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Awareness-led Social lab on Circular Economy in Switzerland: Exploring Serendipity

Darya Gerasimenko, Erica Mazerolle-Castillo

Draft Chapter from 19.02.2020

Key words: partnerships, social innovation, social lab, circular economy, serendipity, value co-creation, awareness-led innovation, unity field

Abstract

Global challenges are signalling the urgency of an unprecedented quality of co-creation, putting SDG 17 on Partnerships in the centre of solutions. Awareness-led approaches are coming to the surface of sustainability work, pushing us beyond our comfort zone to address the real problems rather than treating the symptoms. Social spaces for trust, deep listening, compassion, non-judgement, and unconditional love are becoming key. This chapter presents our healing journey within the awareness-led social lab “*Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab*” in the Swiss Romandie. We offer our insights on the values set and self-work needed to experience a deeper understanding of such social spaces and their potential in the context of diversity and increasing complexity. We share serendipitous learnings from our co-hosting team’s perspective on the orchestration of such space; mindfulness and its role in it; as well as on the co-creation of prototype solutions. The voices of our cohort participants on their valuable serendipities complement this understanding. We conclude with opening a scientific discussion for further exploration of such healing ‘unity in diversity’ spaces.

Prof. Darya Gerasimenko, Dr. rer. publ. HSG

Professor of Sustainability Science at Samara National Research University (SSAU), Russia
Lecturer in Economics at St Gallen University (HSG), Switzerland
Co-facilitator, co-creator, *Science and Mindfulness Lead* (as a Senior Researcher at École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL)) of “*Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab 2018*” in canton Vaud (Switzerland)
Emails: darya.gerasimenko@unisg.ch, darya.gerasimenko@ssau.ru

Erica Mazerolle-Castillo, M.A.

Social Innovation & Communities of Practice Lead at Impact Hub Lausanne/Geneva (IHL/IHG), Switzerland
Co-facilitator, co-creator of “*Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab 2018*”
Email: erica.mazerolle@impacthub.ch

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1. Introduction

The complexity of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the limited time to reach them signifies a completely new meaning, quality and depth of collective intention, partnerships and co-creation. At the time of writing this chapter, we are a decade away from the deadline to achieve the global SDGs 2030 [1]. An opinion piece in *Nature* co-authored by the former executive secretary of the UNFCCC and a member of the IPCC amongst others indicate that avoiding catastrophic and irreversible damage on human prosperity requires radical collaboration across unusual partners by 2020 [2]. Sustainable Development Goal 17 on partnerships has become key for successful work on all other SDGs [3]. The topic of how to create meaningful and effective partnerships and what is needed for them is indeed gaining momentum around the world [4].

Our action-research within the awareness-led social lab “Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab” presented in this chapter focuses on the human capabilities necessary for effective co-creation valuing diversity in unity. What does it take to co-create a space of trust for bridging people, siloed organisations and institutions to achieve meaningful dialogues and a deep understanding of each other’s worldview?

The Circular Economy approach relates to improvements in all Sustainable Development Goals, and particularly but not exclusively SGD12. Several literature reviews have demonstrated the variety and complexity of the meaning of circular economy (Reike et. al. [5], Korhonen et. al. [6] and others). The circular economy concept belongs to the so called “essentially contested” concepts, implying that there is an agreement on the goals of this concept and disagreement on how to define it [6].

One of the recent definitions presents circular economy through the necessity to “*develop systems approaches to the cooperation of producers, consumers and other societal actors in sustainable development work*” [6]. This approach explicitly emphasizes the role of cooperation and partnerships in circular economy transformation. However, that precise aspect of partnerships for circularity has not been well studied yet, and more research is needed along those lines [7]. The weakness of social and institutional dimensions in the narrative around circular economy was well emphasized in Moreau et. al [8].

Circular economy requires societal innovation as much as it requires technological innovation. Current experiences on circular economy transformation demonstrates that such degree of complexity and interdependency requires high levels of trust as well as appreciation of the value of co-creation among stakeholders. A new quality and even forms of governance for such transitions, e.g. social/living labs, are gaining momentum in different parts of the world. Multi-stakeholder approaches are central to social innovation spaces, where, following the Quadruple Helix Model of Open Innovation 2.0., representatives from all parts of society co-create solutions together: academia, business, government and civil society [9]. Those labs are becoming safe spaces for experimentation and learning for sustainable solutions across all types of diversities: age, sector, gender, nationality, education, etc. Given the challenge of achieving co-creation in such diverse groups, the following question arises: how to orchestrate social fields for the co-creation of true circular economy solutions? With this question in mind, we started our social lab journey in the canton Vaud in Switzerland.

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New governance values are entering the stage of sustainable transformation: agile governance [10], collective leadership by Petra Kuenkel [11], sociocracy 3.0. by Bockelbrink et. al. [12], and many others. They allow us to experience new patterns and depths of human interactions for a better world. Katrin Muff [13] recently offered a great overview of the participatory methodologies for reaching the SDGs. Moreover, the Theory U process developed by Otto Scharmer [14, 15] as well as Art of Hosting [16], Dragon Dreaming [17] and other schools and techniques have opened new opportunities for ecosystem work, offering frameworks and methodologies to practically foster meaningful connections and partnerships for sustainable transformation.

The evolution of the social/living lab concepts over time has recently entered a new stage: awareness-led social labs, where awareness-based practices such as Social Presencing Theatre (SPT), mindfulness, meditation, unity consciousness calibration work and others have been applied along the traditional multi-stakeholder tools such as design thinking, frame innovation, etc. Recent research from the Max Planck Institute in Berlin led by Prof. Singer within the *ReSource* Project in the field of social neuroscience demonstrates the value of mindfulness and meditation for the co-creation of “caring” economy and cooperation in general [18, 19, 20]. Such depth in the quality of social lab spaces opens up new opportunities to explore and understand how to use partnerships (SDG 17) as a means to reach other SDGs, as well as what potential awareness-based approaches contain for sustainable transformation in general.

Awareness-led social labs in the context of the urgent need for change are growing steadily around the world. However, the literature on these experiences is rather scarce (Oxford Lab [21]). Our lab is one of the first of such explorations and more work needs to be done on how and why those spaces work, and how to use them effectively.

The aim of this chapter is to share the experience and learnings from our awareness-led social lab “Beyond waste: Circular Resources Lab 2018”. We share our insights on the values set and self-work needed to experience healing interconnectedness in the context of increasing complexity and diversity through the magic of *serendipity*. This chapter contributes to the growing literature on this subject and aims to improve the quality of such spaces by discussing their challenges and opportunities. This social lab is a prototype itself; however, it is a step forward as it offers new insights and opens a scientific discussion for further exploration.

