time where many communities are broken, Inclusivity and participation are at the heart of the labs, by design.

The Labs are open, collaborative spaces where every member of the community is welcome. And to ensure that this is not just a passive welcome, we are also running Skills Camps in parallel to the Social Startup Labs. Those who may automatically exclude themselves from the coming to a lab, we intend to invite in to reach through our skills camps, where they will gain access community

participation. Our belief is that when people are confident of what they bring to society, they naturally participate.

We know that if we do not take steps to enable people to be here, many will assume it is "not for them". We will see the same profile of participant (yourself, myself) at the labs. The skills camps therefore, are not about adding new skills. They are about identifying transferrable skills, they are about each person owning their own life narrative. They are about each person giving a name to their different life stages and experiences. They are about defining their own meaning, and taking ownership of this. Once they do this, they have defined their own role in society. From this knowledge, they will be motivated to contribute. If they truly own their own role, they will feel second to nobody. They will be able to be in the same room with someone who has a degree from Harvard, and will feel equally able to participate as a citizen of the world. Nothing to defend against, nothing to prove.

This is a hypothesis that we intend to test.

With any issue, it is no good only involving people when it is too late for them to have influence. If they are not able to participate we need to do whatever it takes to enable that to happen. This involves making explicit the rules of participation and taking a hard look for the existence of rules that we may never have considered existed. We must then work together to maximise participation.

This, from Reos "Change Lab" Brochure:

"Entry into the game takes the form of a quasi-social contract, which is sometimes made explicit.. or recalled to those who forget it is "only a game". By contrast, in the social field are games "in themselves" and not "for themselves" one does not embark on the game by a conscious act, one is born into the game"

2. We happen to be in line with the freshest public policy around work creation and communities stepping up to what the state can no longer do best.

Social Startup Labs is moving along the lines of what the leaders of the country want to do. This is lucky, but it is true. Our recent activities have led us to engage with people who are feeding into policy at various levels.

UnLtd commissioned "The Venture Society" report. David Cameron describes ResPublica as " An exciting initiative which has arrived at a vital time" At this year's Shine Unconference Sofia helped Cliff Prior, CEO of UnLtd to facilitate the Community Design Lab. Mamading Ceesay participated in the lab. Here, Cliff presented the 7 main recommendations of the report.

On a point by point basis we can show how what we are doing with Social Startup Labs links so closely to the ideas in The Venture Society.

From the "ResPublica Publication:

"The Venture Society: a wide-ranging enquiry into the United Kingdom's uniquely rich culture of grass-roots, early-stage social enterprise and social action"

Social enterprise: those business that create products and services that help people in a variety of ways while staying true to certain moral and social principles. Some are local people who want to improve where they live. Others are future social business leaders who seek to replicate, scale and structure these ideas on a national and international level. WE who value civil society have an interest in backing and supporting both.

We are concerned with the question of how to build the infrastructure at central and local levels in a cost-effective way, so as to get more time and money into early-stage social entrepreneurship: to the grass roots where social action can be truly transformative.

Most social entrepreneurs create social enterprises that become successful business. Combined turnover for UK: £24bn! Their ventures build relationship and bring together communities. They are the grass roots, the lifeblood of this diverse resilient sector, which itself is the age old idea of the locally driven, eclectic community marketplace, updates for the modern age. They are venture, by venture, sowing the seeds of a new social economy

The following 7 points are the recommendations for what government can do to create the infrastructure layers for social enterprise. We comment here on how we are already geared to work with many of these recommendations.

i) Create the community 'tablets' program, offering a network of support infrastructure for venture funding, incubation and support: local dragon's dens. Each would have its own localized, community-driven brand and identity.

London Creative Labs has its own brand and identity that is being continually shaped through its Social Startup labs, its skills camps and through on going conversations in the local community and the wider London community practitioners' networks.

With venture funding we can scale up the skills camps to massively increase participation in our communities, and also run more Social Startup Labs where the community gets to create together a 'bigger picture' of what is happening and collaboratively identify where action is best focused. Note that any action that arises out of Social Startup Labs does so out of individual motivation within an informed context. There is no top-down approach. Social Startup Labs provide the very light infrastructure for bottom-up activity at the earliest stages. Bottom up activity that is informed by access to a bigger picture.

(ii) Invite larger organisations such as UnLtd to become Social Labs: innovation hubs and seed funders for community tablets with a specific mandate to produce innovation that help the grass roots to scale, disseminate best practice, broker supply chains and bulk deals, and direct private and blended funding to promising projects.

