IN SEARCH OF (ORGANIZATIONAL) LEARNING AND TRANSLATION IN PUBLIC INNOVATION LABS

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ABSTRACT

Public Innovation Labs are rapidly spreading with the aim of improving public sector responses to societal issues. However, labs are often struggling to embed their outcomes in ordinary activities. The article builds on the notions of *organizational learning* and *translation* and on the case of an innovation lab at the municipal level to articulate some of the challenges and limits of labs in relating to public organizations institutional dimension. It also describes possible formats and approaches to meaningfully engage with ordinary activities, structures and power dynamics within the public sector.

INTRODUCTION

The use of design in the public sector is rapidly growing mainly due to the increasing number of 'laboratories' (henceforth public innovation labs or PIL) developing at municipal, regional and national level in different countries (Tõnurist et al. 2017; Mc Gann et al. 2018). PILs can have different names (urban living labs, policy labs, public innovation labs, innovation platforms, etc.), but they tend to share a similar format. They are dedicated arenas that bring together different stakeholders (and thus different knowledge) for experimenting and learning about how to tackle societal issues. PILs are driven by the idea that, in order to face contemporary societal issues, there is the need to focus on experimentation and continuous learning by involving citizens and different actors in co-creation activities (Tõnurist et al. 2017). PILs are often framed as a matter of overcoming the limits of current management styles in the public sector (Criado et al. 2020), and they are seen as vehicles to introduce more participative and experimental governance (Kronsell and Mukhtar Landgren 2018; MCGann et al. 2018).

Strongly based on project logics (Fred 2018), PILs provide flexibility and freedom for experimentation; however, they tend to become isolated islands that lack the capacity to embed results in ordinary activities (Timeus and Gasco 2018). Referring to the theme of conference, PILs struggle with "scaling" their processes and outcomes, which, in turn, leads to legitimacy and accountability issues (Fred 2018; Mc Gann et al. 2018).

These issues are not new for the design research community, who has already highlighted the need for more critical and ad-hoc designerly approaches to engage with the public sector (Julier and Kimbell 2019). Attention should be given to current organizational cultures, routines within public organizations (Junginger 2015). In previous work, together with some colleagues, we focused on the importance of learning to articulate and engage with the relationship between worldviews and practices in public sector ordinary activities (Agger Eriksen et al. 2020). This article focuses on the challenges PIL faces in creating conditions for this kind of learning and for its "embedding" in ordinary activities (Scholl et al. 2017), i.e. *organizational learning* (Senge 1990; Crossan et al. 1999, 2001). By reflecting on the struggles of a municipal PIL, the article highlights how learning processes need to be paired with negotiations and mobilizations for learnings to be *translated* (Callon 1986; Czarniawska and Joerges 1995) within ordinary activities. It also identifies some limits of PILs as a format in supporting these efforts and calls attention to the need for developing forms for experimentation and translation with(in) ordinary activities.

INNOVATION AND LABS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

PILs are often framed as a matter of promoting public sector innovation. Since the late 1980s, private sector management styles have been introduced in the public sector to respond to perceived shortcomings of traditional bureaucratic administration, such as inflexibility and economic inefficiency, but also poor responsiveness to citizens' and societal needs (Stoker 2006; O'Flynn 2007). There has also been a fascination for private sector capacity to continually reinvent itself to face emerging challenges and to develop new business opportunities i.e. being innovative (Parsons 2006).

