



# **Collaborative Policy Laboratories for Solving Complex Community Problems**

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## **Abstract**

Complex community problems rarely fit within the administrative boundaries of a single government department or the expertise of one professional group. Challenges such as neighborhood deprivation, housing insecurity, climate vulnerability, youth disengagement, unequal access to health services, environmental deterioration, mobility exclusion, and local economic transition are characterized by interdependence, contested priorities, incomplete information, and changing conditions. Conventional policy processes may struggle with these problems because they often separate policy formulation from lived experience, experimentation from implementation, and public institutions from community knowledge. Collaborative policy laboratories offer an alternative governance mechanism by creating structured spaces in which public officials, residents, civil-society organizations, researchers, service professionals, and other stakeholders jointly define problems, develop policy options, test small-scale interventions, and generate learning before wider implementation.

Public-sector innovation research identifies experimentation, networks, partnerships, feedback mechanisms, and adaptive organizational arrangements as important capacities for responding to uncertainty, while policy-lab scholarship emphasizes collaborative and citizen-centered approaches to policy design. This paper develops a conceptual-methodological framework for community-oriented collaborative policy laboratories through a structured synthesis of collaborative-governance scholarship, public-sector innovation research, and contemporary policy-lab practice. The proposed model organizes laboratory activity into six interconnected processes: participatory problem framing, stakeholder deliberation, collaborative design, prototyping, testing and learning, and policy transfer or scaling.

Two analytical matrices clarify the institutional conditions and lifecycle responsibilities required for effective laboratories, while an illustrative activity-distribution graph demonstrates how a balanced laboratory could allocate attention across its principal functions. The analysis argues that policy laboratories should not be treated as temporary brainstorming workshops. Their value depends on representative participation, facilitation, decision authority, transparent evidence use, capacity for experimentation, feedback loops, and institutional pathways through which successful learning can influence mainstream policy. The paper concludes that collaborative policy laboratories can strengthen community problem solving when experimentation is connected to democratic legitimacy, organizational learning, and sustained implementation capacity.



**Keywords:** collaborative policy laboratories; community problem solving; collaborative governance; policy innovation; co-creation; public-sector innovation; experimental governance; participatory policymaking

## 1. Introduction

Public institutions increasingly confront community problems whose causes and consequences extend across multiple policy sectors. Housing instability can intersect with employment, transport, health, education, neighborhood safety, and social protection; climate risks can interact with infrastructure, livelihoods, land use, environmental justice, and emergency management. Such conditions resemble what public-policy scholarship describes as complex or wicked problems because stakeholders may disagree not only about preferred solutions but also about how the underlying problem should be defined. Collaborative approaches have consequently become prominent because they allow governments to combine administrative authority with knowledge and resources distributed across public agencies, communities, civil society, academia, and other sectors. Ansell and Gash's influential analysis of 137 collaborative-governance cases showed that successful collaboration is shaped by institutional design, leadership, trust, stakeholder incentives, and opportunities for incremental gains that reinforce commitment to the collective process.

Policy laboratories have emerged within this broader shift toward experimental and collaborative governance. Tönurist, Kattel, and Lember's international study identified innovation laboratories as organizational responses to external complexity, technological change, and pressures for new forms of public-sector problem solving. McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis subsequently examined the rise of public-sector innovation laboratories as experiments in design-oriented policymaking, while McGann, Wells, and Blomkamp showed that such laboratories can contribute to strategic policy capacity through citizen-centered and collaborative approaches to public problem solving. Unlike conventional consultation exercises, a mature policy laboratory is expected to create an iterative environment in which alternative interpretations of a problem can be examined, potential interventions can be prototyped, and assumptions can be challenged before policies are institutionalized at scale.