We can work closely with Social Labs such as UnLtd to help to identify and disseminate best practice. We will be creating spaces for stakeholders to engage with one another and make more visible the projects that will help address the most urgent unmet community needs. We can get into the nitty gritty of how to do this, as our core offering is facilitating collaboration in a participatory manner.

(iii) Cut application bureaucracy through this local funding, but also by giving social labs a quasi regulatory power to approve a new, flexible "venture-lite" structure for social startups

funded by community lablets and social labs. Set up a bureaucracy task force that review the burden of regulation on early-stage social entrepreneurs.

We will feed back to identify the precise nature of the burden of regulation on early-stage (social) entrepreneurs. This will help to inform the bureaucracy task force.

(iv) Engage social labs to provide pilots for virtual advisory boards and work with providers to create more virtual equity and peer to peer lending platforms to diversify investment sources.

Through our operation on the ground, in our local domain of practice, we can play a role in providing contacts for advisory boards. We have engaged with various peer-lending platforms from Jamii Bora in Nairobi, to Grameen in Dhaka and the UK. We have also been thinking for a long time about reputational and community currencies. We can actively do our part in feeding into the thinking around peer lending and the optimal working conditions for it to work through our observation and practice.

(v) Work with social labs to create fund management plan gold standards for community lablets that allow for mutual and cooperative local ownership and funding models, as well as locally decided venture priorities. They should allow a community asset career for each community lablet. Engage with OTS strategic partners, such as BASSAC, the DTA and other to create best practice kits.

We will be at hand to help local community ventures better understand the different ownership and funding models. We are working with Lean Startup Principles. One of our partners, Integrity Unlimited is the first Sociocratic organisations in the UK (a newer form of cooperative). We are also in conversation with many networks and practitioners in organisational ownership models.

Our collaboration process at Social Startup Labs will enable locally decided venture priorities to emerge. It is the centre-piece of the labs. The bigger picture is co-created ground-up.

(vi) In a time of reduced funding, the costs of infrastructure for social ventures should be limited to being within the envelope of existing program commitments. We see a role here for the Capacitybuilders network and the Community Development foundation -- both owned and paid for by government, the former to 2014 but capable of being wound up at any time by the Cabinet Office -- to take a distinctive, needed role supporting social entrepreneurship.

We can work with appropriate organisations to share our experiences and know-how around capacity building. We will be testing models that could then be scaled up to other areas through the work of agencies such as the Capacitybuilders (relating to Future Builders)

We are working with individuals and agencies that play a bridging role between small scale "demand on state reducers" and larger commissioning bodies for contracted-out work. (E.g Contented, Composition Advisory) We can work with the Capacitybuilders' network

We are particularly interested in exploring the boot-strapped model to enable early stage ventures to be ahead of the funding curve. Thus our work with Lean Camp, Business Model Generation and the Action Cycle all has an emphasis on ongoing ongoing prototyping and minimal next action.

(vii) In the longer term, as the finances allow, we should look to pump-prime the social marketplace and these platforms through a capitalized social investment bank, targeted tax breaks for new blended value investment vehicles and a community reinvestment act, both subjects of future ResPublica research. We must also tweak the Whitehall schema and get Treasury buy in to formalize the process by which demand reduction is paid for on a program basis across service-delivering Whitehall departments.

We are in conversation with two UK universities as to the possibility of their evaluation of the impact of our programs. The findings would then feed into the agencies that are working the equations around demand reduction.

3. We are practical and emphasize the experiential over the theoretical. Our labs will increase the necessary Social Proof/Confidence to scale up collaboration.

At a conference in London in Dec 2009, a young leader asks why is it that when groups get together, we often witness the lowest common denominator of intelligence. Interestingly, internet pundit Clay Shirky said that he used to believe that technology could be used to scale up our collaboration efforts. But then in 2009 he changed his mind. He said that until we are better able to collaborate in small groups it is not worth trying larger collaboration attempts.

Francis Moore Lappe (best selling author of “Diet for a Small Planet”) hints at why this is the case when asked “What is the one thing that will create more sustainable communities?” She answers “When communities learn how to resolve conflicts”. She outlines an approach in her later book “Getting a grip 2” to practicing the ‘art of democracy’: active listening, creative conflict, negotiation, mediation, mentoring and other relational skills.

Deep Democracy is an example of a social technology that aims to integrate the wisdom of the ‘no’ back into a community. It a method in which we have invested learning and practice and benefit from the mentoring of the The Deep Democracy Institute.