Nowadays, the discourse around public sector innovation primarily focuses on overcoming the shortcomings that market approaches created in the public sector (De Vries 2016). Particularly, a focus on outputs and efficiency overlooked the importance of interdependencies across different domains in the delivery of public services and of equity, transparency and accountability (O'Flynn 2007). A focus on efficiency led to a more "skinny" public sector that tended to lack spaces and resources for being innovative (Parsons 2006). Recent framings of public sector innovation are thus focusing on questions of efficacy (rather than just efficiency), lifting the importance of citizens' experiences and of taking a holistic approach to complex societal issues (De Vries 2016). However, public sector innovation remains an ambiguous concept both in theory and in practice, which is entangled with private sector logics and tends to oversee the peculiarities of public sector context and action (ibid.). In particular, it has been argued that innovation in the public sector is rarely a matter of "creative destruction" (Schumpeter 1994), but rather an incremental and negotiating process in which new elements supplement rather than substitute older ones (Olsen 2009). These negotiations involve institutional aspects (laws, procedures, organizational and professional cultures) and individuals' views and actions (ibid.). This internal complexity is paired with the intractable nature of the issues the public sector is dealing with (Parsons 2006; Olsen 2009): they are problems that cannot be definitively solved and thus, rather than focusing on "finding new solutions", public sector should instead increase its own capacity for ongoing learning and adaption (ibid.) by fostering reflexivity in relation to institutional as well as external questions. This demands a preference for ongoing learning processes (Schön 1971), creating a movement *"from the periphery to the periphery and from the periphery to the centre"* (ibid. p. 166) with the aim of nurturing citizens, civil servants and other actors' capacity to drive *"their own continuing transformation"* (ibid. p.166). This capacity is, however, hindered by arrangements that are strongly focused on efficiency, since they tend to eliminate aslo time and resources for learning (Parsons 2006). Moreover, efficiency logics tend to see failures as a waste of resources, thus ruling out a key driver of learning (ibid.).

PILs are rooted in the tradition of Living Labs (Fölstad 2008), sustainable transition management (Loorbach 2007) and design (Selloni and Staszowski 2016). An underpinning principle of innovation labs is that of being niches in which to engage different actors, and thus different forms of knowledge, to experiment outside the influence and rigidity of prevailing regimes (Kemp et al. 1998). These engagements are often organized as projects, with temporal ad-hoc structures and resources to address specific issues (Fred 2018). It has been argued that through networking, the articulation of expectations and processes of social learning niches can gain momentum and challenge existing socio-technical regimes (Geels and Raven 2006). Learning is understood as a transformative activity (Mezirow 1997) aimed at changing ways of thinking and acting. In the public sector, these changes are also meant to address organisational and governance aspects (Castán Broto and Bulkeley 2013; Kronsell and Mukhtar Landgren 2018; MCGann et al. 2018).

PILs can be looked upon as a matter of creating space for experimentation and learning in a "skinny" public sector. However, it has been also highlighted that the principle of being a niche can lead to the creation of isolated islands that struggle to connect with ordinary activities (Timeus and Gasco 2018). The format of the "project" exacerbates this isolation (Fred 2018). The risk is that PIL become self-referential, or worse are used by limited networks of people or actors to drive their own agendas (Fred 2018) with evidence gained through experimentations staged and interpreted by experts overruling public accountability (MC Gann et al. 2018).

(ORGANIZATIONAL) LEARNING AND TRANSLATION

To further explore PIL challenges in nurturing innovation in the public sector, this section articulates, from a theoretical perspective, learning in PILs, *organizational learning* and organizational change.

Learning-by-doing and doing-by-learning are at the core of PILs (Frantzeskaki et al. 2012): joint projects provide opportunities to try out things together and, by collaboratively reflecting on and evaluating activities, to advance shared understandings that, in turn, can inform views and actions.

To further articulate what is learned about in PILs, it is possible to rely on Argyris and Schön (1974) and Reynolds (2014), who distinguish three possible learning levels emerging when reflecting in and on action. *Single loop learning* is based on detecting and

correcting errors by using established rules, procedures and actions (ibid.). The *single loop learning* process is shaped by the underlying question 'are things done right?' *Double loop learning* is based on the principle of error detection and correction and tracing back to the underlying causes of the problem (ibid.). It is most applicable to situations where the existing rules and procedures do not fit the new challenge, thus triggering the question of 'are we doing the right things?'. *Triple loop learning* is characterised by a reflection of the core values, purposes and principles, which serve as a context and foundation of processes through taking a deeper look at the question 'how do we decide what is right?' (ibid.). *Triple loop learning* articulates how the notion of 'right' is informed, i.e. it opens up for the role of values and power in shaping understandings and actions (Reynolds 2014). Learning loops can be used to articulate if learning is about concrete issues, contextual/organizational questions or, instead, power dynamics.

