

## Engaging The Youth Through Public-sector Innovation Labs: Insights from Innovation Lab Cases in Thailand and The Philippines

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*Received: November 15, 2023*

*Revised: January 8, 2024*

*Accepted: February 6, 2024*

### Abstract

This paper investigates youth participation in public sector innovation labs PSI Labs in Thailand and the Philippines specifically analyzing two cases—the Chiang Mai City Lab in Thailand and the Youth Social Innovation Lab (YSIL) in the Philippines. Public policy literature on PILs considers public innovation labs as a space and medium for co-design, co-learning, and co-implementation of policies. In Southeast Asia, PSI Labs have become a unique strategy in addressing social problems. Some of these PSI labs were designed to promote youth participation—digital natives who have the energy and the stakes to address concerns in the public sector. However, understanding how these spaces enable youth participation in engaging the public sector is limited. To address this gap in literature, this paper explored how the youth are engaged and empowered to participate in addressing public problems. Drawing from existing literature on youth involvement in policy processes, we scrutinized the Chiang Mai City Lab and YSIL,

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exploring how these innovation labs foster and leverage youth participation. Using lesson drawing as an analytical lens, we examined policy documents, program designs, and relevant secondary literature. Our findings reveal a diverse range of strategies employed to engage youth and integrate their perspectives in addressing public problems. The study also highlighted how digitalization played a crucial role in furthering youth participation. Overall, this research provides nuanced insights into the dynamics of public sector innovation labs, emphasizing their transformative potential as platforms for youth-driven policy development.

**Keywords:** Philippines, Public Sector Innovation Labs, Public Policy, Thailand, Youth Participation

## การมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนผ่านห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมของภาครัฐ: ข้อมูลจากกรณีการศึกษาของห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมใน ประเทศไทยและฟิลิปปินส์

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมภาครัฐ หรือ PSI Labs ในประเทศไทยและฟิลิปปินส์ โดยวิเคราะห์ในสองกรณีโดยเฉพาะ อันได้แก่ ห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมที่จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ในประเทศไทย และห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมทางสังคมสำหรับเยาวชน (YSIL) ในประเทศฟิลิปปินส์ บทความนโยบายสาธารณะที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ PIL ถือว่าห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมสาธารณะเป็นพื้นที่และสื่อกลางสำหรับการออกแบบร่วมกัน การเรียนรู้ร่วมกัน และการทำให้เกิดนโยบายที่ใช้ร่วมกัน ในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ PSI Labs ได้กลายเป็นกลยุทธ์ที่สำคัญในการแก้ไขปัญหาสังคม ห้องปฏิบัติการ PSI บางแห่งได้รับการออกแบบมาเพื่อส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชน ซึ่งเป็นชาวดิจิทัลที่มีพลังและพร้อมที่จะจัดการกับข้อกีดขวางในภาครัฐ อย่างไรก็ตาม การทำความเข้าใจว่าพื้นที่เหล่านี้ช่วยให้เยาวชนมีส่วนร่วมในการมีส่วนร่วมของภาครัฐนั้นมีอยู่อย่างจำกัดได้อย่างไร เพื่อแก้ไขช่องว่างนี้ในวรรณกรรม บทความนี้จึงได้สำรวจว่าเยาวชนมีส่วนร่วมและมีอำนาจในการมีส่วนร่วมในการแก้ไขปัญหาสาธารณะอย่างไร จากวรรณกรรมที่มีอยู่เกี่ยวกับการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนในกระบวนการนโยบาย เราได้พิจารณา Chiang Mai City Lab และ YSIL โดยสำรวจว่าห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมเหล่านี้ส่งเสริมและใช้ประโยชน์จากการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชนอย่างไร การใช้การวาดบทเรียนเพื่อเป็นเลนส์ในการวิเคราะห์ เราตรวจสอบเอกสารนโยบาย การออกแบบโปรแกรม และวรรณกรรมรองที่เกี่ยวข้อง การค้นพบของเราเผยให้เห็นกลยุทธ์