The answer to the young leader’s question, in our opinion is that in society, we do not yet *know how to do collaboration* as we know how to do, say, French teaching or organizing sports leagues. We see basic collaboration skills as a new form of literacy that everyone could learn. We call it process literacy. If everyone had it, it would be a literacy that were distributed throughout our society. Right now, it is very much not. Most people don’t quite know how to get the most out of a meeting, let alone handle a family conflict. Hence, at one level, distributed process literacy is our aim. For this to be achieved, we believe that we need to help each other, to help each other (person-by-person) to get better at it. We think that it needs to be introduced as a skill set in itself. That way, those who are good at it will be explicitly valued and can inhabit norms. We need to value those people in our communities, families, etc that facilitate better collaboration by their actions, skill-set and practice. In this way we empower them to help others who have more to

learn. In one community in the states where gangs were rife, mediation was introduced to a school district. As the role of mediator became socially valued, there was a shift in aspiration by young people away from gang leader towards mediator. Until mediation was given direct focus, people did not know to value the skill-set or people who excelled in it. Thus those people were not empowered to spread the skill-set.

London Creative Labs will make visible the skill-sets needed for better collective intelligence to emerge.

"The replicability of a change lab rests less in the replicability of the specific innovation or project in itself but in participants learning from each other, building relationships and practicing those capacities or mind-states that are conducive towards social change, in moving from no knowing how to cope with a particular social mess to becoming a team of virtuoso social actors" Reos

When we get better in small groups, we will have social proof.

The Social Startup Labs are a practice in collaboration in small communities. The learning edge will be how people work together in small groups. We are working with social technologies that can enable this, that come from a variety of communities of practice, from the "Art of Hosting" fellowship, to the Change Labs community of practice, to the emergent London Creative Labs collective. The portfolio of social technologies that have emerged around the London Creative Labs collective are peer-coaching models, collective presencing and swarming practices. These involve involve minimal collaboration processes that cultivate learning around the collective mindset needed to manifest social outcomes. For example, out of a major project that was about collaboration, a very condensed understanding of the minimal ruleset of collaboration called The Confluence Model emerged. Now we are working with the Action Cycle, an even more condensed ruleset that produces a minimal outcome using the following question: "What can we get done in one week?"

Until we learn together, "how to learn together", we will not scale up our collaboration efforts. This necessarily brings us to the interpersonal and even the intra-personal realm. Social Startup Labs is based in a physical locality which is relevant at this point. "The Spring" is a disused warehouse, out of which is emerging a shared workspace and new social landscape, hosted by world-class practitioners of the intra- and inter-personal realm. The consequence is that we are being supported within a context of very high levels of personal practice which necessarily strengthen our ability to maintain integrity at every level of our work.

We are committed to fostering *much* better collaboration in our society, starting in small groups. Between our networks, our location and our own culture, we are physically and socially grounded in the the practice that is needed to scale up collaboration across boundaries. As we enable groups to improve collaboration, and to understand why and how it works, we will strengthen the social proof that this society desperately needs for it to aim for the next level. We will increase the sense of confidence in the one thing we all have: each other.

4. Social Startup Labs tackle separation across silos by bringing the whole system into the room and longer term, stimulating the emergence of diverse organizational ecosystems.

The emergence of social phenomena such as anti-social behaviour cries out about a fractured society while lonely older people and a disconnected younger generation speaks of fractured families. 1 in 4 adults suffering mental health syndromes whispers fractured people. Fractures permeate our world. How do we heal it?

We need to make whole again.

We are not the first to take the whole-systems approach. Here are just some examples that use a whole-systems approach:

Scenarios, performed by Shell in the 1980's. In this methodology, representatives from the whole system in question are brought together over a process of evoking a chosen future that lasts months.

The deep democracy movement is by design a whole systems perspective as it seeks to integrate the wisdom of outliers, rebels and resisters in group process. They recognize that to maximize the collective intelligence, we need to know how to “get the best out of every body and every thing that happens”, and have developed a language, culture and practice for doing so.

Large scale dialogue processes such a deliberative democracy movement in the US attempt reach the citizenry that traditional democratic practice had not reached. Constellations is a group process that takes a whole-systems approach.

The Change Labs effectively convene multi-stakeholder dialogue and action fora.

London Creative Labs will convene communities with the following frame: that we are operating within systems of systems that interconnect and interrelate. We will help people to see the network of relationships between systems and the ecosystem and its wider environment

Our longer-term vision is that is that by facilitating access to this rich picture, we will enable communities to spot what is most actually needed, so that by and large, their actions are better informed in relation to the whole. The feedback and feedforward loops that stem from their decisions will be easier to visualize. This will lead to healthier ecosystems overall as they will be more clearly connected to themselves.