Another key question is who is learning. To embed learnings in organizations (Scholl et al. 2018), PIL should focus not only learning among participants but also on *organizational learning* (Senge 1990; Crossan et al. 1999, 2011). The concept of *organizational learning* is entangled with the idea of organizational change: it is about understanding how new ideas and practices emerge and can be supported in an organization, but also how new ideas and practices can transform structures and procedures (ibid.). It is essentially about creating opportunities within organizations for people to learn as well as to act upon such learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974). *Organizational learning* demands supporting single individuals and groups in embracing a more reflexive practice, which requires to overcome several defensive routines (Argyris 1990) and to recognize one's own and/or group's own bounded rationality (Simon 1991). It is a process that needs to consider institutional complexity (Olsen 2009), and thus the need to continuously adapt learning approaches and focuses. Moreover, there is also the issue that organizational structures and routines tend to rule out and discourage learning by providing little space for reflection and improvisation (Senge 1990).

In order to understand if and how learning moves in an organization and becomes change, it may be possible to use the notion of *translation*. Czarniawska and Joerges (1995) describe organizational change as a process of *translation* through which ideas materialize into procedures and objects, and by doing so allow (or neglect) space for specific ways of thinking and doing (ibid.). They understand organizational change as an organic process that often emerges as the result of multiple actions and intentions happening at different levels in the organization: it is not enough if an idea is promoted or pushed only by the management or by employees; rather, it needs to be recognized and promoted at the same time on different levels (ibid.). In this perspective, *translation* can be looked upon as the process that leads to the materialization of learning into actions, documents and procedures. Callon (1986) describes *translation* as a collaborative effort that entails interactions among different actors as well as material artifacts: through these interactions, ideas are mutually developed and appropriated, thus leading to change in relationships, understandings and practices (Freeman 2009). Callon (1986) identifies four phase in *translation*: (1) *problematization,* i.e. the formulation of an issue and the network of actors and objects around it; (2) *interessement,*i.e. the negotiation through which possible shared interests among actors are negotiated; (3) *enrolment*, i.e. the alliances that might emerge if interessement is successful; (4) *mobilization of allies*, i.e. the ability of the enrolled actors to introduce new ideas and practices in their own networks by mobilizing actors and objects and reworking given relationships among them.

…AND THE ROLE OF DESIGN

The connection between experimentation and learning is at the core of design (Schön 1984). Design can be understood as an inquiry process in which the designer learns about a specific situation (problem framing) and then, from this learning, she develops possible answers to it (problem solving). Moreover, the participatory design/co-design tradition (Simonsen and Robertson 2012) provides an understanding of how to support learning among different participants by looking at collaborative design processes as a matter of mutual learning (ibid.). While designing together, participants learn about each other and the issue at stake in the process. However, a question that still stands is what kind of approaches and formats are best suited to *translate* learnings developed in PIL in the involved organizations. Botero et al. (2020) have been using the notion of *translation* to lift and to articulate the kind of work of negotiation and alignment among mundane, strategic, methodological and contextual factors that are required to initiate and drive participatory design processes. Building on Czarniawska and Joerges (1995), *translation* appears to be key also in fostering the appropriation of PIL outcomes in ordinary activities. But what does *translation* look like in PILs? And what kind of formats might be used to support it?

A DESIGN INQUIRY INTO INNOVATION LABS

The focus on learning and *translation* is further developed through the case of an innovation lab at municipal level (for now on The City Lab), in which I engaged as a design researcher. In particular, the focus is on the Forum for Citizens Involvement (FCI) that I ran together with a civil servant in the frame of The City

Lab. FCI aimed at fostering *organizational learning* about citizens' participation.

Together with some colleagues, I collaborated with previous innovation labs in the same city. This meant that I had the connections with and trust from the civil servants to be able to advocate for initiate and co-run FCI.

Methodologically, I relied on design practice to generate knowledge (Dixon 2020). The engagement in The City Lab and the establishment of FCI were grounded in the question of how to support *organizational learning* about citizens' participation. The running of FCI not only generated insights about organizing citizens' participation, but also about the struggles of PIL in fostering learning and bringing about organizational change.

The data used for this article include notes, pictures and different kinds of materials generated by participants during the meetings, and the analysis produced by myself and the civil servant with whom I ran FCI. I integrated these data by interviewing the following: the civil servant responsible for participation at the planning department, who was very active in FCI; the project leader of a previous lab, who was engaged in the setting up of The City Lab and then ran one of its sub-projects; and the project leader of The City Lab, who was in charge of it for one and half year. The interviews were done individually one year after the conclusion of The City Lab. The official City Lab evaluation report about learning was also analysed.