The chapter is organised as follows: the first section provides a brief description of our social lab experience in Switzerland, its process and main milestones. The second section presents the serendipitous learnings from our co-hosting team. The third section offers the cohort participants’ views on this first prototype. The final section concludes with a discussion and open questions for further research.

2. Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab 2018¹

“Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab 2018” has been a co-creation process of the following actors: Chair of Green Economy and Resources Governance at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), Impact Hub Lausanne (IHL), Impact Hub Geneva (IHG),

¹ More information is available at www.circularresourceslab.ch.

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collaboratio helvetica (cohe) and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Switzerland, with the financial support of Migros Engagement Foundation.

Twenty-five participants were thoroughly selected through an online application process calling for the co-creation of circular economy solutions for the canton Vaud in Switzerland, utilising the Theory U process and other awareness-based tools to allow *serendipity*² to emerge for our collective learning and healing. Four prototype solutions for circular economy were formed within this journey from September to December 2018, in addition to the social lab prototype as such.

Both authors of this paper have been the primary responsible co-creators for this lab, representing the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) by Dr. Gerasimenko (Science & Mindfulness Lead) and Impact Hub Lausanne/Geneva by Mazerolle-Castillo (Catalyst).

This social lab is the first prototype of an awareness-led social space within the circular economy domain to our knowledge, marking the beginning of such exploration. It is envisaged that the learnings and open questions from this first round will contribute to the growing knowledge on social innovation for sustainable transformation (e.g. circular economy).

This experiment took form in a unique setting. First, both the steering committee and the co-design & co-facilitation team came together in a cross-sector collaboration without any structure nor hierarchy, a challenge in itself given the different organisational cultures and norms. Therefore, cross-sector learning on the orchestration of such a trust-based space already represents a significant value added on its own, even before the start of the social lab itself. Second, we were free to work with any topic within the CE domain (SDG 12) and any methodologies and ideas as a pure experiment to explore the potential of the social lab format. Third, we were not bound by any particular “expected results”, hence the value added has been a social lab prototype in itself. Most important was the exploration of such spaces and their potential for SDG solutions in general, using the topic of circular economy as a focus.

Our Social Lab Journey

Phase 0: Learning about synchronicities around social lab initiatives on circular economy in the canton of Vaud (September 2017 – March 2018)

Synchronicities happen to be a real sign of “readiness in the air” to act on certain issues in a certain way. Parallel to each other, two groups of people started working on very new narratives within the Swiss Romandie context: social labs, awareness-led innovation (i.e. Theory U) and circular economy transformation in one form or another. Both groups had been working under already existing living/social lab frameworks inside their institutions, both in Lausanne in the canton Vaud. They were the Chair on Green Economy and Resource Governance (GERG) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) and Impact Hub Lausanne (IHL). Other institutions interested in this experimentation were collaboratio helvetica (cohe) and SDSN Switzerland.

² Serendipity in this context refers to favourable outcomes/events that emerge without having been anticipated or expected and as a result (in our case) of collective intelligence activation.

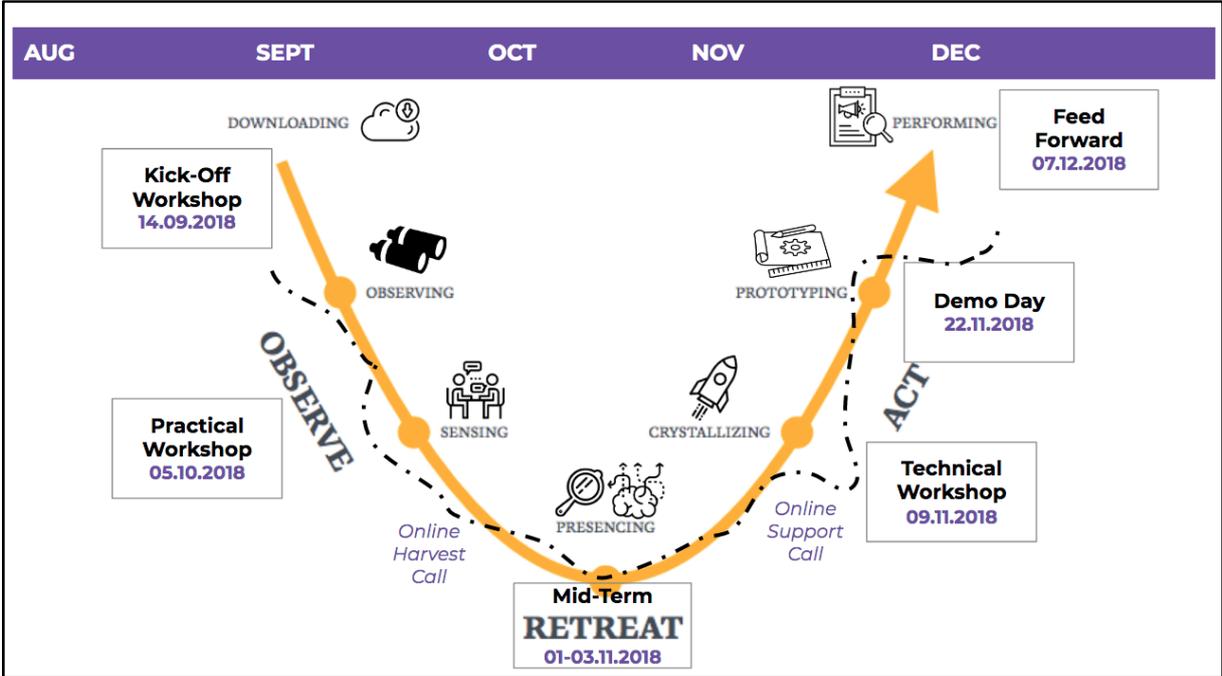
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Since it was a new initiative both for Switzerland and the world, there was no best practice to refer to in terms of how to deliver such a complex and innovative project. The nature of such project is a safe co-creation space with common values and readiness to go beyond the comfort zone and grow in all domains: intellectually, socially, spiritually, etc. At the joint meeting in April 2018 we decided to start with ourselves and create the first partnership of this journey between IHL/IHG and GERG-EPFL. This is how the titles of two separate projects became one: “Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab”.