Contemporary examples demonstrate that laboratory approaches are no longer confined to isolated experimental units. OECD's 2025 case study of Korea's Open Policy Lab describes a structured mechanism that brings together subject specialists, frontline practitioners, and other stakeholders for collaborative policy development, particularly during early policy design under uncertainty and complexity. At the international-development level, UNDP reports that its Accelerator Labs network currently includes 89 laboratories covering 113 countries, while its experimentation work has been designed around exploring local solutions, learning from practical trials, and adapting interventions in response to evidence. These examples illustrate the growing institutional interest in combining experimentation with distributed knowledge.

Nevertheless, the existence of a laboratory does not automatically generate innovative or democratic policy. A lab may invite citizens yet provide them little influence over decisions; it may produce attractive prototypes without authority or resources for implementation; or it may remain organizationally isolated from the departments expected to adopt its findings. Timeus and Gascó's study of innovation capacity in Barcelona found that laboratories can contribute to idea generation and



knowledge management, but also warned that organizational isolation can limit their wider impact and long-term sustainability. OECD similarly notes that experimental activities can remain confined within innovation units or one-off projects, creating difficulties when successful practices must be transferred into routine government operations.

The present study therefore conceptualizes a collaborative policy laboratory not as a physical room or temporary workshop but as an institutionalized process for collective problem definition, experimentation, evidence generation, reflection, and policy adaptation. The paper focuses specifically on complex community problems, where lived experience and local knowledge are essential but must be integrated with professional expertise, administrative responsibility, and systematic evidence. Its central proposition is that effective policy laboratories require three capacities simultaneously: collaborative legitimacy, through representative and meaningful participation; experimental capability, through disciplined testing and learning; and institutional connectivity, through mechanisms that translate laboratory findings into mainstream policy decisions. The framework developed below seeks to integrate these capacities within a practical local-governance model.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

### **2.1 To Examine the Role of Collaborative Policy Laboratories in Complex Problem Solving**

The first objective is to analyze why policy laboratories may be particularly appropriate for problems characterized by uncertainty, interdependence, dispersed knowledge, and competing values. Rather than assuming that government possesses complete information before intervention begins, the laboratory model treats policymaking as an iterative process in which understanding develops through engagement, experimentation, and feedback. OECD's work on adaptive public-sector innovation similarly emphasizes testing, partnerships, decentralized capacity, experimentation spaces, and evaluation mechanisms as enabling conditions for government adaptation.

### **2.2 To Identify Institutional Conditions for Effective Collaboration**

The second objective is to determine the organizational and governance conditions that distinguish substantive collaboration from symbolic participation. Particular attention is given to stakeholder representation, facilitation, trust, power asymmetry, knowledge integration, decision authority, ethical experimentation, and accountability. This focus is consistent with collaborative-governance research showing that outcomes depend heavily on the conditions under which participants enter and sustain collaboration rather than merely on the existence of a participatory forum.

### **2.3 To Develop a Transferable Policy-Laboratory Framework**

The third objective is to translate theoretical insights into a practical lifecycle model that local governments and community partnerships could adapt to different policy areas. The framework connects problem framing with co-design, prototyping, evaluation, and institutional transfer so that learning generated within a laboratory does not terminate when an individual experiment ends.



### 3. Review of Literature

#### 3.1 Collaborative Governance and Community Knowledge

Collaborative governance provides an important theoretical foundation for policy laboratories because it recognizes that many public purposes require decision processes extending beyond traditional organizational boundaries. Ansell and Gash describe collaborative governance as a structured process in which public agencies and non-state stakeholders participate collectively in consensus-oriented public decision-making. Their comparative analysis emphasizes the importance of starting conditions, facilitative leadership, institutional design, trust-building, commitment, and shared understanding.

Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh broaden this perspective through an integrative collaborative-governance framework that connects system context, collaborative dynamics, collective capacity, joint actions, impacts, and subsequent adaptation. Their model is particularly valuable for community policy laboratories because it treats collaboration as a dynamic governance regime rather than a single meeting or consultation activity. Collaborative capacity develops through principled engagement, shared motivation, leadership, knowledge, resources, and procedural arrangements.