THE CITY LAB AND THE FORUM FOR CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT

The City Lab (September 2016- December 2019) was financed by European Structural Funds (ESF) and the National Innovation Agency (NIA). It had a budget of 7.3 MLN euros and was a significantly large project for the city. It focused on sustainable city development and the creation of new ways of working. Several departments of the city were involved in its activities and on its board.

The City Lab built upon a previous externally financed lab (2013-2015). The Previous Lab focused on peripheral neighbourhoods that present a number of socio-economic challenges and that are also in need of physical renovation. The Previous Lab was run by the environmental department and involved different city departments, property owners, energy companies, citizens and universities. It was financed by the NIA program for municipal innovation labs. The Previous Lab developed a number of experimental projects through which some key challenges[1] for the development of a sustainable city were identified. Among them were the need for creating a learning structure within the municipality and spreading ways of working based on citizens' and other actors' needs.

The City Lab was a continuation of the Previous Lab and had a clear focus on these challenges. The NIA program for municipal innovation labs included more cities, but less funding was available. Consequently, the environmental department decided to seek additional funding. The opportunity was found within an ESF program, of which several parts of the city were interested in. A fast-growing population and the political decision to densify the city placed pressure on several departments to deliver new planning processes and to engage with land and property owners for quickly building sustainable and affordable housing. Additionally, under 2017, because of an internal reorganization, local area departments would be dissolved. There was an interest to pursue funding for maintaining and disseminating local city platforms to facilitate the interaction between citizens and the city. Centrally[2] it was decided that these different interests had to be consolidated into one large project to be led by the environmental department. A couple of civil servants at the environmental department wrote the funding application in collaboration with the planning department, the city office, the work and social department, the building department and the south area department. The outcome was a huge and complex project focusing on the planning and creation of sustainable housing by experimenting with new ways of working, including alliances across sectors, citizens' participation and norm-critical approaches, and new models for measuring value. The project comprised a number of sub-projects: five planning processes in different areas; a thematic track on sharing economy; the maintenance and/or creation of six local platforms to facilitate interaction between city functions and citizens[3]; the creation of an innovation platform that, by supporting the other processes, would facilitate innovation processes driven by external actors and would develop a structure for innovation and learning within the city; an evaluation and learning track in collaboration with local universities; a network about

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[1] The seven identified challenges as described in the ESF project application: 1. Innovations do not spread in the municipal organization; 2. Low engagement of property owners; 3. Those who have a need and those who innovate do not meet; 4. Financing models and value measure models with a holistic perspective are missing or are not used; 5. Learning structures are missing or are not used; 6. The lack of a norm-critical perspective means that competences are not valued, and needs are not fulfilled.

2 My informants could not recall exactly how that decision was taken, but it involved representatives from the City Office and its political board.

3 This activity of the project was eventually cancelled because after the dissolution of the local departments it became difficult to reallocate its responsibility.

housing access across city departments; and a trans-sectorial forum about sustainable and affordable housing.

At the start The City Lab lacked a project leader. The Previous Lab project leader refused to continue in that role: *"The project was too big, and I could not see the whole picture...We got lost in the money, unfortunately."* An external consultant, a former civil servant from the environmental department, acted as temporal project manager for six months, until a project manager was enrolled. She was new to the city, but had previously worked within the public sector with sustainability issues. She applied to the role because *"The City Lab seemed to have the resources and mandate to actually bring about the change needed to create a sustainable city."* When she started, some of the sub-projects were still missing a project leader. Because of a chronic lack of personnel within the departments and the logics of external financing, new people were hired to drive the sub-projects, rather than use internal staff. Though these new personnel were passionate about their work, they often lacked an understanding of the organization's structures and logics. The project leader emphasized how it was difficult even for her, as a newcomer, to navigate relationships across the departments.

Despite the collaboration with the writing of the application, issues related to the mandate and understanding of the lab emerged at the onset of The City Lab. According to the project leader, *"it took half of the project time to get the different departments' directors* (sitting on The City Lab board) *to discuss not only the 'what', but also the 'why' of The City Lab."* A number of middle managers from the various departments had reservations about the project. It was *"seen as something coming from the side"* and thus not being prioritized (or worse considered a threat). According to the project leader, a main issue was the lab's positioning: *"I think the choice of placing the leadership at the environmental department was wrong. Given the themes and ambitions, we should have been placed centrally at the City Office."*

Another issue was the size of the project, which included around 60 people. Ordinary management activities did not leave the project leader and the leading group much time for developing relationships with ordinary activities. Moreover, the administrative work required by the financing body was very time consuming.