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ที่หลากหลายที่ใช้ในการดึงดูดเยาวชนและบูรณาการมุมมองของพวกเขาในการแก้ไขปัญหาสาธารณะ การศึกษายังเน้นย้ำว่าการเปลี่ยนผ่านสู่ดิจิทัลมีบทบาทสำคัญในการส่งเสริมการมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชน อย่างไรก็ตาม โดยรวมแล้ว งานวิจัยนี้ให้ข้อมูลเชิงลึกโดยละเอียดเกี่ยวกับพลวัตของห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมภาครัฐ โดยเน้นย้ำถึงศักยภาพในการเปลี่ยนแปลงของพวกเขาในฐานะเวทีสำหรับการพัฒนานโยบายที่ขับเคลื่อนโดยเยาวชน

**คำสำคัญ:** ฟิลิปปินส์ ห้องปฏิบัติการนวัตกรรมภาครัฐ นโยบายสาธารณะ ประเทศไทย การมีส่วนร่วมของเยาวชน

## Introduction

The role of youth towards democratic participation is evolving, and much more a critical element in addressing public problems in an uncertain, complex, and changing world. In developing countries, numerous works have been putting emphasis on youths in national and local governance and development participation. More so, contemporary society stresses the role of creative ideas and innovations to finding alternatives to problems, where it sees the role of youth to be significantly intertwined. In Asia for example, more and more nations have become more optimistic about utilizing start-ups, social-civic enterprises, and local innovations addressing issues of food insecurity, health emergencies, political participation, education systems, among other areas of concern. In the advent of COVID-19, some Southeast Asian countries have mobilized and convened local public sector innovation labs (PSI labs) to address issues of continuity in responding to other pressing issues underlying the health emergency. Hence, innovation labs functions as a progressive space that not only establish a network of convergence of creative minds to address society's concern, but also to expand on people's participation in the process addressing those issues despite the impending limitations brought by health emergencies.

In this study, we investigated how youth participation is harnessed in two PSI labs in Southeast Asia. These innovation labs functioned as a laboratory for the ideas of the youth, as well as an opportunity to learn and apply themselves towards addressing public problems. To undertake this, we examined two specific cases: Youth Co:Lab in the Philippines, and Chiang Mai City Lab in Thailand. In the fast-paced world we live in today PSI labs play a role for policymakers who want to create and implement effective policy strategies. These labs act as centers where research takes place, data is collected, and pilot projects are carried out providing real life evidence that informs policy choices. By incorporating innovative lab methods into the policymaking process policymakers can take an approach constantly improving policies based on feedback and practical results. This flexibility and adaptability are particularly important when dealing with ever

evolving challenges. Specifically, on the imperative implications of youth participation within the innovation labs agenda. In this curiosity, we will investigate youth led innovations in making bigger impacts to society through innovation labs. Lessons from Thailand and the Philippines represent critical points of imagining innovations in each of the country's contextual realities and governance framework. In the proceeding section, we will explore the literature of public sector innovation labs and draw insights from youth participation in public policy literature to develop a framework in examining these two cases. We also highlight how despite the growth of youth-centric PSI labs, academic literature is limited in this aspect.

## Objectives

1. To critically examine the key features and processes of the select PSI labs, shedding light on the unique dynamics of youth involvement in policy innovation.
2. To identify specific strategies utilized by the selected PSI labs that were specifically designed to promote youth participation.
3. To draw lessons from the cases selected on how the youth are engaged and how their ideas are transformed into innovative solutions, providing insights into the broader implications for effective youth engagement in public policy innovation.

## Literature Review

### Public Policy Theory and Public Sector Innovation Labs

The developments and growth of innovation labs are linked to the quest of nations and communities towards democratization of policy making and addressing of public problems. Innovation labs also cut across the concerns of bring policy making and putting solutions to problems reachable to and by the public (Ravetz & Miles, 2016). The whole quest is even linked to the impending issues and contestation of technocratic domination in addressing society's concerns. Where technocracy dominates the process of governance and providing solutions to public concerns, it represses people to

participate in a democratic process to addressing their concerns (Dunn, 2017). Moreover, technocratic control and command is even stronger and evident in the process of creating innovative outputs and producing creative ideas.