Applied to community problem solving, these insights suggest that residents should not participate solely as sources of information. A collaborative laboratory should enable community actors to influence how problems are framed, which outcomes matter, what interventions are considered feasible, and what unintended consequences require attention. Professional expertise remains important, but expertise must interact with lived knowledge rather than replacing it.

This distinction is fundamental because complex community problems frequently contain information that is difficult to represent in administrative datasets. Service-access barriers, social stigma, informal support networks, neighborhood trust, cultural practices, mobility constraints, or local perceptions of safety may not be adequately captured through conventional indicators. Policy laboratories can serve as boundary spaces in which different forms of knowledge become available for collective interpretation.

#### 3.2 Policy Laboratories as Experimental Governance Institutions

Public-sector innovation laboratories are generally associated with experimentation, design methods, cross-disciplinary working, prototyping, and new ways of engaging users or citizens. Tönurist, Kattel, and Lember's international analysis showed that laboratories emerged partly as responses to complexity and technological challenges. McGann, Blomkamp, and Lewis further situated the rise of public-sector innovation laboratories within the growing adoption of design thinking and experimental approaches to policy.

McGann, Wells, and Blomkamp examined innovation laboratories specifically through the lens of co-production in public problem solving and found that their significance lies partly in their capacity to develop more collaborative and citizen-centered approaches to policy design. This orientation differentiates laboratories from conventional expert committees. Rather than completing analysis first and consulting communities afterward, co-production seeks to involve affected actors during problem definition and solution development.

Contemporary institutional practice reinforces this interpretation. Korea's Open Policy Lab integrates subject-matter expertise, frontline knowledge, structured deliberation, and participatory policy

formulation. OECD characterizes it as both a platform and a methodology for co-creation during early-stage policy development. UNDP's Accelerator Labs similarly position experimentation as a mechanism for dealing with complex development challenges by testing approaches in real settings, learning from both success and failure, and adapting subsequent action.

The experimental component of policy laboratories should, however, be understood carefully. Policy experiments involving communities differ from technical product testing because public interventions may distribute benefits, inconvenience, risks, or opportunities unevenly. Ethical experimentation therefore requires proportionality, transparency, safeguards for vulnerable groups, clear responsibility, and procedures for stopping or modifying interventions when adverse effects emerge.

### 3.3 Research Gap: Connecting Experimentation to Institutional Change

A recurring weakness in the literature concerns the transition from laboratory activity to institutional transformation. A policy laboratory may successfully generate ideas yet have limited influence if mainstream departments lack incentives, authority, funding, or capacity to implement them. OECD notes that one challenge of adaptive innovation is that experimentation can remain confined to laboratories, digital units, or temporary initiatives instead of becoming part of core organizational practice.

Timeus and Gascó provide empirical support for this concern. Their Barcelona study found that innovation laboratories can strengthen idea generation, knowledge management, and innovation-oriented human-resource capacity, but isolation from the parent organization may limit broader institutional impact. The problem is therefore not simply whether laboratories innovate, but whether the organization learns from them.

A second gap concerns evaluation. Policy laboratories frequently emphasize process characteristics such as collaboration, creativity, workshops, prototypes, or participation. These indicators provide useful information about activity but do not necessarily establish whether community problems improved. A laboratory could be highly participatory yet produce interventions that are impractical, financially unsustainable, or ineffective.

The present study addresses these gaps by combining collaborative legitimacy, experimental discipline, and institutional transfer within one analytical model. It proposes that policy laboratories should be evaluated not only by the number of ideas generated but by the quality of problem framing, diversity and influence of participants, evidence generated through testing, adaptability of interventions, and successful incorporation of learning into normal public decision-making.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This study uses a structured conceptual-methodological design rather than reporting a completed field experiment or community survey. The approach was selected because the research objective is to integrate established collaborative-governance theory, policy-laboratory scholarship, and contemporary institutional practice into an operational framework for community problem solving.