Phase 1: Co-hosting team co-creation & preparation (April – August 2018)

A website was set up to provide visibility about the process, the methodologies and the overall journey. More than 50 applications were received for 25 places available. Upon selection, co-creators (as we called participants) were asked to share statements answering the following questions: *What experience of yours do you bring to this lab [mind]? What excites you about this lab [heart]? What do you expect to happen as a result of this lab [will]?* This method of sharing motivation and intention virtually was a conscious choice to spark the co-creators’ co-initiation process. Co-initiation, the first out of five of the U-Process’ stages, consists of bringing together a group of stakeholders around a shared purpose and creating a safe container in which collaboration can flourish, leading to the co-creation of solutions. The co-initiation phase began with the information session, continued virtually with the application and selection process, and culminated in the Kick-Off Workshop in September 2018.

Figure 1. Beyond Waste: Circular Resources Lab Journey



Source: authors’ own depiction

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Phase 2: The social lab process (September – December 2018)

The U-Process for leading personal, organisational and societal change comprises five main stages: co-initiating, co-sensing, presencing, co-creating (incl. crystallising and prototyping) and co-evolving [14]. Within the social lab process, one full-day workshop was offered for each of these six stages, including a 2.5-day workshop with overnight stay for the presencing phase at the bottom of the U. The frequency of workshops was every three weeks at the beginning, and picked up speed in the second half of the process, taking place every one to two weeks. The time periods in between workshops were also considered as important parts of each stage, thus co-creators were expected to actively engage with each other and work on their challenges using the methods and practices learned in person. We set up a *Slack* channel (an instant messaging platform) to enable ongoing communication and teamwork amongst the co-creators, including the co-hosting team.

Kick-Off Workshop

The Kick-Off Workshop was the culmination point of the *co-initiating* phase, the process through which a diverse group of people gather around a shared intention and begin to form as a social body. It started with welcoming words describing the context and purpose of the lab, followed by a mindfulness session focused on the feeling of “*gratitude*”. It was then structured in two main parts. The morning icebreaker used storytelling to create a group dynamic and map the ecosystem, nourishing the relational aspect and bringing collective awareness to the social field. The afternoon was focused on content, specifically aimed at ascertaining the status quo surrounding waste and circular economy in the local region (Canton of Vaud) and pertaining to the three pre-selected fields: plastics, water and electronic waste. Experts in the fields of plastics and eco-design, water management and electronic waste were invited to provide an overview of the state of affairs in their respective fields. One session also provided input on the circular economy concept, as well as on the Theory U process and the social lab approach. The last session of that day used an indigenous methodology (Dragon Dreaming circle) to weave individual intentions into a collective vision, co-creating the lab’s Manifesto (collective intention map).

Practical Workshop

The Practical Workshop marked the beginning of the *co-sensing* phase, which is dedicated to exploring the system from different angles in view of understanding it through a wide range of perspectives, particularly those of voices at the margins. The morning mindfulness session focused on sensing the feeling of *deep listening*. Overall, the workshop’s aims were twofold: first, to equip participants with tools and methods that awaken perceptive abilities beyond observing with the analytical mind, such as deep listening, sensing with the heart (empathy) and experiencing generative states of conversation (co-creation). Second, for co-creators to identify which specific topic to address within the priorities we identified for our region and form teams around them.

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The tools and methods shared and practiced included the Iceberg Model, Levels of Listening, Dialogue Walks and Case Clinics. Those methodologies prepared participants for *sensing*, the ability to integrate information in a more purposeful way, to inform our next course of action through intuition rather than only analysis. This was extremely new and unusual, pushing many co-creators out of their comfort zone. Yet it contributed to developing genuine relationships, a sense of community, and the discovery of a novel way of addressing complexity. As one co-creator commented at the end of the workshop:

“I think it’s very positive to implement activities focused on human development in order to address very real problems. In an academic or scientific context, we value rational-individual thought above emotional and collective aspects. The Beyond Waste exercise is very audacious and at the same time organic. You are introducing humanity into a problem-solving context. Many of us engineers are completely new to this and you are helping us to learn how to walk in this new environment. It’s like a complete rewiring of our brains.”

In the three-week period between the Practical Workshop and the Mid-term Retreat, co-creators were tasked with going on Learning Journeys and conducting Stakeholder Interviews, a cornerstone sensing method, to collect insights from actors in their field of enquiry.

Midterm Retreat

The Midterm Retreat corresponded to the *presencing* phase of the U-Process, where one connects to the source and accesses their most authentic self, letting go of expectations and old convictions to understand their purpose in the broader context. We chose a retreat centre outside the city. The workshop spread over 2.5 days to allow for spacious reflection and inspired action.

The first morning’s mindfulness session focused on *reconnection to self*. The following sessions aimed to explore a new mindset and its potential: unity consciousness rather than separation consciousness. Through a sensory walk in the forest, collective art sessions and guided journaling, we experienced bridging the three major divides that are at the root of the problems facing humanity today: the divide between self and nature, self and others and self and self [22, 14].

Up until this stage, the group had not reached full clarity on which teams would be formed and what specific topics would be handled. Through a sharing circle, we set our intentions for shifting from reflection to action mode; new topics and teams were born. We then proceeded with 3D Modelling, a technique to map the system in order to better apprehend it, and identify a direction of change to start prototyping. To conclude, we all shared what we were ready to let go of, and what we were committing to or letting come.

Technical Workshop

The Technical Workshop marked the beginning of the *co-creation* phase, where we used prototyping to translate an idea or a concept into experimentation and action. It is about being

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inclusive and responsive, operating with heightened energy levels and tuning to future possibilities, functioning like a vehicle for the new that wants to emerge. We began with a mindfulness session focusing on *interconnectedness*, followed by an expert's input on prototype design. Working through the steps of the Design Thinking process, we learned to embrace the prototyping mindset of iterative design. After an intensive design session using Empathy Maps and User Journeys amongst other tools, we had a whole group exchange on the progresses of prototype solutions, bringing to the surface the synergies and collaboration opportunities present within the cohort.

Demo Day

The Demo Day aimed to present the prototype solutions for the first time to a public audience, in view of receiving feedback to continue iterating. Throughout the process, co-creators had reframed the problem they were tackling, defined who they were designing a solution for, and deconstructed the solution into manageable pieces for more focused action and development.

The day started with a mindfulness session focusing on *true human empowerment*. Then, a pitching training was offered by one of our experienced co-creators, and teams reworked their presentations before the evening event. It was important to constantly remind each other that we were still in the co-creation phase of the U, where generating feedback is the main objective (rather than being judged). As expressed by members of the cohort:

“I enjoy this open and non-judgemental space we created here.”

“Important is not the objective but the whole journey that we went through together.”

“Something next to prototypes emerged, that is difficult to explain, but it is here.”