As a result, new ecosystems that contain diverse organizational forms will emerge, that are by design, better able to adapt to change and to integrate externalities.

5. We are not working alone! A Social Startup Lab is a rich seed informed by the input of over 100 movers and shakers -- the deeper practitioners of change.

We will start with one lab. If we had substantial more funding we could start with much bigger tests. We do not, so we are starting with the minimal setup. This is a handicap as certain patterns will not be identifiable within communities until

critical mass is involved. It is also however, a benefit. It encourages us to identifying economies of scope rather than of scale, which fortunately is a future-proof trend according to Gunther Pauli, author of the forthcoming Blue Economy book. In which he indicates how we could create 100 million jobs in the next ten years through the 100 best social innovations. In diverse ecosystems models, economies of scope result from activities such as co-production.

The Social Startup Lab is a rich and dense process. It blends together all of the 9 core LCL approaches listed in this document into the design. The benefit of starting small is that we can test the process with fewer consequences, leaving us better able to maintain integrity in the process as we go along. This is necessary due to the complex social intervention that the lab embodies.

Thus it is the first seed. It is modular and contains with it, everything that we will be applying at a larger scale. With the right conditions the seed can grow. The quality and impact of the social outcome will reflect the gradually evolving social DNA as it scales. That DNA is the purpose and principles it is based on. For London Creative Labs, this originated in the combination of principles that we observed to be at play when Yunus created Grameen, Fazel Abed created BRAC and Ingrid Munroe created Jamii Bora. We have studied these principles in depth. The social DNA is also informed by many other liberating educational ideologies and community governance models from Ivan Illich, Paolo Freire, the Community Organizers, Asset Based Community Development to Gunther Pauli's Blue Economy and Elinor Ostroms' models.

In many areas we are fortunate to have practitioners at the top of their game to mentor us. Our community of peers have helped shape our ideas and are poised to take us to the next level. It is a great honour to have Muhammad Yunus as someone who advises us from time to time.

It is from this fertile soil that Social Startup Lab prototype has emerged.

6. In this time of recession, the labs are about uncovering new markets that include the disenfranchised at every level.

We have been sharing ideas with others and gradually developing an approach to uncovering untapped markets that would address worklessness. In this sense it is about making the market place as transparent as possible. This has involved thinking about how to create participatory maps in our communities, of needs, opportunities and assets.

In the attempt to create the maps, one thing has become clear: In order to know how best to develop shared open data that is meaningful, we need to balance two different aspects:

1. "Getting the hard data into open databases"
2. "Getting people together in real time to interact with the data and working with empirical data that is easily available through low tech mapping approaches"

The first aspect can be, but is not religiously, a high-tech approach: For example having all the food data for Lambeth in an open database, including how much is

currently produced that is dependent on import, how much can be and is being supplied through local produce etc.

Getting people together in real time to interact with the data: For example, identifying who are the people who are creating new solutions to existing food needs. Then mapping out where those different initiatives exist and identifying how they combine in obvious ways. When we address, what data is useful to create a meaningful bigger picture, we can tackle the question, "What else do we need to know so that we can be best informed as to where to place our efforts?" This answer will in turn inform our mapping efforts, as a result of which new opportunities will emerge as we fine-tune the overall map we are working from.

Thus we gradually uncover the most accurate picture of what a community needs, and what it has to address that need.

This is the art and practice of community resilience. It is about giving a market back to its people.

Complex- so many factors that it is not obvious which cause leads to which effect.

Systemic - Looking at society as a system of systems. No good fixing the outcomes. We need to look at the root cause

Intervention - we cannot control a system, but we can disturb it. We can identify the contributors to a situation and then

7. The labs are dynamic and meet people where they are: bringing in to play Muhammad Yunus' dormant "social action" ideas from "Creating a world without poverty". This is a great segway into creating new kinds of social businesses.

in 2006, Muhammad Yunus laid out a vision of Social Business transforming the world. He also offered the notion of social actions, encouraging people to get together in threes, commit to doing something within a year, and then give it a go. The idea of starting a Social Business from scratch was deemed to be too much to ask of everybody and anybody. A social action was described as something that would provide vital, open learning and could give people a taste, leaving them wanting to take a bigger step the next time around.

In our work in designing the Social Startup Labs, we borrowed the idea of a "minimal viable product" from the Lean Startup domain. We were asking ourselves, how does Minimal Viable Product relate to Social Startups. Mamading identified that the minimal viable product would be a social action. This is in the spirit of Yunus' Social Action. Except we are bringing the cycle down to one week from one year. Our Action Cycle provides this kind of focus. What can be done in one week? This is about keeping a momentum going in terms of confidence in collaboration.