The analytical corpus included peer-reviewed studies on collaborative governance, public-sector innovation laboratories, policy design, experimentation, and municipal innovation, together with primary institutional material from the OECD and United Nations Development Programme. Sources were

considered relevant when they addressed at least one of four core themes: collaborative governance, policy experimentation, community or citizen co-production, or institutional innovation capacity.

## 4.2 Search, Screening, and Analytical Procedure

The evidence search was conducted up to July 12, 2021 using combinations of the terms collaborative policy lab, policy innovation laboratory, public-sector innovation lab, community problem solving, collaborative governance, co-production, policy experimentation, adaptive public-sector innovation, and citizen-centered policy design.

Academic sources were prioritized where publication metadata and methodological information could be verified through scholarly publishers or institutional repositories. Institutional sources were restricted primarily to recognized public-governance and development organizations. Materials concerned only with corporate innovation laboratories, commercial product development, or purely technological laboratories without substantive public-policy relevance were excluded from the core synthesis.

The included evidence was coded across six recurring functional categories: problem framing, stakeholder deliberation, co-design, prototyping, testing and learning, and scaling or transfer. A second layer of coding examined enabling conditions such as leadership, trust, representation, facilitation, knowledge diversity, institutional authority, resources, evaluation, and organizational connectivity.

## 4.3 Proposed Analytical Criteria

**Table 1: Analytical Criteria for Evaluating Collaborative Policy Laboratories**

| Evaluation Dimension  | Core Question                                                              | Expected Evidence                                                |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Problem Definition    | Was the community problem jointly diagnosed rather than predetermined?     | Multiple perspectives, causal mapping, lived-experience evidence |
| Representation        | Are materially affected groups meaningfully represented?                   | Transparent participant selection and inclusion mechanisms       |
| Deliberative Quality  | Can participants question assumptions and consider alternatives?           | Facilitated dialogue, documented disagreements, reasoned choices |
| Knowledge Integration | Are administrative, technical, research, and community knowledge combined? | Multi-source evidence and contextual interpretation              |
| Experimentation       | Are proposed interventions tested before large-scale                       | Prototypes, pilots, predefined learning                          |

| Evaluation Dimension  | Core Question                                                                | Expected Evidence                                              |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
|                       | commitment?                                                                  | questions                                                      |
| Learning Capacity     | Are successes, failures, and unintended effects documented?                  | Evaluation records and iterative modifications                 |
| Decision Connectivity | Can laboratory findings influence authorized policy decisions?               | Sponsorship, decision pathways, budget or implementation links |
| Accountability        | Is responsibility for experimentation and subsequent decisions identifiable? | Governance rules, documentation, review arrangements           |
| Scalability           | Is there an explicit process for transferring successful learning?           | Adoption plan, replication criteria, institutional ownership   |

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 The Collaborative Policy-Laboratory Lifecycle

The synthesis indicates that successful laboratories need a disciplined sequence while retaining sufficient flexibility for iteration. The process begins with problem framing rather than solution selection. Stakeholders should jointly examine how the issue is experienced, which systems contribute to it, what outcomes matter, and where uncertainty remains.

The second phase involves structured deliberation. Here, stakeholders compare evidence, lived experience, institutional constraints, and competing values. Facilitation becomes particularly important when participants enter with unequal organizational authority, resources, technical knowledge, or confidence. Collaborative-governance theory suggests that trust and shared understanding develop progressively rather than simply appearing because stakeholders have been brought into the same forum. Co-design then translates shared understanding into possible interventions. Instead of immediately choosing a single comprehensive solution, the laboratory develops multiple hypotheses and identifies which assumptions can be tested. Prototyping allows these ideas to be examined at relatively limited scale, while testing generates evidence about feasibility, user experience, distributional effects, administrative requirements, and unintended consequences.

Learning should subsequently determine whether an intervention is modified, discontinued, expanded, or combined with other approaches. This iterative orientation closely resembles OECD's account of adaptive innovation, which emphasizes testing, experimentation, feedback, partnerships, and organizational capacity to respond to changing circumstances.