Feed Forward

The Feed Forward Workshop corresponded to the sixth and the last phase of the U-Process, *co-evolving*. While the active part of the journey ended, in reality it signified the beginning of a new reality where actors actively cooperate with each other to develop solutions to common challenges. We thus invited various stakeholders from the Swiss public administration (federal and cantonal) as well as politicians to include the government dimension in our social lab prototype, as it had been missing up to that point. Before our 20 guests arrived for the public dialogue, we started the day with a meditation on *absolute love frequency*.

The second part of the day was dedicated to a conversation with external guests at the intersection of public space and personal responsibility. Overall, the dialogue sought a collective reflection on awareness-led innovation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Three distinctive threads emerged from the discourse:

First, the gap between how the current system works and what we actually want to achieve.

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Second, **a consensus about the need for transformative change, and spaces that support it** as a prerequisite for achieving the SDGs. There seemed to be “an experience gap” between the acknowledgement of what is needed, and the actual knowledge of how to achieve it. Overcoming the fear of failure and changing the way success is measured were emphasized as drivers of greater experimentation.

Third, **a realization that systemic transformation implies a paradigm change**, which itself departs from individual self-responsibility; achieving systems change requires openness, willingness and courage to interact at a deeper level to tackle the root causes of existing problems.

The day ended with a reflection amongst the cohort members about ecosystem awareness as an alternative philosophical framework to political economy.

Phase 3: Reflection & Research (January – September 2019)

How to study this type of social innovation space is itself an open question. What has become clear is that the classical evaluation frameworks based on quantitative outputs, predefined expectations and parameters are no longer appropriate. They do not show the entire spectrum of possibilities and serendipity elements that are present in such spaces. Those impacts are non-linear and vary along the time spectrum. Moreover, such social spaces of this quality of presence should not be judged until we learn more about what they truly are, what they are capable of bringing as well as how to navigate their benefits.

The quality of such spaces depends on many factors: facilitation quality and experience, level of engagement of all actors, their background and “readiness” to experience a “change”, as well as the willingness to actually follow that change potential. From our experience, great quality social spaces work as an opportunity for change to happen which depends on each participant’s personal decision on how and to what extent they will allow it to unfold: at which pace, when, in which area, with whom & how. What also became evident is that high levels of trust, compassion and non-judgement are capable of supporting everyone in the direction of their own needs and aspirations. Hence, the benefits of the experience are very individual and can vary greatly from person to person depending on their own departure point, intention and current life question they are facing. This became clear through our usage of various harvesting methodologies during the process.

We collected information mainly through entry/exit questionnaires, post-its and handwritten notes, personal blog entries published by some co-creators on our website shortly after the lab, as well as interviews conducted half a year later that relied on the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology [23, 24]. From our experience, even the MSC methodology does not allow us to access the full value and range of the experience and its benefits. A special interview protocol should be designed to study those spaces (some suggestions that will come in the next publications and the continuation of this work). As we have just started working with such spaces in various contexts (topics, countries, etc.), we are convinced that it will show more of

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its facets through more practice and reflections. The next section shares the main insights and learnings collected thus far.

3. The serendipitous learnings from the experience of our co-hosting team

An important learning in this entire process has been how to allow serendipity to emerge by removing expectations, silos and limiting beliefs. First, we have created a space where the transformative journey of the cohort starts with ourselves, our deep trust and unconditional support amongst us as a co-hosting and organising team.

There were two circles originally involved into the orchestration of this social lab process: a co-hosting team of facilitators consisting of Dr. Darya Gerasimenko (EPFL), Erica Mazerolle-Castillo (IHL), Cynthia Kracmer (IHG), Isabelle Ruckli (cohe) as well as the steering committee represented by Michael Bergöö (SDSN Switzerland), Dr. Darya Gerasimenko (EPFL), Prof. Bruno Oberle (EPFL), Felix Stähli (IHG/IHL), Nora Wilhelm (cohe). Both circles changed during the process. With a blank canvas to start, observing the emergence of this orchestration and learning from it throughout was very revealing. We committed to make this unique experiment work and trusted it addressing and healing our own egos along this process.

Academic literature on the Theory U process within the lifelong education domain focuses on what participants learn through their U journey [25]. We would like to add here that the facilitation team and steering committee also went through a transformative learning U process and more, and further scientific exploration of the governance/orchestration aspect is essential to learn its potential. In what follows, we offer learnings pertaining to three domains where serendipity unfolded from the perspective of the co-hosting team: governance of the space; mindfulness and its role in the process; as well as emergence of prototype solutions.

3.1. Governance (Orchestration) based on respect and trust

Before the partnership between Impact Hub (business and civil society) and GERG-EPFL (academia) took shape, each institution was envisaging to realise their social labs independently. The collaboration between Impact Hub, GERG-EPFL and then cohe and SDSN Switzerland, contributed to an interesting positioning which attracted a high diversity and quality of participants. More specifically, social innovation facilitation and entrepreneurship expertise (provided by Impact Hub and cohe) and rigorous science and mindfulness inputs (provided by GERG-EPFL) as well as the global network of SDSN enabled the unique design and delivery of the innovative social lab format.

Originally, the co-hosting and facilitation (core) team consisted of four people: the catalyst and community of practice lead, the social innovation design lead, the documentation and storytelling lead, and the science and mindfulness lead. However, no dedicated role was fully or officially responsible for the governance of the lab, i.e. managing partnership agreements and relationships between partners and stakeholders, as well as fundraising. A few times during the process, extra meetings were held to address related issues, draining energies away from

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the main focus of delivering a high-quality social lab process, as we still operated in an old framework of “management needs”. We thought that governance/management was needed to ensure smooth operations, and not having a dedicated person for that role posed a challenge. However, the pure experimentation and exploration nature of the lab allowed us to prototype a new quality of cross-sector interaction where no structural governance was established or even needed per se. It opened new horizons to explore further how to work across sectors from a place of trust, unconditional support and love, openness and without any protocols and “obligations”. Work is distributed and done according to “I can handle it well”, not because “I have to do it” or someone told me to deal with it. This opened a whole new perspective of what unity field navigation or orchestration actually is as opposed to management.

Our partner and one of our sponsors - SDSN Switzerland - through its powerful international network offered us an opportunity to apply, and as a result of the selection process, to present at the United Nations SDSN Global Solutions Forum 2019 at Columbia University, where we shared our insights on awareness-led innovation and received valuable feedback [26].

Another serendipitous element was a new discovery within our core facilitation team. Krista Kaufmann (IHL) was supposed to help us with logistics during our workshops, and to our great surprise, she became our graphic facilitator when from the very first workshop she voluntarily started drawing the social field’s evolution. This is how by the Midterm Retreat we had unexpectedly become a group of five facilitators. This awareness-led social lab space allowed Krista to discover and develop her amazing graphic recording talent. The graphic recording book of our lab is also available online.

