



12. Transformation Labs

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Transformation Labs* (T-Labs) are long-term multi-actor processes focused on social-ecological change. They have a particular emphasis on just and sustainable transformations, and human-nature connectedness. They typically address complex problems, where people share a sense of urgency but may disagree in their problem understanding. They are a very new tool and have been mostly applied in participatory research projects but could be relevant to any organisation interested in social innovation for environmental problems.



T-LABS AT-A-GLANCE

- Enable reframing of complex problems, reflexivity and collective agency to foster change.
- Require knowledge of participatory processes, creative facilitation and mixed-methods analytical skills, as well as a safe environment.



Benefits

1. Promote reflexivity on complex social-ecological problems and interconnected causes.
2. Can generate new meanings and shifts in mainstream narratives.
3. Seek to foster individual and collective agency in order to support participants in activating alternative pathways to change.
4. Focus on a high quality process, rather than judging success on outcome alone.



Challenges and limitations

1. **Recruitment:** May not be attractive to participants who expect a direct impact on policies (unless the T-Lab is intentionally targeted at doing so).
2. **Engagement:** Difficulties in achieving long-term engagement, with intermittent participation lessening the possibilities for transformation.
3. **Impact:** The majority of T-Labs to date have prioritised individual and collective transformations, meaning they may achieve low systemic and structural impacts.




Participants

T-Labs gather medium-sized groups (e.g. 10-20 people) of invite-only participants who ideally participate for the full duration of the process so that transformations can be evaluated. Participants should represent diverse perspectives of the problem and have different capacities for action; this means there may be a focus on involving a range of professionals and community leaders. Depending on the context and process goals, diversity is also promoted regarding age, gender, ethnicity, knowledge, background, etc.

STEPS




Timeframe: T-Labs are long-term engagement processes that may last as long as conveners and/or participants are willing to engage. Scoping and preliminary research may take over a year. The collective interaction phase requires 1 year minimum but can expand over several years. Final evaluation requires at least 4-6 months plus communication and public dissemination that may take another 6 months, academic publications aside




OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

T-Labs initiatives build upon a multi-level framework of transformations (individual, collective, systemic and structural). In order to analyse change, T-Labs produce rich qualitative datasets from interviews, surveys and workshops. This approach supports increased impacts for participants and their immediate networks (meaning there is often less focus on policy impact than, for example, Deliberative Forums), however some T-Labs have alternatively targeted impacts at different levels, from local actions to national policy changes.



RESOURCES NEEDED

Knowledge of group dynamics and facilitation skills are required in order to set up the T-Lab and handle relations with and among participants. Qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis and visualisation are needed for process evaluation and interpretation. Complex adaptive systems theory usually underlies the implementation of such methods.



ONLINE/OFFLINE

T-Labs are primarily designed for in-person interaction, yet online spaces can be accommodated.

LEARN MORE

Charli-Joseph, L., J. Siqueiros-Garcia, H. Eakin, D. Manuel-Navarrete, and R. Shelton. 2018. *Promoting agency for social-ecological transformation: a transformation-lab in the Xochimilco social-ecological system*. *Ecology and Society* 23(2):46.

Pereira, L., Olsson, P., Charli-Joseph, L., Zgambo, O., Oxley, N., Van Zwanenberg, P., Siqueiros-García, J.M. and Ely, A., 2021. *Transdisciplinary methods and T-Labs as transformative spaces for innovation in social-ecological systems*. In *Transformative Pathways to Sustainability* (pp. 53-64). Routledge.

*This infosheet refers to the engagement method developed in particular in the PATHWAYS network and not the business(es) or conference of the same name.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE: PATHWAYS

The PATHWAYS network has developed and used T-Labs in their work with civil society and policy makers in Argentina, China, Kenya, India, Mexico and the UK to address socio-ecological challenges.