## 5.2 Proposed Governance and Implementation Matrix

**Table 2: Collaborative Policy-Laboratory Governance Matrix**

| Laboratory Stage      | Principal Risk                                                    | Recommended Practice                                             | Primary Responsibility                |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Problem Framing       | Government defines the problem too narrowly                       | Joint diagnosis with affected communities and frontline actors   | Lab leadership and community partners |
| Stakeholder Selection | Powerful or organized groups dominate participation               | Transparent representation and inclusion criteria                | Convening authority                   |
| Deliberation          | Conflict or technical language suppresses community voice         | Independent facilitation and accessible evidence                 | Facilitator                           |
| Co-Design             | Preferred solution is predetermined                               | Generate and compare multiple intervention options               | Multistakeholder lab team             |
| Prototyping           | Communities bear uncontrolled experimental risk                   | Small-scale, reversible, ethically reviewed intervention         | Responsible public authority          |
| Testing               | Success measured only by administrative convenience               | Define community, equity, service, and implementation indicators | Evaluation team                       |
| Reflection            | Unsuccessful experiments are hidden                               | Document failures and explain adaptations                        | Lab governance board                  |
| Policy Transfer       | Prototype remains isolated inside the lab                         | Establish departmental ownership and decision pathway early      | Senior policy sponsor                 |
| Scaling               | Successful local intervention is copied without contextual review | Assess transferability and local conditions                      | Implementing agency                   |

The matrix demonstrates that the laboratory should be linked to formal decision structures from its beginning. A policy sponsor capable of authorizing implementation, an operational department capable

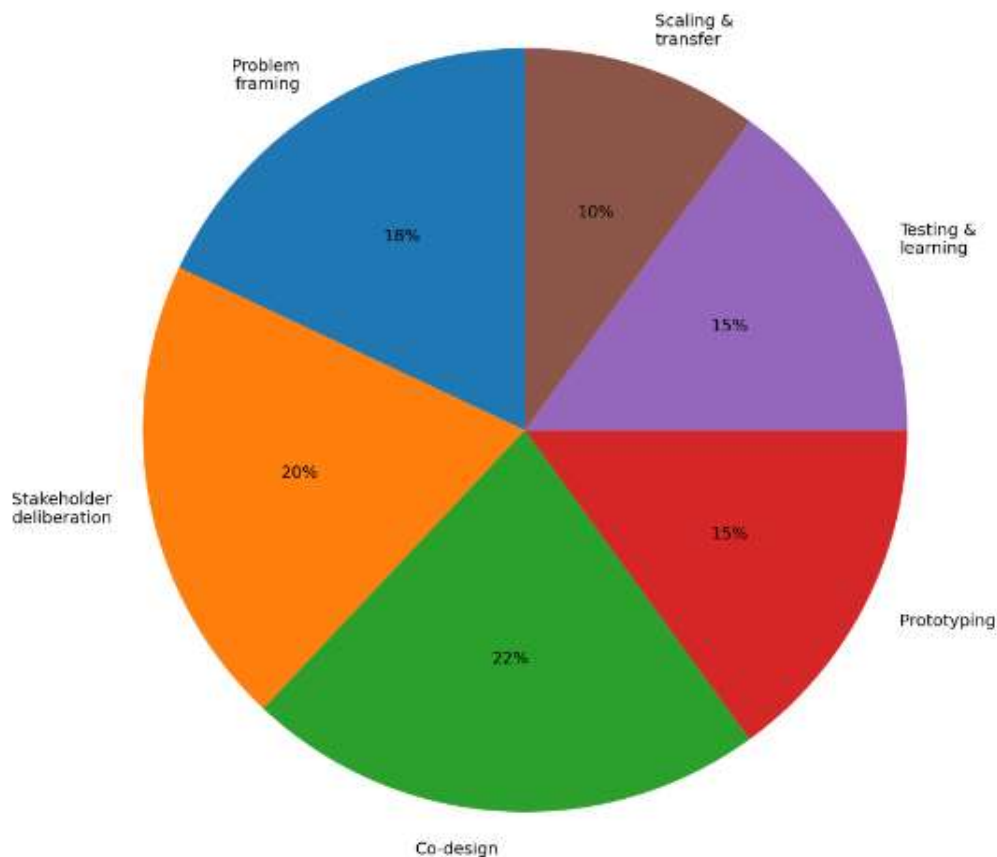
of sustaining the intervention, and an evaluation mechanism capable of producing credible evidence should therefore be identified before extensive experimentation begins.

