

Policy Labs

for quick tests done right

The public sector faces major and complex social challenges. Policy labs are connecting social actors and citizens to find new solutions.

By Fredrik Olausson

THE PUBLIC-SECTOR OPERATES IN A COMPLEX WORLD.

People, organisations and institutions comprise a system in which the actors influence each other and the entire system over time. Society's challenges usually span a range of different sectors and meeting these challenges is a complex task. Managing issues such as refugee reception, mental well-being or the complex building of society means that the system's components must work together and organisations must coordinate their efforts. This is made more difficult by the traditional silo thinking that permeates Sweden's public, non-profit, and private sectors. It has become more and more clear that traditional forms of governance based on a top-down perspective with sectoral boundaries are no longer effective. The classic administrative structure is quite simply not built to handle complex social challenges that require a holistic perspective and an ability to work across both policy areas and administrative boundaries.

Policy labs an international phenomenon

Ineffective silo thinking is not only a Swedish problem. To meet these challenges, many other countries have established policy labs to create the forums and tools for cooperating across boundaries and sectors and between various administrations, authorities and government ministries. It is particularly important to also involve users and citizens in this process, which should be open and inclusive. One Danish forerunner is Mind Lab, which has existed since 2002 and is a cross-sectoral development unit working with public-sector innovation. Starting from the views of citizens and social actors, Mind Lab helps the public sector to design various services and implement legislative changes. Among other things, Mind Lab has worked with almost 400 educators in Denmark to develop a plan to turn

the country's new school curricula into a reality. In Sweden a number of labs have been founded, such as Experio Lab (which works with challenges within the health-care system), Trafik-lab (a "community" that aims to disseminate public transport data to various social actors), OpenLab (for social innovation in Stockholm), and Mötesplats Social Innovation (with a focus on social development in Skåne).

Policy labs can be quite varied in terms of their organisation. Erika Augustinsson, who works at Mötesplats Social Innovation, gave a good summary of the structure of policy labs in an article in the Swedish magazine *Dagens Samhälle* (Today's society)¹. She says policy labs are platforms with a mandate to act quickly in order to increase the ability to design holistic policies and to facilitate policy development between administrations,



When systems comes together – this example from Co-Lab when the different actors around unaccompanied immigrant children and youth meet.

¹ <https://www.dagensamhalle.se/debatt/soekes-ett-svenskt-policylab-foer-innovation-28696>

authorities, government ministries and academic disciplines. A lab normally contains several different forms of expertise that work together, such as change management, communication, service design, ethnography and behavioural science. Labs use testing and an iterative method to build up the ability and courage to think in new ways and respond to risks as they arise.

Together with the officials who will design the service for the target group, the lab can drive a process of change that focuses on new solutions. Equally important is to identify obstacles in the form of laws, regulations, praxis and policies. These are legacies from the time before terms like “cross-sectoral work” or “sustainable development” were in use. Today’s rapidly changing world does not offer any simple answers. These lab environments are therefore needed so that we can experiment, explore and find ways to get the target group involved in order to create a more agile, co-creative and open public sector.

Dare to make mistakes in order to get it right

The most important aspect of the labs’ function is – in addition to having a testing and inquisitive work method – to also include both users and employees in the work. By understanding these groups’ needs in depth, and by working in an exploratory and iterative way, this inclusion will lead to solutions that meet

” **Here people, contacts, ideas and learning are brought together. We want to be here because this is a learning project. This is a forum for meeting others who are working with the same issues”**

Jurate Karlsson, the Swedish Migration Agency

actual needs and not just ease the symptoms.

The labs’ work method is based largely on design methodology. This builds on exploring needs and problems, generating ideas, creating prototypes, failing and trying again – together with the user. Drawing on things like interviews and observations, the lab gains an insight into the user’s daily life and the needs that exist from the user’s perspective and not from that of a specific organisation. This is important in order to identify the “right” challenge area and problem. On many occasions, the immediately apparent problem can merely be a symptom of the real problem. After a solution has been found, the next task is to have the power to implement change and to scale up.

Co-lab Sweden

Over the past five years Sweden has received more than 50,000 unaccompanied child and youth migrants. Co-lab Sweden is working at the mandate of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to create better welfare and a faster way into society for these individuals.