I joined The City Lab as a researcher in September 2017, one year after its commencement, and I was part of the learning track. Together with the secretary of The City Lab, we took the initiative for the Forum for Citizens' Involvement (FCI). The goal was to support learning across departments and between The City Lab and ordinary activities regarding citizens' participation

and norm-critical perspectives. Initially, the leading group wanted FCI to focus primarily on The City Lab sub-projects and staff. However, we managed to open it up for all civil servants of the city by arguing for the need to connect with ordinary activities and to learn from previous experiences.

The idea of FCI came from the Previous Lab. Some civil servants, with whom I collaborated with at that time, underlined the need for learning about citizens' participation across the city departments. Though one of them initiated such an arena some years before, it soon fizzled out as her manager questioned why she was organizing activities for people from other departments. While working with FCI, we also learned about another arena for citizens' participation that was active in the city between 2008 and 2010. It was run by the head of a library who worked extensively with citizens' involvement. She initiated the arena as it was of great interest to many other civil servants that wanted to work with this topic. Unfortunately, the endeavour ended a couple of years after due to a lack of support from the organization and politicians.

FCI held two-hour meetings monthly. We relied on co-design approaches, and the encounters were structured as workshops in which civil servants were mapping, brainstorming and reflecting together. The point of departure was always a concrete experience: current projects which were in need of some peer support and/or previous experiences which the participants discussed and analysed jointly. One of the meetings was dedicated to mapping participants' own practice in order to identify shared issues. The City Lab secretary and I took care of analysing the outcomes of each session. The analyses were used to build an understanding of current issues in relation to citizens' participation within the city, which was an understanding that we continuously discussed with the participants.

The forum was active for 9 months (Oct 2017-July 2018) and had a total of 7 meetings, engaging 37 participants from the planning department, the environmental department, the city office, the buildings and streets departments, the work and social department, the service department, the waste handling department and some sub-project leaders of The City Lab. The participants were all working with and being passionate about citizens' participation.

FCI did support learning among participants: the new people found it highly fruitful to meet more experienced colleagues and to delve into old projects. The more experienced civil servants found it interesting to learn about peers' situations and identify common struggles across departments. In particular, it materialised that the main challenge was not the lack of methods; rather, it was the lack of an 'infrastructure' to integrate citizens' input in ordinary activities. The experienced civil servants highlighted how – despite the political will of

working with participation – there was a lack of mandate, resources and routines in practice. FCI participants saw the necessity of engaging managers and politicians in discussions concerning resource allocation and structures for participation. The person responsible for participation at the planning office highlighted that *"It was the time when the local area departments were dissolved. People from different departments had the same concern: how do we do now to reach out citizens? In planning and development processes, we don't have time and resources to build local networks. I think FCI supported us in discussing this and in developing a shared formulation, that we* (i.e., the participating civil servants from the technical departments) *could bring back to the city office investigations about citizens' participation ...."* While FCI was running, the city office started an investigation into how to coordinate citizens' participation efforts across the technical departments: some civil servants active in FCI were giving input to this work. The leader of the investigation also participated in some FCI meetings. The investigation became the main vehicle to bring forward the outcomes of FCI: among other things, it suggested the creation of a permanent learning arena regarding citizens' participation and the necessity of having a further investigation concerning how to support local involvement after the dissolution of local area departments. The person responsible for participation at the planning office also forged ahead with some topics that were discussed within FCI. Particularly, she connected a planning process with another city initiative that creates local networks between schools, associations and citizens with a focus on youth. She used one of these local networks to get in contact with local people to gather input for a local planning process.

In summer 2018, while planning the meetings with managers and politicians, FCI was interrupted. Because of the difficulties in running The City Lab, the project leader and other members of the leading group resigned. This necessitated a reorganisation of activities. The priority was to support the sub-projects focusing on planning efforts and the project deliverables.. I took responsibility for writing the deliverable about citizens' participation which was planned to be a set of methodological guidelines. By connecting the learnings from FCI to the planning sub-projects findings and challenges, I shifted the focus of the guidelines from methods to the organization of an infrastructure for participation across departments and rooted in local areas. The hope was that the guidelines would also

disseminate FCI outcomes. However, the guidelines remained just a project delivery.