This arrangement does not mean that senior officials should control the laboratory's conclusions. Rather, institutional connection ensures that participants do not invest time in a process whose results have no plausible pathway into public policy.

### 5.3 Illustrative Distribution of Policy-Laboratory Activity

The following graph presents an illustrative conceptual allocation, not empirical data collected from an existing policy laboratory. The distribution demonstrates how a laboratory might divide its analytical attention across the six major stages identified in this study.

**Graph 1: Illustrative Distribution of Collaborative Policy-Lab Activity**



**Note:** The percentages are simulated for conceptual demonstration. They should not be interpreted as measured averages or recommended universal budget proportions.

The model allocates the greatest illustrative share to co-design (22%), followed by stakeholder deliberation (20%) and problem framing (18%). This distribution reflects the argument that complex problems require substantial attention before full-scale implementation. Prototyping and testing each receive 15%, while scaling and transfer account for 10% of the laboratory's direct activity.



The comparatively smaller scaling share should not be interpreted as suggesting that implementation is unimportant. Instead, scaling usually moves responsibility from the temporary collaborative laboratory toward mainstream administrative organizations. OECD's analysis indicates that the critical challenge is precisely this transition from contained experimentation toward wider organizational practice.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Policy Laboratories Should Produce Learning, Not Merely Ideas

The most important distinction emerging from the analysis is between an innovation workshop and a policy laboratory. Workshops can generate valuable creativity but may terminate when participants leave the room. A genuine policy laboratory should connect deliberation to observable experiments and use those experiments to revise both proposed solutions and the underlying understanding of the problem.

This distinction is particularly important for complex community issues because initial problem definitions are frequently incomplete. An employment intervention, for example, may reveal that transportation rather than skills is a binding constraint; a public-health initiative may discover that distrust rather than information availability explains low service uptake. Experimentation therefore serves an epistemic function: it helps policymakers discover how a system actually behaves.

UNDP's contemporary experimentation approach similarly emphasizes real-world testing, learning from both failures and successes, and adapting interventions rather than treating policy design as a one-directional sequence. OECD's adaptive-innovation framework likewise treats experimentation and feedback as central capabilities for governments operating under uncertainty.

Failure within such laboratories should consequently be differentiated from negligence. A carefully bounded experiment that disproves an assumption can create valuable public knowledge. However, experimentation becomes ethically problematic when communities bear avoidable risks, when objectives are unclear, when failure is concealed, or when decision-makers continue ineffective interventions despite contrary evidence.

### 6.2 Collaboration Requires Attention to Power and Representation

A second implication is that collaboration cannot be evaluated through participation numbers alone. Community groups differ in organizational resources, political access, technical vocabulary, time availability, and ability to participate in formal meetings. A laboratory that invites everyone but structures discussion around professional policy language may formally satisfy participation requirements while reproducing existing inequalities.

Collaborative-governance theory places considerable emphasis on starting conditions, power differences, leadership, trust, and procedural design. Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh similarly identify shared motivation and capacity for joint action as core components of functioning collaborative regimes. Policy laboratories therefore require active measures to prevent expert knowledge from automatically outranking lived experience.

This does not imply that all claims should be treated as equally supported by evidence. The objective is to create a process in which different forms of knowledge can be examined transparently. Community members can identify contextual realities and unintended consequences, researchers can



assess evidence quality, service professionals can identify operational constraints, and public officials can clarify legal and financial limitations.