What is nice is that it fits in with the spirit of a social action. It brings it right down to the confidence level the people need to jump over. If we can get something done in one week together, there is reason to take the next step.

8. We are not skating over the surface of issues. Social Startup Labs are complex systemic interventions, something society needs to get much better at doing to tackle issues such as worklessness.

Complex systemic interventions are not new but we assert that society does not know how to do them very well.. Change Labs emerged several years ago as leaders in this domain.

“The ambition of the change lab is to be a space that brings together a group of diverse stakeholders and to forge them into a team. The purpose of this team is to attend to a social challenge until such a time that ways forward emerge, which when acted upon, increase the probabilities of a shift occurring at a causal, structural level.

One way of understanding these second generation change labs is that they are ontologically new. That is, as organizational forms, they do not correspond to what we currently understand to be an organization precisely because they are new.

Inspired by "grounded theory" taking an inductive approach from these initial change labs has led to an articulation of what a change lab is. This, in turn has led to what could be thought of as a preliminary attempt at a phenomenology of systemic action.” “Laboratories for Social Change Seminar Notes, Reos Partners

We have taken much inspiration from Change Labs. We are also forging our own way, guided by our peers and mentors at organizations such as Reos Partners.

Because we wanted to stay as independent as we possibly could, we have put the initial Social Startup Lab together in a very boot-strapped manner. Likewise with our first skills camp.

Once we get some tests underway, we will be in a stronger position to seek funding and blended investments into the process.

Our intention is to keep our process as open as possible, and gradually work with the larger agencies, so that our interventions are tracked and evaluated, and the interventions can scale.

It has been quite a journey to discover how best to put our initial ideas into practice. We are excited to launch ship now with our prototype model for the Social Startup Lab.

Again it is worth mentioning the wealth of the networks that we sit across. The kind of advice and help at hand is unparalleled.

9. Our approach follows Elinor Ostrom's multi-scale approach to challenge the old collective action adage that only a local actions coordinated by a top-down approach can work for global challenges. Our practices will feed back into policy.

The recent nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom is tackling collective action challenges. She rejects the notion of the “tragedy of the commons”. In this article she describes a multi-scale approach as a new approach to the age-old understanding of collective action challenges. She rejects the notion that for governing public good, we must have top-down implementation that compensates for the lack of individual motivation to nurture a public good. She introduces the notion of a multi-scale approach, which gives credence to local efforts that can lead to collective governance of a public good. She looks at what the conditions are for these local efforts to work.

"Given the complexity and changing nature of the problems involved in coping with climate change, there are no “optimal” solutions for making substantial reductions in the level of greenhouse gases emitted into the atmosphere. A major reduction in emissions is definitely needed, however. The advantage of a multi-scale approach is that it encourages experimental efforts at multiple levels, as well as the development of methods for assessing the benefits and costs of particular strategies adopted in one type of ecosystem and comparing these with results obtained in other ecosystems. A strong commitment to finding ways of reducing individual emissions is an important element for coping with climate change. Building such a commitment, and the trust that others are also taking responsibility, can be more effectively undertaken in small- to medium-scale governance units that are linked through information networks and monitoring at all levels." Ostrom, E. A Multi-Scale Approach to Coping with Climate Change and Other Collective Action Problems. <http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/565/cite> "

In the Social Startup Labs, we will effectively be carrying out approaches that need to be implemented at multiple levels. Elinor Ostrom's paper holds within it much wisdom for guiding us in this process.

We will be managing interventions at a personal, interpersonal and local level. We cannot wait till national policies are all aligned. We will however maintain a sensitivity to the policies implemented.

Our results will trickle back up through our engagements with policy makers and will therefore at least be in the domain of influence, albeit in a minor way at first.

For example:

✱ Recently, Mamading and Sofia participated in producing a paper pre-election that landed in number 10. In conjunction with three other contributors and we produced a paper on approaches for dealing with worklessness that were based on unleashing assets in local communities and enabling local needs and assets to be better mediated.

✱ Our project is one of 15 projects chosen by the Mayor's office as examples of sustainable development in action. Our efforts will be feeding into the policy development of the London Sustainable Development Commission.

These are just a couple of bodies that we are engaging with. Through our associates the outcome of our labs will seep into a range of think tanks.

As we scale our efforts, we will be doing what Muhammad Yunus said when he took his own social action: Operating at the worms eye level as well as the bird's eye level.