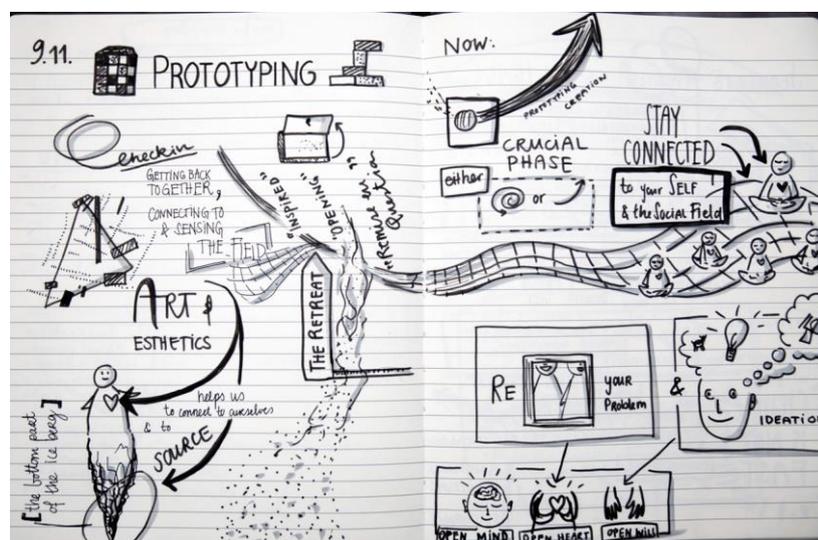


Illustration by Krista Kaufmann

3.2. Mindfulness & Meditation

The topic of mindfulness in relation to innovation is gaining momentum in scientific research. In September 2018 the Copenhagen Business School held “Mind, Meditation and Innovation Conference”, exploring mindfulness as a facilitation tool for innovation activity around the world [27]. The special issue on Mindfulness in the academic journal *Current Opinion in Psychology* in August 2019 edited by Amit Bernstein et. al. [28] spawned a wide discussion in

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academia. In total, 60 academic papers were presented to explore mindfulness in the broad spectrum of its applications: from health benefits to education, business innovation and even politics. In November 2019, neuroscientists of the Brain Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences together with the Moscow State University opened the “Meditation and Altered Consciousness Research Centre” in India, working together with several Buddhist monasteries and in cooperation with the Dalai Lama [29]. Just to name a few more trends adding to the impressive work of Max Plank Institute and Prof. Singer described in the introduction [18, 19, 20].

While each full-day workshop along the U process was unique in its design, common elements recurred. They always began with a mindfulness session led by Dr. Gerasimenko (Science & Mindfulness Lead) to enhance self-awareness, clarity and to tune into the unity consciousness field through particular themes along the U process: Kick-Off Workshop – “*gratitude*”, Practical Workshop – “*deep listening*”, Midterm retreat – “*reconnection to self*”, Technical Workshop – “*sense of interconnectedness*”, Demo Day- “*true human empowerment*”, Feed Forward – “*absolute love*”. While only 1/3 of participants had had prior experience with meditation, an overwhelming majority of the participants³ found it useful and valuable, however, in their own unique way given their background and prior mindset.

Lara (48, entrepreneur): "The mindfulness sessions were very useful, it's something that we learn for life. ... So, these little “pockets of breathing”, these moments of meditation are very good."

Annabel (27, governance and social innovation officer): “I found also quite interesting the mix between rational and emotional that it was really expressed without any shame. Now it is getting less surprising, but this mindfulness sessions... people might think kind of “what is going on here? Are we here to work?” However, in the age of too much information in the 21st century, artificial intelligence, IT, etc. it was important to reconnect to what makes us human and unique, me or you, everyone... Reconnecting to what is fragile and unique in humans. For decades it was science, math, to find solutions...but what is actually **the key is our emotions, our empathy, is our ability to connect and relate to each other**”.

Richard (40, chemical engineer): “I think what was really important for me was the type of methodology that was used – deep listening exercises, the meditation portion that was really helping me to concentrate on what would come next. I have a tendency in my daily life to really jump from one topic to the other and kind of treat things superficially because you need to move on, to do task one, task two, task three... and then you move to task four, you don’t have time to come back to it. And in this sense, having those **breaks of meditation**, those moments when we were sharing quite freely and openly, it was really a very appreciative change in the way you can interact with other individuals.

Mike (52, engineer): “I knew before this experience that I was not going to be someone for meditation, I tried a lot of techniques of meditations with experts such as mindfulness, hypnosis, etc. and I have never really succeeded in finding sense, or the feeling that I was succeeding in those exercises. So, what was interesting in the change in me, was more in discovering different ways of meeting people, talking to people and creating relationships within a group of people from different backgrounds and age pretty well. And feeling comfortable sharing things that you would not share in a normal work relationship”.

As for the co-hosting team (five people), we actively utilised mindfulness & meditation practices for our own healing. Our facilitation team’s unity field calibration allowed us to co-create a healthy and attractive space for us first and therefore for the cohort participants. An

³ For anonymity, the names of the interviewees in this section have been changed; however, the age, sex and background are real.

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important element of our overarching U process was a 1-day mini U process for the facilitation team, which we did on the 1st of October 2018, after our Kick-Off Workshop.

3.3. Serendipity in the evolution of prototypes

An initial exploration of the circular economy field in the Canton Vaud was conducted through a dozen stakeholder interviews to gather inputs from government, business, academia and civil society. Based on those interviews we selected three focal topics for this social lab journey: water, plastics and electronic waste. However, the clustering exercise in the Practical Workshop resulted in the emergence of new priority topics better reflecting the current needs: consumer behaviour, circular business models, and electronics.

During the midterm retreat however, by tuning into the field on what is truly needed in order to foster circular economy transformation in Switzerland, topics naturally evolved away from new goods or technologies towards services and education, placing focus on human development and evolution through knowledge and networks.

Brief descriptions of the prototypes that were finally born during the third workshop along the U and onwards are as follows (more information is available on the webpage):

3.4. Circular Human Incubator

Integrating practical trainings on circular economy into the social welfare and unemployment insurance system in order to harness underutilized human potential and build human and intellectual capacity within an often-marginalized segment of the population.

3.5. Atelier des Futurs

A dedicated community space nestled within a commercial area, which promotes non-transactional consumption and post-capitalist ways of living, thinking and interacting.

3.6. Circular Academy for Construction (CA4C)

An educational programme on circular economy opportunities in the construction sector targeting SMEs.