The external evaluation report on learning[4] highlights how The City Lab developed learning in the sub-projects and, to some extent, drove learning activities (like FCI). However, it also points out that without the creation of a permanent learning structure it is difficult to harvest the outcomes of the sub-projects and to ensure continuity in learning. The same conclusion was also reached by The Previous Lab.

(ORGANIZATIONAL) LEARNING AT FCI AND THE CITY LAB

This section analyses what kind of learning emerged in FCI and the limits of FCI and The City Lab in supporting *organizational learning.*

FCI relied on designerly and co-designerly approaches to support collective reflection-on-action (Schön 1984) on ongoing and previous cases. By staging collaborative activities for analysis and reflection in small groups, it was possible to create a constructive and welcoming environment that fostered mutual learning (Simonsen and Robertson 2012) among participants.

Past projects triggered learning much more than current ones. Defensive mechanisms (Argyris 1990) were less strong in discussing old experiences, thereby allowing for *double loop learning* to emerge (Argyris and Schön 1974). Different approaches could be confronted to resonate their strengths and weaknesses. Instead current City Lab sub-projects were often in their early stages and focusing on 'doing things right' (*single loop learning*) and were only partially opening up for 'what is the right thing to do' (*double loop learning*) (Argyris and Schön 1974). The pressure of having to deliver within a given time frame (Fred 2018) and the lack of knowledge about the context made it difficult for some sub-projects leaders to critically reflect on their own processes. Moreover, it was possible to trace *organizational learning* by looking at the legacy of some of the past experiences. It materialized that despite 'successful' results most of these experiences did not impact ordinary activities. The discussion focused increasingly on structures, mandate and power dynamics within and across departments, rather than on methods (i.e., *triple loop learning*) (Reynolds 2014). An organizational focus on participation was also present in the frame of the City Office investigation (formulated by politicians and focusing on cross-departmental coordination) and clearly in the outcomes of the investigation, which also highlighted the importance of

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[4] To ensure confidentiality these reports are not referenced in the paper but can be provided to the reader upon request to the author.

learning structures across departments concerning this topic.

FCI did support learning at 'the periphery' (Schön 1971) among civil servants that were passionate about and worked with participation. A weakness was the lack of critical voices. We unsuccessfully tried to engage civil servants that saw participation as one of the many issues that city planning and development needed to deal with. Their participation would have helped in positioning participation work in relation to other issues. We also failed to support learning at 'the centre' (Schön 1971). Though we planned to involve managers and politicians, we were without a means to reach out to them. Overall, FCI lacked the legitimacy to engage people in learning – a legitimacy that was supposed to be ensured by the City Lab.

The City Lab was originally conceived for, among other things, creating learning structures. However, the running of the subprojects, the managing of a rather large organization and the heavy reporting work required by the financing body left little or no resources and space to engage with this issue. According to project leader, "*We would have need to be a much smaller team with some people having a deep understanding of dynamics across departments. We should have been focusing only on the challenges and have had more time.*" Notwithstanding practical issues, learning was hindered because The City Lab struggled to be recognized as a support for learning and innovation. The project leader underlined that its leadership should have been positioned more centrally in the organization. Though a more central position might have helped with the formal legitimacy of the City Lab, it probably would not be enough to ensure a successful *translation*.

TRANSLATION AT THE CITY LAB AND FCI

This section articulates *translation* at The City Lab and FCI through the lenses of Callon's (1986) four phases: (1) *problematization,* i.e. the formulation of an issue and the network of actors and objects around it; (2) *interessement,* i.e. the negotiation through which possible shared interests among actors are negotiated; (3) *enrolment*, i.e. the alliances that might emerge if interessement is successful; (4) *mobilization of allies*, i.e. the ability of the enrolled actors to introduce new ideas and practices in their own networks by mobilizing actors and objects and by reworking given relationships among them.

