



# Three Principles to Run a Policy Lab

Insights from the rEUsilience Experience

Thinking about resilience series

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# rEUsilience

Risks, Resources and Inequalities:

Increasing Resilience in European Families

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This contribution to the *Thinking About Resilience* series explores the concept of policy labs (or policy innovation labs, public innovation labs, i-labs) as an innovative tool in collaborative policy development. One example of a policy lab in practice is that of the rEUsilience project. The aim of this piece is to review the approaches to and key characteristics of policy labs and present the rEUsilience Policy Lab as a case study.

In the following, we start by outlining prevailing descriptions of policy labs. This section is followed by an overview of the characteristics and functions of the labs along with the perceived benefits they bring to contemporary policymaking and the challenges they face, with examples from across the globe. After spotlighting some of the national and supranational policy labs, we then turn to the case of the rEUsilience Policy Lab. We list three key learnings revealed from the experience of the rEUsilience Policy Lab thus far, which could be beneficial for establishing and running an independent, project-based policy lab dealing with pressing policy problems.

## What is a policy lab?

Policy Labs are designed and promoted as initiatives aimed at fostering innovative policymaking in the public sector. They have been defined as “multi-disciplinary government units using a range of innovation methods, including design, to collaboratively engage users and stakeholders in service and policy development.” (Whicher 2021: 253). Traditionally, policy or policy innovation labs consist of multiple stakeholders and typically adopt multidisciplinary, often participatory, approaches (Tönurist et al. 2017; Brock 2021).

Across different definitions of and approaches to the policy labs, there is an underlying emphasis on creating new information or developing solutions in ways that are not necessarily found in typical handbooks but can only blossom in collaborative settings. Labs offer a meeting ground for experts from various fields, such as academia, NGOs, the government, and the private sector, to tackle specific policy problems or areas. They are also defined as “dedicated teams, structures or entities focused on designing public policy through innovative methods that involve all stakeholders in the design process” (Fuller and Lochard, 2016:1). As such, in one way or another, policy labs can be interpreted as a bridge to link the gap between theory, knowledge and practice. They “represent islands of experimentation where the public sector can test and scale out public-service innovations” (Tönurist et al. 2017: 9).

The past decades have witnessed a proliferation of the number of policy labs across different policy fields, as high as 450 entities globally (Wellstead et al. 2021). An earlier report commissioned by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission identified 73 policy labs across European Union member states in 2016 (Fuller and Lochard 2016). By 2020, there were 13 policy labs in the UK (Whicher 2021).



One of the key reasons behind the rising appeal of policy labs in contemporary policymaking is said to be their participatory design that is attuned to the needs of citizens and its reliance on evidence-based practices (Lee and Ma, 2020; Wellstead et al., 2021). Another potential reason is the need for more creative or unconventional policy responses to contemporary societal issues requiring new solutions (Lewis 2021) and transforming public governance to be more rapid, effective, efficient and responsive (Ferreira and Botero 2020).

Many policy labs across different countries and in different policy fields corroborate the diversity of these entities. This also suggests that Whicher's (2021) definition posed previously, the assumption that policy labs will operate as government units or as part of government entities, might only be partially accurate. Government-level initiatives, such as the UK's Behavioural Insight Team or Denmark's Danish MindLab, might have played a trailblazing role in the expansion of the concept and practice of policy labs but the multitude of policy labs (sometimes also called innovation labs, see Tönurist et al. 2017) encompasses a wide range of forms, including those established by government entities, NGOs, universities and specific projects (Brock 2021; Pólvora and Nascimento 2021).

Policy labs are typically created with a specific policy goal or an innovation target in mind. As a result, they are prone to be substantially distinct from one another. For example, even under the same entity, such as government-initiated policy labs, policy labs may still differ from one another regarding their operationalisation, management, or funding structure. Some can be controlled by the government (fully funded by a government department), some are led by the government (partially funded by a government department) and some are enabled by the government (funded through contracts) (Lewis 2021: 241).

Despite the variation in the form and the absence of a unified definition of policy labs, there are noticeable cross-cutting features. These are the use of (i) design-thinking, (ii) experiments and (iii) user-centric (or human-centred) approaches (Tönurist et al. 2017; Lee and Ma 2019; Olejniczak et al. 2020; Lewis 2021; Wellstead et al. 2021). These three key components relate back to the definitions of policy labs, in which 'fresh thinking' is considered a prerequisite and policy labs function as fields of experimentation for innovative policies.<sup>1</sup> We explore these in detail below.

## Key characteristics and functions of policy labs

The literature on policy labs summarizes several standard functions of the labs, including working in collaboration with various governmental and non-governmental actors, collecting and analysing data and evidence-based policy recommendations and employing innovative, user-centred and experimental approaches (Tönurist et al. 2017; McGann et al. 2018; Lee and Ma 2019; Lewis 2021). Contributing to the capacity building of policymakers, cultivating collaboration and cooperation opportunities within and between stakeholders, prototyping ideas and advocating for policy change have also been recognised as desired, if not common, characteristics of these labs.

