



EAPC blog

Living labs: present and future – Tatiana Fernández

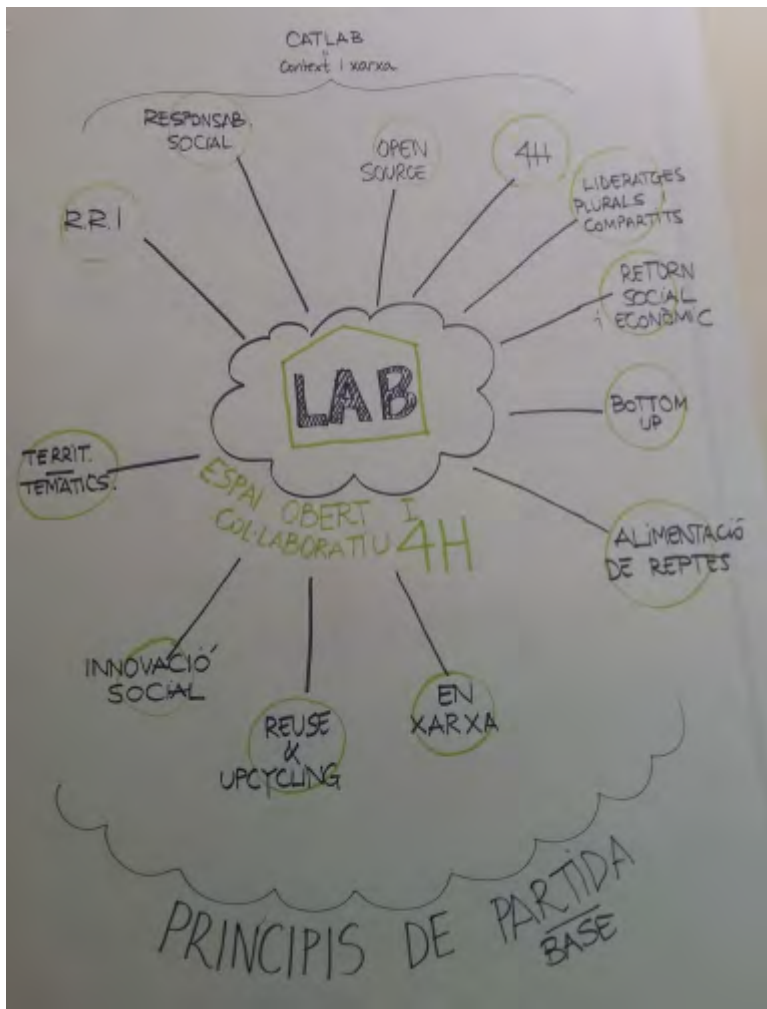
🕒 25 de juny de 2019

In Catalonia and throughout Europe, governments are called on to provide new and more effective responses to major societal challenges (population aging, climate change, pollution, mobility, etc.), and must do so, urgently, within a context of limited public resources. Their failure to create effective responses to these challenges and to societal needs has distanced European citizens from the public administration.

In this context, over the last few years we have seen the emergence of spaces for participation and open innovation in which citizens and different entities work together and organise themselves to generate effective responses to societal challenges and needs, often without the participation—or with little participation—on the part of the public administration.

The conference on «**Living labs, innovació oberta i universitats**» («Living Labs, Open Innovation and Universities»), organised by the University of Barcelona and the European Network of Living Labs (EnoLL), served to demonstrate that there are many players in Catalonia that understand the importance of establishing such spaces for open innovation. Living labs, citizen or social laboratories and digital manufacture facilities, are collaborative spaces for meeting and experimentation that enable stakeholders to tackle complex societal challenges by designing, developing and testing innovative solutions.

Living labs are often established by enterprising citizens and by universities, and are financed by the public administrations, mainly local authorities. However, the Government of Catalonia also supports such initiatives by providing funding through RIS3CAT calls for proposals. At the first call for PECT local



Source: First Catlabs Innovation Camp

territorial projects, funding was awarded to fourteen lab projects. Universities have also financed living labs through OTRI calls for knowledge transfer projects. Similarly, the Government of Catalonia promotes the reorientation of the Punt TIC network towards innovation laboratories that promote the participation and involvement of citizens in designing local public policies and managing public facilities and services in the local sphere.

In this context, we may well ask what role labs can play in the innovation system in Catalonia, particularly since —as demonstrated by the «Living Labs, Open Innovation and Universities conference»— the labs are very diverse, in terms of objectives, thematic area, business model and the type of challenges they seek to respond to.

Living labs offer citizens a gateway to innovation. As such, they are key to democratising innovation and advancing towards a fairer and more innovative,

inclusive, sustainable society that empowers citizens.

These labs also play a role in the transfer of knowledge and technology from universities to the territory, not only to companies, but also to government and other types of entity.

And, most importantly, many labs have the necessary focus and capacity to become drivers of change and social transformation, and to promote the transition towards more sustainable economic models that are more respectful and responsible towards both people and the environment.

Living labs (which do not necessarily have to be physical realities) are spaces for meeting and collaboration where public administrations, companies, research and innovation players and citizens can rethink and co-design innovative responses and solutions to the challenges that face the territory. These are challenges that do not have a single solution but require collective actions and changes in the priorities and ways of doing things of individuals and institutions and, above all, changes in ways of cooperating.

One of the main obstacles to articulating this much needed collaboration are, precisely, differences in perspectives and approaches, since public administrations, companies, universities and civil society all respond to challenges from very different perspectives and interests.

The bureaucracy that dominates our administrations (and our universities) makes it difficult to detect common interests and opportunities to generate shared value through collaboration. In response to this problem, we need to identify and call attention to the barriers that prevent us from articulating this urgently-needed collaboration to respond to problems and challenges that we have clearly identified, to which technological solutions exist and over which there is agreement on the urgent need for and direction of change. Labs are meeting spaces where we can co-design shared agendas that will enable us to respond more effectively to the challenges that face us as a society.

In order to optimise the energy and potential for transformation of these living labs, new narratives, new professional profiles and new work methodologies are needed to promote, through a systemic and holistic approach, the cooperation of stakeholders with very different interests and ways of doing things.

In short, in the present context, in which we need to reinvent public services in the twenty-first century, living labs are more necessary than ever as drivers of change and social transformation.

Tatiana Fernández Sirera

Head of Economic Promotion, Directorate-General for Economic Promotion, Competition and Regulation

👉 CATLABS, FORMACIÓ, INNOVACIÓ, TATIANA FERNÁNDEZ, VEH