PSI labs often emphasize user-centered design principles as it is anchored to the participatory and people-centered direction. In the literature, the PSI Labs take on different shapes and forms (see Gryszkiewicz et al., 2016; McGann et al., 2018, 2021; Zivkovic, 2018). Broadly speaking, PSI Labs are organizations, teams, spaces, and activities created specifically to promote innovation in the public sector and develop innovative policies and solutions for complex public issues (McGann et al., 2018). Their objective is to unite various stakeholders, such as policymakers, public servants, specialists, citizens, and service users, with the purpose of collaborating on comprehending issues and jointly devising, testing, and executing inventive policies or public services (Cole, 2022). However, a common feature that it has is that PSI Labs prioritize the needs and experiences of end-users when developing innovative solutions through a process co-creation, co-designing, and co-production (McGann et al., 2021). Moreover, policymakers can leverage these principles to ensure that policies are designed with the people they impact in mind, promoting inclusivity and responsiveness. Crucial to these potentials is to reiterate that the whole agenda may have linked to the progressive direction of the critical approach to doing policy analysis. The take of some scholars would contest, that such domination should be diminished, thus, the public should also have a hand in the process of producing creative knowledge, ideas, and practical alternatives. Moving away from this tendency is what the whole new discourse on innovation lab is pursuing— to emphasize on democratic potentials and bring innovation closer to people (Forester, 1999).

This new movement links to the whole advocacy of critical policy scholars, specifically of those working with participatory and pragmatic approaches to doing policy analysis (Forester, 1999). Particularly, this scholarly camp would better point on the discursive potentials of doing innovation labs, as it is particularly linked to giving



a platform for various policy actors to participate. Moreover, the deliberative potential of innovation labs often provides policy actors the opportunity to talk, discourse, and manifest their sentiments over issues at stake. What meaningfully been observed is the involvement of varied sectors in these platforms, that most progressive thinkers would consider essential in the quest for a more inclusive democratic participation. More so, the participation of the youth sector is also highly desired since deliberative democracy scholars see it as an important development and factor to pursuing a meaningful democratic participation in communities and governments. Channeling the progressive and participatory potentials of the whole idea of deliberative democracy makes a unique framing of innovation labs, that is sensitive to sectoral participation. Hence, what is important to note here is as to how the youth are involved (or not) in the process of democratic innovations.

### **Co-learning and Co-designing in Public Sector Innovation Labs**

Going through relevant literature and studies has led us to thinking about the youth participation in these innovation laboratories, specifically in Southeast Asia where most developing and growing communities would stringently emphasize this. The democratic potentials of innovation labs have been bringing the youth closer as they navigate around ideas for tangible innovative alternatives in addressing issues of societies. Moreover, the very idea of innovation labs link on co-production, co-creation, and co-learning that youth extensively hinge on. Co-creation is highly valuable in the realm of innovation because the objective is to “engage citizens (or the public) in the overall planning process, even from the initial stages” (Menny et al., 2018; Sillak et al., 2021). The diverse backgrounds, skills, and knowledge of the various participants enrich deliberations and the co-creation of solutions. This underscores the idea that effective thinking of solutions that requires active participation by the public, who are directly involved in co-creating solutions based on how societal processes and cultural landscapes function in a specific context. Conventionally, co-production is best understood as a “synergy between the activities of citizens and the government and implies a partnership between the service users” (Pestoff, 2014); thus, it has become decent



support towards the soundest and productive public policy process. Brandsen et al., (2018) points that “co-production is generally associated with services citizens receive during the implementation phase of the production cycle, whereas co-creation concerns services at a strategic level.”