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS, in autumn 2016 the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) were allocated funding to operate Co-lab Sweden. The Swedish Industrial Design Foundation, SVID, was commissioned to implement the initiative. Co-lab Sweden is intended to act as a multisectoral platform for innovation and cooperation in order to solve, from the user’s perspective, complex issues at the national level. The aim is to be able to apply the forum and methods used to any complex social challenge.

“The lab’s first challenge is to create a better everyday existence for unaccompanied children and young people,” explains Pia McAleenan, project manager at Co-lab Sweden.

Bringing actors from the non-profit, private and public sectors together with the target group in a secure environment far from the regular organisational functions creates better conditions for achieving ideas without silo logistics. New solutions to complex social challenges must be met by multisectoral and scaleable approaches.

Since the beginning of autumn 2016 some 40 actors from the public, non-profit and private sectors have been linked to the lab. These actors have met on several occasions and discussed multisectoral challenges and opportunities. At the same time Co-lab Sweden has met a large number of unaccompanied young people, who have described their situation and how they experience the system. In the work to create a better everyday



Photo: Hanna Andersson

Exercise where the children and adolescents get to know each other and express how they feel.

” Working like Co-lab Sweden is excellent if you want to eliminate organisational gaps!”

Mats Tyrstrup, associate professor researcher in business economics at the Stockholm School of Economics

life for unaccompanied young people, it has been important to give them influence within the contexts they are part of. They are experts about their own situations.

“We’re working according to a model where we are trying to grasp and understand the needs of these unaccompanied people,” Pia McAleenan says. “By merely talking, we believe we are missing out on many insights. That’s why we’re also working with manifesting in various materials plus image-based storytelling, all in an enjoyable and inspiring way.

“We’ve also noticed it’s often easier to have a freeranging discussion about various topics, instead of using in-depth interviews and other more traditional information-gathering methods. This applies whether we meet with unaccompanied children and young people or with working adults.”

The information and insights from the conversations with the unaccompanied young people were taken back into the lab for use as a basis for discussion. The lab participants chose three

challenges to focus on more: the lack of information, reinforcing the adults around the children, and reinforcing the children’s and young people’s identity and sense of self. Based on these challenges, the lab participants have worked with the unaccompanied individuals to generate ideas for proposed solutions to the needs identified within the framework of these three challenge areas.

“It’s fantastic how Co-lab Sweden has captured the views of the children and young people and what they feel is important,” says Sonja Ghaderi, coordinator in Uppsala Municipality. “This can be challenging and is something many people need to improve at. That inspires me.”

During the spring the lab participants met on three occasions in three different groupings, in which they worked with the three challenge areas. The unaccompanied young people have continually been given opportunities to contribute and suggest improvements. The smaller groupings have worked according to the model: capture and understand the insights in order to create innovative solutions that renew the young people’s welfare.

In May 2017 all the lab participants met in a large group to present their ideas to each other. Also present were unaccompanied young people, who could ask questions and give relevant feedback. Some of the ideas that arose during the work done in the spring focus on getting the public-sector actors to cooperate at a higher level in order to enable more independence and self-esteem among the unaccompanied individuals. Co-lab Sweden also perceives good opportunities to improve these people’s everyday life by hiring previously arrived unaccompanied young people who have been granted a residence permit to help the newer arrivals with such things as questions about their rights and obligations, and questions about Sweden and culture. The next step is to test the ideas on a small scale but in live situations. This will allow the solutions to be refined before they are scaled up to the national level. The tests will be carried out by the lab participants within their respective organisations. During the entire test phase, the participants will receive support from one another via a number of network meetings. ■

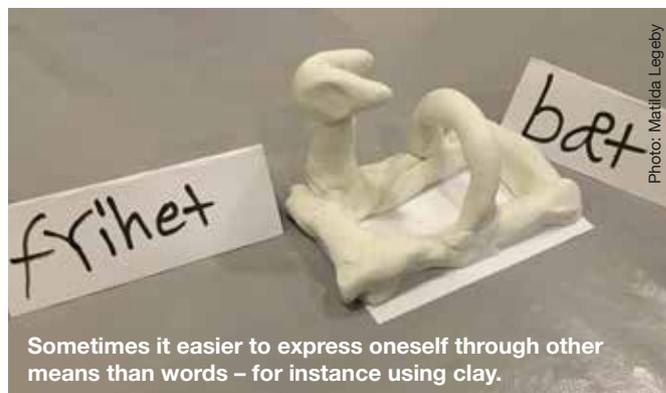


Photo: Matilda Legeby

Sometimes it easier to express oneself through other means than words – for instance using clay.