The project leader reflects, *"I felt we weren't prepared and didn't have the tools to deal with the fact that the city is structured in different departments that have different political boards and thus different goals."* The lack of knowledge about the organization and approaches to deal with its nature made it difficult to identify people, objects and questions that could trigger shared *problematization* and *interessement* about learning. The involvement of different departments during the application phase focused on resources to run activities. Learning ambitions required a new shared *problematization*, which took almost half of the project time, leaving little time and resources to actually work with learning. Moreover, The City Lab's predefined sub-projects and goals implied a lack of flexibility to adapt to different contingent needs and situations within the departments.

Within FCI, we partially managed to *translate* some of the learnings, thanks to the engagement of the person responsible for participation at the planning office and the civil servant running the investigation about coordinating participation work. A shared *problematization* (i.e. organizational aspects of participation work) led to a partial *enrolment* of both these people. With FCI, we focused on understanding the background and conditions of their roles and tasks and frame FCI activities (and outcomes), so that they could be useful for their activities(*interessement*). This negotiation led to a quite stable alliance with the person responsible for participation at the planning office and a more fragile one with the person running the investigation (*enrolment*). It was only at the very end that we knew if and how the outcomes of FCI were integrated in the investigation.

The *enrolment* of the city planning participation's responsible led to a missed *mobilization*. Because of the interruption of FCI, we missed the opportunity to support her experimentation within ordinary activities, which was a unique opportunity to develop *organizational learning* about participation in the planning department. The integration of some FCI outcomes in the investigation can be considered as a partial *mobilization* It lifted the importance of further work on infrastructures for local participation. However, due its limited time and focus it didn't provide any indication on the characteristics of these infrastructures nor on how the further work should be carried out.

LIMITS OF PROJECTS AND LABS AS A FORMAT

Some of the struggles of The City Lab in supporting *organizational learning* and *translation* relate to the fact that it was organized and financed as a project.

Projects as temporal ad-hoc efforts organized outside ordinary activities have been already criticised for being unable to foster change in public sector ordinary activities (Fred 2018). Predefined activities (and deliverables) made it difficult to develop ad-hoc *organizational learning* efforts and to drive the negotiations that *translation* required. External financing worsened the situation (Fred 2018) because it

entailed two different commitments: towards the city and towards the financing body. The commitment to the financing body, with its rules and procedures for reporting and controlling the advancement of the project, was not compatible with and tended to override the commitment to the local and contingent needs that emerged along the way. Moreover, external project funding gave freedom to The City Lab, but it also implied a lack of regular interactions with the departments and their political boards.

In addition, traditional formats for anchoring were not sufficient for driving *translation*. A formal mandate and a board with different departmental representatives did not ensure the actual legitimacy of The City Lab to mobilize people and procedures in the departments in experimental and reflective activities. FCI was unsuccessful in this mobilization, despite the fact that it had a bottom-up legitimacy. Czarniawska and Joerges (1995) remind us that the possibility (and impossibility) of organizational change is not ensured by a formal top-down mandate nor by a bottom-up legitimation, but rather by a continuous process of mobilization and negotiation of ideas, practices and relationships across different levels.

In addition to issues related to the project format, the struggles of The City Lab reveal some limits of PIL as a format. The idea of the lab as "an innovation milieu" (Tõnurist et al. 2017) turned out to be problematic. With FCI, we had to argue for using older cases and to open up for participation beyond former City Lab members. These two choices were key in fostering more in-depth learning and connecting to ordinary activities. Yet, they also challenged the identity (and idea) of The City Lab as the context where innovation takes place and with the people who have the capacity and mandate to do that. More generally, the case highlights how the idea of the innovation lab as a protected niche (Kemp et al. 2008) can be detrimental in a context that requires an ongoing engagement with ordinary activities (Schön 197; Parsons 2006; Olsen 2009).

Moreover, there is an issue with how experimentation and learning are generally framed in PILs. Most of The City Lab sub-projects were focusing on experimenting with developing new methods and solutions together with external actors. According to a learning-by-doing philosophy, they were seen as a pre-requisite to be able to drive *organizational learning*. However, as mentioned, this left little time and resources to actually engage with ordinary activities. Despite its ambition to systematically improve procedures and embed results in ordinary activities, The City Lab delivered, yet again, ideas and methods about ways of working. This discrepancy resonates with the fact that PILs are mostly taking inspiration from ideas, methods and environments developed for commercial innovation, which aims at fostering processes of creative destruction (Schumpeter 1994) for the development of new solutions. This idea encourages bold and explorative experimentation in which learning is instrumental to the creation of new products, services and/or ways of working. According to this perspective, existing structures, procedures and cultures are something to trespass, rather than to engage with.