In general, the literature analysing various policy lab examples places a strong emphasis on characteristics like being forward-looking, innovative, flexible and creative, indicating a distance from the bureaucratic traditions of the state (Brock 2021). For example, during the implementation of the policy lab (Impact and Innovation Unit), the Canadian government

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, the definition used by the UK Government, as a real life example <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit/getting-started-with-open-policy-making>



stressed the importance of human resources and “recruiting the right people” to bring forth ideas that would lead to ingenious results (ibid: 232). This can be taken as a signal of how policy labs and their potential contributions are perceived by government officials. However, what is important here to note is that policy labs do not have political power and influence. Hence, it has been said to be important to underline their function as a catalyst (Pólvara and Nascimento, 2021) instead of an actual changemaker.

An important overarching function of policy labs can be described as identifying problems, researching, building evidence, and proposing solutions. The solution phase can take multiple forms, such as prototyping, capacity building, and providing consultancy on corporate services. An example of a policy lab addressing a pre-defined problem and filling the knowledge gap is Nepal’s EnLiFT Policy Labs (Ojha et al. 2020). The problem in focus here is identified as a gap between the research and policy in Nepal’s forestry sector and its governance. Previous research also argued that there had been a substantial amount of accumulated knowledge by communities managing forests and researchers in the field, yet an interest or response from policymakers was lacking in return (ibid). The EnLiFT Policy Lab was run over the course of five years (2014-19) and built on “an action research approach engaging community forestry and related stakeholders at all levels from village through civil society to government” (ibid: 4). An advantage that EnLiFT Policy Lab utilized is the slow process which enabled participants to engage in the topic closely. Such an approach introduced the changes incrementally as opposed to a top-down intervention.

Lastly, managing stakeholders is among the many tasks that policy labs are expected to do, which brings us to the next point. While not necessarily synonymous, the multi-stakeholder approach that policy labs often rely on might be interpreted as equivalent to being participatory in their design. A canonical example here is the historical Amelisweerd case, which came to life as a result of the tensions between the Highway 27 section of the Dutch motorway project and the public outrage during the 1970s and ‘80s (Toussaint 2019). Dealing with public protests and associated highway constructions lasted over a decade throughout the 1970s. This contested period was considered a significant learning curve for how to design robust participatory policymaking, wherein the public is not just informed but actively engaged in the decision-making (ibid). In short, stakeholders in policy labs are active participants who co-create or co-test policy ideas, innovations and proposals rather than bystanders or spectators.

## Advantages and challenges of policy labs

In general, there is an underlying assumption that policy labs contribute to the capacity of stakeholders, especially those with policymaking responsibilities. This happens through the delivery of training or capacity-building activities and the development of toolkits or guidelines for the proposed ideas or policy innovations in discussion (Evans and Cheng 2021: 599). They are also helpful in offering guidance to facilitate the implementation of a policy proposal or managing networks of stakeholders involved in the process.

While policy labs might have some influential capacity, the effect of such an influence may be somewhat limited (Kim et al. 2022). Policy labs are often constrained by a set time and budget frame. Operating under stricter time and funding-related pressures may pose a challenge to bring about the achievements and developments that are promised initially. In other words, although policy labs deal with complex problems and aim to develop creative solutions, their power can be limited in forcing the adoption of the solutions they proposed. This is for several reasons. One is that policy labs often deal with one specific policy problem. They adopt a



solution-oriented focus but are not always involved in the implementation part (Brock 2021). Hence, the feasibility of the solution might be an issue. Moreover, they do not have political power. The duration of a proposed solution to a policy may not fall into the political priorities at the time. Another reason behind a limited impact stems from the fact that improvements are dependent on system changes. Regardless of the intentions and efforts, the interventions may not be scalable, or the engagement of the policy lab may remain short-term (Lewis 2020; Olejniczak et al. 2020; Evans and Cheng 2021).

The concerns around the transmission of the learnings from policy labs or the endurance of their impact pinpoint some other challenges engrained in the design of these entities. In the majority of the cases, policy labs are built as independent entities that are autonomous in their operation. However, they are still integrated into a greater organisational structure, which may cause conflicts (Lee and Ma 2019; Ferreira and Botero 2020). They may face constraints during the implementation of suggested innovations due to some form of political resistance or conflict of interest (Lewis 2021). There are examples of policy labs, such as Helsinki Design Lab in Finland and MindLab in Denmark, that have been shut down due to organisational conflict or other reasons (Lewis 2021).

Along similar lines, regardless of organisational dynamics and potential conflicts at various managerial levels, time and funding limitations may come into play. They can be temporal entities set up to serve a specific task or forced to cease operations due to limited funding and lack of resources. Alternatively, as raised in the previous point, the results produced by the policy labs may not come to life on time, which may go against political ambitions. The targets not being reached in the desired time window may lead to the dismissal of further funding for the policy labs.