Furthermore, co-learning is a foundational element of innovation labs, promoting collaboration among a diverse range of stakeholders, including policymakers, urban planners, academics, entrepreneurs, and citizens, among others (Ravetz & Miles, 2016). This iterative approach accelerates innovation, minimizes risks, and offers valuable insights into potential challenges, ultimately leading to more efficient and sustainable solutions. By facilitating knowledge exchange and shared learning, co-learning empowers these entities to address complex urban challenges comprehensively (Bakırlioğlu & McMahon, 2021). By actively involving communities, innovation labs cultivate trust and a sense of ownership, fostering inclusive initiatives centered around citizens. Thus, co-learning plays a crucial role in enabling innovation labs to effectively tackle the intricate and evolving urban issues of the modern world, especially in involving the youth. These core elements of participatory, inclusive, and democratic innovation labs are fundamentally linked to youth participation in a broader scope. In this study, we will articulate on the role of innovation labs to youth participation, at the same time will draw attention on cases in Southeast Asia nations (Thailand and the Philippines) where innovation labs have been taking prominence. Towards the end, we see how digitalization have become imperative to youth participation in innovation labs.

## **Conceptual Framework and Methodology**

In this paper, we investigated youth participation within the context of Public Sector Innovation Laboratories (PILs), we employed a set of principles that reflect youth participation. Frank (2006) synthesized insights from the 18 academic works disciplines that discuss the theoretical significance, normative importance, and empirical investigation of youth participation in the context of planning. The resulting synthesize was the identification of the following principles: “(a) give youth responsibility and voice;

(b) build youth capacities; (c) encourage youthful styles of working; (d) involve adults throughout the process; and (e) adapt the sociopolitical context” (Frank, 2006, p. 367). Furthermore, recognizing significant developments have occurred since 2006, more up to date literature on youth participation are considered to make the framework applied to be more robust. Our unique contribution lies in operationalizing this framework, adapting, and reappropriating these definitions in the context of PSI Labs.

The first principle discussed by (Frank, 2006) is that meaningful youth participation entails *giving the youth a responsibility and a voice*, at its core, seeks to address power imbalances between youth and adults in the planning process (Frank, 2006). When the youth are able to function as organizers and decision-makers in public sector issues, it allows them to gain a sense of motivation (Horelli & Kaaja, 2002). Evidence also suggests that the youth are often acutely aware if their abilities are not recognized or given importance in their communities. This can be empirically investigated in this study through looking at how PILs grant the youth substantial responsibility in designing innovations and implementing them. PILs should actively address power imbalances between youth and adults, ensuring that young participants have a substantial role and voice in the innovation processes.

Moreover, to *enhance youth capacity building* is to seek bridging the gap between youth capabilities and the demands of PILs by equipping them with knowledge, skills, and confidence (Frank, 2006). Empirically, this can be looked into through looking at the effectiveness of PSI labs in engaging the youth through efforts that bridges the gap between the demands of these processes and the skills and knowledge possessed by young individuals. This can take in the form of training, exposure activities, activities that seek to empower the youth resulting in an increase in confidence i.e. public speaking, and a clear demonstrated growth in competencies.

Promoting *youth centric approach* emphasizes the incorporation of youthful styles of working within PILs, aligning with the preferences and needs of young participants (Frank, 2006). It entails the utilization of techniques that are social, dynamic, interactive,

expressive, constructive, and challenging. Empirically, this can be observed through looking at how these approaches are integrated in the design of PILs. Alongside capacity building, it is crucial to adopt approaches that resonate with young participants, incorporating youthful styles of working within PSI labs.

*Adult involvement and support* are crucial within PSI labs, where adults serve as facilitators and mentors. This principle underscores the importance of taking youth seriously, empowering them, and leveraging resources while respecting their contributions (Frank, 2006). Adult involvement ensures that the youth's efforts are not only valued but also guided, enhancing their impact within PSI labs (Checkoway, 2011). Empirically, this principle can be observed through asking the basic question on what is the role of adults in this process. When referring to adults, they can be mentors, teachers, parents and even the organizing team above the age of 35. Adult facilitators and mentors play a pivotal role in the success of youth engagement in PILs, offering guidance and resources while respecting youth contributions.