3.7. Magic Mushrooms: Exploring the potential of the spent mushroom substrate

Valorization of (usually wasted) mushroom substrate for soil regeneration and a service that develops customized organic fertilizing solutions for farmers.

As one participant recalls:

“We are not doing the thing that we were discussing in the Lab, the proposal initially discussed doesn’t work from a business point of view, but the good thing is that the interaction with the people in BWL gave me a different perspective, that I’m evaluating further. In simple words, what happened is that instead of offering a product, I decided to move towards services. This is another thing I’ve learned around what CE is, that businesses could move more towards this area of services, creating higher value by finding different ways to do things without the need to produce more stuff. This is something that I learned. ...So, I switched the way to do things and I hope we continue in the right path with that.”

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Those were the first prototypes that were born out of this open space by a group of strangers coming together on the social lab journey (as a prototype) with two of them having a “case giver” among our participants. However, for further iterations, additional support mechanisms (financial, people, network, etc.) should be included in the entire design of such long-term spaces for the future. The information about those prototypes is online for all interested people who could be interested to develop them further.

4. Selection of the serendipitous insights from the lab cohort members

Here we give space to our co-creators’ voices without any major analysis from our side, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions.

4.1. Excerpts from the blog entries written within one month after the end of the awareness-led social lab (names in this section are real).

Katalin (49, artist, designer): “The journey felt like the organic process of *forming a community*. The structure proved to be flexible to allow for adjustments, but rigorous enough to hold us in place and achieve the goals that were set at the beginning. It allowed us to see how we could work together, and how we can support each other in the future. In the end, I felt a strong conviction that we started something important, and that we all will be part of the unavoidable change, working together; and also felt extremely privileged to have met such a group of exceptional people.”

Alexis (26, programme manager): “As it turns out, letting yourself go and trusting others to lead you through a new experience can allow you to connect to the issue – and yourself – in ways you had not expected.... In fact, looking back, it was this *emotional connection to nature and to each other that made this Lab so successful*: and is the key ingredient that is missing from so many other incubators looking to broach the same issues. It is this very disconnect from the heart, the mind, and community, that has led us into the linear economic model – towards the ego and away from the eco..., if I could go back and tell myself one thing before I started, or to any others who are looking to get involved in Social Labs with the Impact Hub or others: the unconventional techniques may be exactly what you need to get out of the headspace of stale and tried ideas and into a different sphere of creativity and connection. You just might surprise yourself!”

Sascha (57, engineer, entrepreneur, educator): “Before we started, it was far from obvious that 25 so different people, co-creators and organisers (this distinction became less and less important throughout the process), with different backgrounds, lives, experiences and extremely divergent ways of thinking would find anything in common at all, let alone build such a community and produce something coherent and potentially very useful. A bit of patience, a general interest in the topic of Circular Economy (CE), a good deal of openness and curiosity and broadly aligned values was the seeds that grew into a real community based on deep respect and friendship, as well as beginnings of promising projects.... In my personal opinion, *openness and value alignment* were the two key ingredients.”

Jérôme (41, chemical engineer): “On the first workshop days, instead of starting with the classical “We have a problem, let’s get a solution”, I am asked to practice meditation, share emotions and feelings as they come, co-create a manifesto, practice deep listening, presencing theatre.... My first thoughts were: “Where are the solutions in all that?”, “That’s not an engineer approach to finding solutions...”, “When are we starting the real work”? Needless to say - way out of my zone of comfort, but I decided to stay on board.... And that was only to get even further away from my usual way of functioning: *putting an engineer in a centre of mindfulness for two*

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days was in my head like throwing a cat in cold water. But the group was so open, the intentions so genuinely positive and the overall goal (make Circular Economy progress) so appealing that I felt I should be part of this adventure. As interactions continued, the answers to my initial questions started to appear: the “real work” started as soon as we met and got to know each other, to build ***a real circle of trust such I had never thought you could do with “strangers” in such a short time.*** It all went by small steps, exercises, exchanges, discussions, writings, listening... But through all that and thanks again to the openness of each and every participant, things aligned more and more clearly in my head and in my heart.”

4.2. Testimonies from interviews⁴ conducted in July 2019 (half a year after the lab).

For the readers we provisionally grouped those testimonies into four major categories: personal development and new skills; community building and ecosystem network; deeper understanding of CE and the awareness-based practices; and taking action on CE and climate.

4.2.1. Personal development & new skills

Samuel (37, microbiologist, entrepreneur): “The main change is to realise that you are not the carrier of some truth, everything is relative and yeah, you can learn much more putting down your own position and listening. **Listening is an active process** that I’m applying now... You can learn a lot just by observing and listening in an active way. And you catalyse more things doing this effort, yeah. And in practice, well for my project, my start-up project, actually it was positively influenced because I had the opportunity to test several ideas with people I would not have met in other conditions, so it was a good place to do that, and yeah, you can catalyse your hypothesis and test it faster. Super cool for me.”

Paul (28, microengineer): “The most significant change for me was to discover and learn tools to co-construct a different world. I was able to experience co-creation and feel the power of **collective intelligence**. I rediscovered the importance of human relationships and experienced activities that enable rich and sincere interactions. It seems as though the solutions to create the world we hope for are not futuristic and technical, but are simply found within us and revealed in the **magic of being together.**”

Martina (34, doctoral researcher): “What struck me the most is that by doing things differently and by collaborating differently and having that space of the lab, we had different results. It was really different. First, it was a bit frustrating, I had the feeling we felt a frustration not to have the expected outputs, also from people outside of the lab, there was nothing quantitative and yeah I had the feeling it was not good enough or not what they wanted or what I thought would be a good output. But actually, given the process and the problems at stake, **I had the feeling the output was the right one, I realised actually that it is by doing things differently that you create different solutions.**”

Richard (41, chemical engineer): “Things I have changed as a result of this lab... the way I am interacting with people, trying to listen much more deeply. Seeing what they feel and not only what they say. I used to respond quite quickly to what people say or even tried to anticipate what people say or even to complete their sentence. I felt if you refrain from that if you wait a few seconds after they are finished, people say things differently and they speak it more truly or at least you understand them in a different way. This is one. And I also changed some things connected to circular economy, how people were functioning, what am I buying, where I am going, why I am making those choices,

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when I am planning some trips for holidays, when I am planning to eat. Just connection to self. I was really working in the way that my day is always filled with things, and now I tend to take a bit of time to just sit, think, maybe I realised that I don't need so much activities, that many things, and I go with what I have. I changed the basic way I am reasoning in general..."