All in all, The City Lab points at how the PIL format needs to be advanced to embrace the nature of public sector innovation as an evolutionary, rather than disruptive, process (Schön 1971; Parsons 2006; Olsen 2009) in which learning needs to be instrumental to create the capacity to adapt besides to image new possibilities. On the whole, PILs need to develop ways to engage with ordinary activities – an engagement that is as complex as the one with societal challenges (Olson 2009) and that requires specific approaches.

EXPERIMENTING, LEARNING AND TRANSLATING WITH(IN) ORDINARY ACTIVITIES

Learning is confirmed as a central topic for fruitfully engaging with institutional complexity (Agger Eriksen et al. 2020). PILs' activities should systematically focus on *single, double and triple loop learning* (Argyris and Schön 1974; Reynolds 2014): that is, addressing concrete questions about methods and ways of doing, considering contextual and organizational aspects, and unravelling how views and power dynamics are shaping organizational structures and allowing for or neglecting certain practices in order to identify opportunities and hinders for *translation.*

There is also the need to advance "traditional" formats for experimentation and learning in PILs to explore how to engage with(in) ordinary activities on the side of driving more cutting-edge activities outside regular structures. This demands light and adaptable formats that can be easily integrated into ordinary procedures of planning, executing and reporting activities. Priority should be given to be as close as possible to ordinary activities, with a focus on fostering experiments and reflection that can actually be carried out within ordinary activities. It is important also not to forget the value of previous experiences (like previous attempts at integrating experiments outcomes) in fostering learning.

PILs need both bottom-up and top-down anchoring to have the mandate and trust to engage with ordinary activities (Czarniawska and Joerges 1995). There is the need to recognize *translation* as its own process: one that requires dedicated approaches and resources. To act within ordinary activities demands not only a deep understanding of current institutional settings but also supporting organizations in recognizing, identifying and formulating learning needs (i.e., *problematization*). This means identify questions that are relevant from an

ordinary activities' perspective, unravelling them in relation to methods, organizational and power dynamics aspects (Argyris and Schön 1974), and finding a way to express them so that they trigger possible experimental activities outside or within ordinary activities. This demands active *enrolment, interessement* and *mobilization* of people and objects. Besides this initial effort (Botero et al. 2020), *translation* needs to be continuously sustained as a matter of fruitfully engaging with situated organizational cultures and power dynamics to *problematize* experiments and their outcomes in ways that *enrol* people and objects and lead to their *interessement,* and provide them with the capacity to mobilize others further.

On the whole, this entails a humbler way of operating that relies on the action of people within ordinary activities. In this perspective, PILs become a support to others' doing rather than the milieu and people that drive action.

An engagement with(in) ordinary activities also entails a stronger connection to political steering. This would help to avoid possible risks of PILs becoming a technocratic instrument serving the interests of the few (McGann et al.2018). A tighter engagement with political steering and bodies opens up for exploring the potential of collaborative experimental processes as a complement to traditional investigations in delivering input to political boards to decide about different questions.

A focus on *experimentation*, *learning* and *translation* with(in) ordinary activities should complement rather than substitute more "traditional" cutting-edge experimentation outside ordinary activities. Further research is needed to identify which questions and local conditions are better treated outside or with(in) ordinary activities, or with a mix both.

CONCLUSION

Innovation in the public sector has been recognized as a process that requires opportunities for ongoing learning to address institutional complexity and the intractability of many societal issues (Schön 1971; Parsons 2006). PILs primarily focus on addressing societal issues, and they tend to lack understandings and approaches to engage with *organizational learning* (Senge 1990; Crossan et al. 1999, 2011) and *translation* (Czarniawska and Bernward 1995).

By building on insights from The City Lab and on theory on public sector innovation, the article describes some of PILs' limits in engaging with *organizational learning* and *translation*. It suggests to integrate current approaches with efforts for experimenting, learning and *translating* with(in) ordinary activities. These efforts require dedicated approaches, formats and resources to engage with people, objects and procedures in ordinary

activities and with the political dimension of public organizations.

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