Professional facilitation is particularly valuable when interests conflict. Complex community problems are not always resolved through consensus. A legitimate laboratory may conclude with continuing disagreement. The relevant governance standard should therefore be whether competing positions were heard, evidence was considered fairly, reasons for decisions were documented, and affected participants understood how their contributions influenced the final recommendation.

### 6.3 From Experimental Islands to Institutional Capacity

The third implication concerns sustainability. Laboratories may create an experimental space precisely because conventional administrative systems are constrained by hierarchical approval processes, fragmented budgets, procurement rules, short political cycles, and risk aversion. The characteristics that protect experimentation, however, may also isolate laboratories from ordinary government.

Timeus and Gasco's research demonstrates this paradox: innovation laboratories can enhance organizational capacities while simultaneously being too detached from their parent institutions to create system-wide change. OECD reaches a similar conclusion in observing that experimental practices often remain within specialist units rather than becoming embedded in core public-sector routines.

The solution is not to eliminate laboratory autonomy. A laboratory needs sufficient independence to question prevailing assumptions and test unconventional ideas. Instead, it requires bridging mechanisms between experimentation and administration. These may include senior sponsorship, departmental staff participation, predefined adoption criteria, budget pathways, shared evaluation protocols, and formal processes through which tested solutions are considered by authorized decision bodies.

Korea's Open Policy Lab offers a contemporary example of an institutionalized participatory approach in which collective intelligence, frontline experience, specialist knowledge, and structured deliberation are connected to policy agenda-setting and formulation. The broader lesson is that policy laboratories are most valuable when they influence how an institution learns, not merely when they produce isolated innovative projects.

## 7. Conclusion

Complex community problems challenge conventional public administration because they cross organizational boundaries, contain uncertainty, involve competing values, and depend on knowledge distributed among numerous actors. Collaborative policy laboratories offer a promising governance response by providing structured environments for governments, communities, researchers, service professionals, civil-society organizations, and other stakeholders to investigate problems collectively and test potential responses before wider implementation.

This paper has developed a conceptual-methodological framework organized around six functions: participatory problem framing, stakeholder deliberation, collaborative design, prototyping, testing and learning, and scaling or institutional transfer. The analysis demonstrates that none of these functions is independently sufficient. Participation without experimentation can produce consultation without evidence; experimentation without participation can generate technically efficient but socially



inappropriate interventions; and successful prototypes without institutional transfer can produce innovation that never changes mainstream policy.

The central contribution of the proposed framework is therefore the integration of collaborative legitimacy, experimental learning, and institutional connectivity. Effective laboratories should provide meaningful community influence while maintaining clear decision responsibilities. They should permit experimentation while protecting affected populations from avoidable risk. They should encourage learning from unsuccessful trials while maintaining standards of transparency and accountability. Most importantly, they should establish pathways through which validated lessons can move beyond the laboratory.

Policy laboratories should consequently not be evaluated primarily by the number of workshops conducted, participants engaged, ideas generated, or prototypes displayed. Stronger evaluation should determine whether the laboratory improved collective understanding of the problem, integrated diverse knowledge, generated credible evidence, changed policy assumptions, produced implementable interventions, strengthened relationships among stakeholders, and influenced authorized public decisions.

Future empirical research should apply the proposed framework to operating laboratories in municipalities and community-development settings. Comparative studies could examine policy labs addressing housing, public health, climate adaptation, mobility, social inclusion, youth services, environmental management, or local economic development. Longitudinal evaluation would be particularly valuable for determining whether laboratory-generated interventions survive political transitions, organizational changes, and shifts in public financing.

Collaborative policy laboratories ultimately offer more than an innovation technique. Properly institutionalized, they represent a different relationship between public authority and community knowledge: one in which policymakers do not assume that complex problems can be fully understood in advance, communities are not confined to reacting to finished proposals, and policy decisions are treated as opportunities for disciplined collective learning. Their long-term contribution will therefore depend less on maintaining laboratories as specialized organizational units and more on embedding the capacities for collaboration, experimentation, reflection, and adaptation throughout the institutions responsible for public problem solving.

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