4.2.2. Community building and network ecosystem

Elena (49, artist, designer): "I think for me the biggest change was finding a community, or connecting with different people and some of these relationships really proved long-lasting, for example with Zita, with whom we are still a little bit working together and became really good friends. ... I think also to a certain extent I can imagine that my mandate with cohe is partially thanks to the fact that I was working with Tanya there so we began to know each other, so when she was hired, she wanted to work with me. So really on a personal relationship level this was the biggest impact.... created my own little sub-ecosystem ... because you know I'm not Swiss, it kind of opened my eyes to all the things that are happening around."

Caroline (38, environmental engineer): "My perception of groups really changed by knowing that we can breathe life into a group, influence each other and **walk as one single being**. In autumn, we see birds migrating to warm climates, they move together through the sky. Doing exercises all together was a powerful experience for me, it opened something, gave me hope. Injecting this kind of energy into a group cannot be done alone, there needs to be many people, especially as we did not know each other. Knowing that this can be done was significant for me because I didn't know it was possible and it gives me hope."

Michelle (32, fiduciary accountant): "Also the fact that **I met people I would have never met in my everyday life**. Because when I go to seminars or when I do activities, it's always the same kind of people. Whereas there it was people who are not at all in my universe...Really at the personal level it brought me a lot, even if the project with my team will not continue, but for me at the personal level it brought me a lot..."

Christophe (33, industrial engineer): "Having some time to think and discuss with others without having any expectation or any framework it was positive, it was just *that I was expecting something that I shouldn't have expected before*... I'm thankful for what you did ...we felt very unique, for me I was taking it seriously..."

4.2.3. Deeper understanding of circular economy and the awareness-based practices

Annabel (27, governance and social innovation officer): "This experience brought me new understanding how we can build a circular economy. It is not only about industries; it is going deeper to trigger profound deep understanding of civilisation and of society and societal change. Going beyond green growth rhetoric and even how high tech can save us. Try to **find more coherence in everything and go beyond fancy trendy words**. So, yes, I met a lot of people in the lab that were also aware how the words can close down the thinking and how it is beneficial growing in our thoughts... I really became much more vegan than before; I am only buying now second hand. I am doing now my morning yoga (10 - 30 min). I was doing it before but not in this consistency. I am happy for this positive lifestyle. I really needed it to deal with all new things in my life. The Lab helped me to understand it also meeting more people in my life. It really thought me how important it is to meet people."

Alexandre (57, sustainability professor): "When we have a very complex societal problem, it's important to work on it together. Not just to interview stakeholders, identify and interview

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stakeholders, understand their position and then try to design some solution that will take them as much as possible into account, but actually involving people in the process of devising a solution. .. That's the awareness that arose in me as a result of the process. .. I work in teaching, in research but especially trying to figure out how to best help the societal transition or transformation to sustainability. The whole process we went through showed me that we shouldn't try to design a solution but we should **design a process** that will replicate this collective solution process, this collective understanding and solution seeking process as wide as possible. In other words, some variation of what we did in the lab is exactly what we need to solve the problem of the societal condition of sustainability....the most significant thing that I'm aware of is less linked to the content that we discussed than it is to the process we went through”.

Tanya (33, community manager): “The most significant change for me was a **deeper understanding of the process**. In the sense that I really appreciate the Theory U, the process that they describe, and it gave me a much deeper understanding from where to act and from where to not act. Because usually we jump from the same patterns and the same underlying assumptions... And I feel that when I'm going through my own processes, it gave me more of, a better sense of where I am... It basically gave me a map of orientation and I feel **I'm much more patient, I feel that I'm at the moment** at the bottom of the U, I don't have this impatience like “I should do something now, I need to act” It's not so strong there anymore, I feel that I have more trust in the process, like, “aaah, now I am here and now it's time to stick with it and wait, not to do anything with it.”

Yannick (31, student, entrepreneur): “I realised throughout the process that I needed to be much more radical in my view of the change that the society needs. That means that **CE is just one element inside of a bigger picture where there needs to be a larger shift**. I was thinking also that it was very interesting to hear some of the professionals that you had invited. ...That was a shock for me during the lab that most of the people who are professionals of this field, including university professors, will not be capable of making the change that we need. Actually, many people from civil society have more of the tools to do that.... As we know that we need more emotional intelligence and spiritual awakening for the future, I am not saying the social lab provides all of this, but I think it's an easy entry into all of these questions. ...So, I can only recommend and encourage you to continue doing that great work.”

4.2.4. Taking action on circular economy and climate

Jessica (31, senior business grower): “The lab helped us to understand each other at the personal and human level in the context of a lack of trust in the project, which was at an experimental phase in my company. Some people in the team did not want to do a proof of concept, some information was being withheld, etc...In the end, **this lab contributed to establish circular economy as a topic in one of the biggest banks of Switzerland and to build trust between a Dutch start-up and various Swiss circular economy actors.**”

Yannick (31, student, entrepreneur): “It was pretty timely how things happened when our Social Lab ended, that is when the climate strikes started in Switzerland, and I actually became very involved in that movement, since the beginning of 2019. That was a really good follow-up ... Citizens need to take things into their own hands because politicians are not really representing their interests anymore, or at least they're not representing as fast as needed, the shift in consciousness that is happening. And so yeah, I got very involved in that because it fitted perfectly what I thought was needed to make a change happen.”

Elena (49, artist, designer): “my daughter completely became a vegetarian and a climate change fighter, and her boyfriend too, I interviewed her twice, so somehow those interviews work, just by

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asking these questions it clicked in her head”. (*Comment from the authors: Elena shares here her experience on her Learning Journey’s Stakeholder Interviews within the social lab process*).

4.3. Suggestions for the further iterations of social labs/spaces

Numerous reflection rounds during and after the lab, both within the team and with the cohort yielded some suggestions for further social labs. It was a first prototype of orchestrating such complexity on many levels: a cross-sector partnership among the organising team without a structured governance; the vertical and horizontal diversity within the cohort team; the complexity of the circular economy topic in general; the novelty of the mindfulness approach; etc. We have never claimed it was perfect – it was just the first prototype!

Four people left the lab process in different times for different reasons, however, only 1 person out of 25 fully lost contact with us (and he is still alive). We find it a very good rate for such an innovative experimental approach. From various feedback rounds we suggest here several directions to improve the long-term quality of such learning social spaces if resources allow.