## How do policy labs test new ideas or influence policies?

There are supranational policy lab examples that appear as umbrella bodies that provide a platform that connects different stakeholders, experts and knowledge seekers. To give an example, in 2014, the EU Policy Lab ([https://policy-lab.ec.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://policy-lab.ec.europa.eu/index_en)) was founded at the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. The lab is defined as a space to enable multidisciplinary collaboration and exploration for innovative policymaking. The EU Policy Lab lists three key areas of operation: (i) vision development for policymaking that is tuned to the future, (ii) using design-based approaches to devise innovative policymaking, and (iii) generating and benefiting from experiments and behavioural insights to enhance policy effectiveness (European Commission 2024).

Another one is from UNESCO. Since 2017, UNESCO has been running its Inclusive Policy Lab, which encompasses 20 in-country operations facilitating local actors to design and deliver inclusive and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)-oriented projects (<https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/inclusive-policy-markers>). The function of this lab is described as an online platform that connects experts with policymakers and other civil society actors. The online platform allows registrants to submit queries linking them to an expert on the topic. The lab also produces information and offers a learning space. Through the co-creation of knowledge, exchange of expertise and collaborative work, this lab positions itself as a hub to guide the designing of inclusive policies. This approach is also taken by the UNDP Accelerator Labs (<https://www.undp.org/acceleratorlabs>), which operates as an umbrella lab consisting of 91 labs across 115 countries. These labs define their aim to test what works and what does not to achieve SDGs within the planned time frame (UNDP 2023). The Lab promotes itself as an



“incubator of solutions and ideas”. It positions itself as a platform to facilitate solutions at a pace that keeps abreast of continuously changing societal and policy challenges. These labs are examples of supranational initiatives facilitating country-level operations by offering a common ground for knowledge exchange, idea development and road-testing policy proposals. They are different from the country-specific examples mentioned earlier as they function as knowledge exchange platforms that connect different experts and policy labs with each other.

On the matter of developing and road-testing policy proposals, the example of the rEUsilience Policy Lab (<https://reusilience.eu/>) comes to the fore. Based on the research conducted within the project, the lab first identifies a problem and, collectively with the lab participants, works to develop forward-looking ideas to bring innovation.

## The rEUsilience Policy Lab and its three principles

The rEUsilience project is an example of a social policy endeavour that couples rigorous research practices with impacting policymaking efforts. That is to be achieved through establishing a policy lab as a significant component of the project since its commencement, not an act that sprung to life as an afterthought, which can also be posed as the first learning: *embed the policy lab into the project as a core part of it*. Such an approach facilitates a connection between policy thinking and research efforts.

The rEUsilience Policy Lab aligns with the key features of policy labs discussed earlier. It is an example of a project-based lab, which comes with a predefined time and funding structure. This works as an advantage rather than a challenge. Since the project has a defined purpose and a rigorous research practice that creates an evidence base to inform the problematization of the policy areas, it provides a structure to the lab. Therefore, the second learning can be described as *having a clear goal from the outset*. When the limited time frame is combined with a well-defined agenda, the risks of not achieving the set goals can be mitigated.

Regardless of the form, duration, and funding structure, all policy labs seemed to adopt a collaborative approach that involved engaging with multiple stakeholders from different backgrounds. The case of the rEUsilience Policy Lab also adheres to this. By adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, the lab offers a space for knowledge exchange and policy solutions to be developed. The multi-stakeholder and collaborative approach brings a diverse range of experiences together. Consequently, the third learning can be described as *participatory governance*, in which a plurality of expertise, opinions, and voices contribute to a common goal. In the experience of the rEUsilience Policy Lab, the sessions start with communicating the findings from the research. This is followed by focused discussions where participants share their reflections, experiences and knowledge. The sessions are designed in an interactive, cooperative and inclusive format.

## Concluding remarks

A survey of the literature on policy labs and different real-life policy labs in practice showed that policy labs can be considered avenues that allow creative approaches to complex policy problems. When designed purposefully and managed well, they can support and accelerate policymaking processes by offering innovative solutions. However, they come with unique challenges as multi-stakeholder collaboration often depends on voluntary participation. Other elements, such as the timeliness of the projects or policy proposals, political readiness and



support in terms of prioritization and financing of the proposed innovations, also define the experience and success of the policy labs.

Despite these challenges and limitations, policy labs can still be seen and utilised as ways of supporting evidence-based and participatory policymaking, allowing room for creativity, design thinking, and experimentation. As discussed above, the modes and functions of labs vary widely. The effectiveness and overall success of the labs are closely tied to the context and particular circumstances in which they operate. Nevertheless, they perpetuate a platform to cooperate and co-create better policies addressing current and emerging issues.

While rEUsilience operates within the realms of social policy, the three principles listed above prove relevant to any research area. Having a clear road map to start with and being flexible during the process can be seen as two essential pillars. Embracing a collaborative approach and participatory research practices are the other two pillars that constitute a successful policy lab which would lead to further collaborations and a nudge for improvements in the focused policy areas.





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# rEUsilience

[reusilience.eu](http://reusilience.eu)



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