First, a case or challenge owner should offer the problem to deal with and be responsible to advise on prototype solutions that are being developed, as is the case in already existing formats such as hackathons, innovation camps, etc. In this case, such awareness-based methodologies and practices discussed above would support a deeper dive into the reconnection to self, others and nature. However, allowing an open space for the emergence of specific topics can bring interesting outcomes as they surface new insights on what the problems actually are and what needs to be addressed and healed within a certain field (e.g. circular city, education, etc.). This path should also continue its evolution to learn more about collective intelligence, unity consciousness calibration, collective healing and others.

Second, the timing of a long-term lab’s active phase could be extended to six to eight months, with longer time periods in between modules to enable extensive Learning Journeys and reflections (if we talk about a full-scale social lab process). In our case the descending side of the U process was lengthier and the ascending side shorter (due to some circumstances), which was challenging for us all.

Third, to include more peer mutual learning and idea generation practices as well as knowledge sharing among participants. A greater focus should be placed on the importance of Learning Journeys and the time they require to be practiced in a certain quality.

Fourth, more support needs to be provided in the area of coaching, networking and space holding in-between workshops if resources allow.

Fifth, as one participant has shared about mindfulness, being able “to accompany the different types of personalities and people along this journey in a way that makes it, for those who are not used to it, not seem too weird” is important. Therefore, exploring different communication styles regarding awareness-led innovation, taking into account diverse backgrounds and mindsets is key. More experience and research are needed to address this.

Shorter and more condensed experiences of such social spaces are also important to explore given the limited time and resource availability in many countries to tackle problems. Thus,

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two- or three-day social spaces are also an interesting format for unity consciousness calibration work. More exploration and experimentation need to be done on these shorter formats.

Prof. Dr. Gerasimenko has been exploring several such prototypes at Samara University in Russia in 2016 - 2019: awareness-led social space for one week as a master course on social innovation for circular economy [30], one-and-a-half day social space during the cross-sector conference on circular economy in Samara [31] as well as a three-day executive course using an awareness-led social space [32] to explore mindfulness approach to unfold the potential of the innovation ecosystem in the Samara region with diverse cross-sector representatives sponsored by the regional Ministry of Economic Development [33].

It has become evident that such spaces are sources of never-ending learning for every person that is a part of it. They always generate new depths and dimensions to explore. Through collective learning as a process (and as a form of partnership for sustainability), everyone gets from this space what she/he needs in order to progress in the personal domain and therefore support sustainable transformation in the workplace, city, etc. The benefits of such spaces manifest in a non-linear way at different times and on many different levels and areas of life. We are still in the exploration of the spectrum of possibilities that those spaces can bring us to advance on SDGs.

5. Discussion

One of our cohort members said the following during our process: *“We are not here to change the world but more to start the process of internal change.”* This process of internal change has many angles and manifestations in the outside world. Eventually, what we observed is that every person got different takeaways from this process in terms of how his/her ‘change’ has manifested: from new experiences of how co-creation works to new jobs, new projects and even new habits, values and mindsets.

We cannot judge our capacity to explore space (cosmos) and its value for us before we know how to build proper equipment, space shuttles and rockets to support such exploration. The same is true for these social spaces. We should not judge the efficiency of such “quality of presence” spaces before we know and understand how to co-create proper conditions necessary for this work. Our first steps show a great potential for further practice and research.

The challenges we are facing globally as well as the current SDGs to achieve within 10 years force us to go out of our comfort zone exploring very new ways of interaction, co-creation as well as the depth and quality of partnerships to co-create true solutions based on trust, deep listening, compassion, non-judgement, and unconditional love. Instead of a conclusion for this chapter, we are suggesting more exploration and open various discussion domains for further reflections and research.

5.1 “Rethinking” Success. New patterns, new neuro-connections in the brain, changed behaviour as well as upgraded mindsets are needed to achieve the SDGs. All that takes time to learn and truly master. It requires patience and a new definition of what the success of such spaces means. Moving away from judgement and predetermined outcomes towards an open mind, where serendipity can emerge to show what the real problems are, as well as what is truly needed to solve them.

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5.2 New Evaluation Frameworks. Given the non-linear effects of such an awareness-led social space, it becomes clear that we need a new evaluation framework for these experiences, opening a whole new research trend for exploration of the potential of such spaces for SDG work. We therefore recommend having a workshop with funding agencies to explore further possibilities of how to evaluate such spaces given their unusual multidimensional non-linear impact. What would be an appropriate approach given the explorative stage of practice and sensing within such spaces on one side, and necessity for evaluation on the other?

5.3 Ecosystem Facilitation. The role of ecosystem facilitation in holding such spaces is an extremely important research topic. Theory U and other methodologies are a great setting or framework to offer a supportive transformative process, however, what really makes it a transformative space is the *quality of presence*. Therefore, the ecosystem facilitation (of several people) becomes key to a “quality experience” for the entire cohort. The healing process inside the co-hosting team is fundamental for the success of the entire process through trust and congruence. It is also important to add that although the experience of facilitators as space holders is very important, in the end this space is co-created together with everyone involved. This ecosystem space-holding capacity needs to be further explored.

5.4 Ecosystem self-orchestration. Another interesting dimension is the orchestration of such complex cross-sector, awareness-led social spaces for innovation. Of course, we could use a business-as-usual approach trying to “manage” this process. However, we could take the opportunity for self-orchestration to emerge on its own given the common intention of the organisers, the will to make it work in trust, respect and non-judgement (that is not easy for everyone but possible). This would enable us to see what such spaces could bring us as learnings on how to truly master ourselves first of all. In this case, we would focus on unity consciousness calibration, common values, commitments and trust rather than on management and expectations. As this space has demonstrated, such approach has an amazing potential for further exploration.

5.5 Awareness-led social space formats. We are convinced that longer awareness-led social labs are not the only forms of awareness-led innovation experience. Thus, we have already experimented with shorter term labs of two or three days as well as one week to explore the full range of awareness-led formats. The results and the participants’ feedback so far is very promising to continue exploration of the mindfulness dimension for awareness-led innovation activities in various settings for a variety of topics.

We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who has supported us on this journey as well as to the ones who did not, as we have learned a lot from that on what non-judgement is, how to improve ourselves and how to build bridges. It has been a long and large journey in many ways. We are especially grateful to our cohort participants, co-hosting team members, steering committee members, to all our partners and sponsors, as well as to our ambassadors and volunteers. We are looking forward to continuing this exciting exploration. We are inviting everyone interested to co-create together and to better understand those healing ‘unity in diversity’ spaces.

Acknowledgments (Financial support): We are grateful to the funds for this project provided by SDSN Switzerland, by Migros Engagement Foundation (for the work of Impact Hub Lausanne-Geneva) as well as by the Chair of Green Economy and Resource Governance Prof. Dr. Bruno Oberle (at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL)).

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