*Adopting the sociopolitical context* refers to an active reflection of institutions and the decision-makers usually in government, to be more meaningfully responsive, engage, and provide legitimacy to the role and importance of the youth in the public sector. Frank (2006) discussed how there is evidence that sociopolitical context specifically, existing decision-making structures such as government bureaucracy, city councils, and even school administrative bodies function as barriers in the ability of the to participate meaningfully and fully. This principle therefore focuses on improving decision-maker commitment and aligning sociopolitical factors to facilitate youth engagement. This principle considers the role of both structure and the agents that shape them. Empirically, this principle refers to the ability of PIL innovations to not be limited within the conference, project or a “checkbox” in a government accomplishment document.

This study will examine case studies in Thailand and the Philippines that effectively utilized innovation labs to address complex public issues in their respective

contexts. This study utilized the lesson drawing (Cairney, 2020; James & Lodge, 2003; Rose, 1991) as an analytical lens, to investigate the public sector innovation laboratories in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Philippines. Lesson drawing facilitates an analysis of the two cases as the approach is focuses more specific innovations where each case from learn from instead of a rigid comparison. We closely examined policy texts, program designs, and relevant secondary literature. This methodology enabled a thorough examination of the processes of innovation, enabling us to identify essential lessons, recurring patterns, and valuable insights from the two cases. An in-depth analysis of policy papers and program designs played a crucial role in establishing a solid foundation for comprehending the intricacies of the innovative initiatives. Additional knowledge was obtained from pertinent secondary sources. This methodological decision is in line with our goal of gaining important data to advance the discussion on young involvement in public sector innovation laboratories.

## **Discussion and Findings**

### **Lessons from Chiang Mai, Thailand city lab**

A significant lesson from the Chiang Mai city lab is as to how it traces the youth involvement in the whole process doing an innovation lab. Foremost, we set to clarify here that the conception of a city lab also links and equates to an innovation lab as what was popularly introduced. In pursuit of fostering innovation development, the National Innovation Agency (NIA) introduced the Innovative City Index (ICI) in 2019 to assess the potential of Thai cities and evaluate their innovation ecosystems, encompassing aspects such as policy governance, infrastructure, economic and human capital, and knowledge systems. By the end of 2019, the ICI assessment revealed Chiang Mai's potential as an innovative city, prompting the NIA to select it as a pilot city for their innovation development initiative. In collaboration with various stakeholders, the Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy (CMU-SPP) formulated a development plan for Chiang Mai, funded by the NIA. With the ICI as the foundation, CMU-SPP and other key players assessed Chiang Mai's strengths and weaknesses, initiating collaborative efforts

to create innovative solutions for public concerns. This led to the establishment of the flagship project known as the “Chiang Mai City Lab” in 2021.

The City Lab project, conceptualized by CMU-SPP and the Chiang Mai city-municipality administration, aims to promote innovative solutions. CMU-SPP's role within this project revolves around facilitating, fostering innovation, and addressing city issues. The policy analysis process within this context aligns with established scholarly perspectives (Cairney, 2020; Dunn, 2017; Forester, 1999; Gerston, 2014), yet acknowledges the complexity and variability of policy analysis and processes based on specific contextual factors. CMU-SPP distilled this process into an acronym, "INNOVATE," involving identifying city concerns (I), exploring innovative solutions (N), assessing feasibility (N), organizing innovative efforts (O), visualizing an action plan (V), activating prototypes (A), transferring actions into lessons (T), and envisioning models and feedback for further development (E). These concepts guide the activities of the City Lab, emphasizing participatory and collaborative policy analysis.

Furthermore, the success of policy analysis within the City Lab hinges on the critical roles and collaboration of various stakeholders. These actors' functions are multifaceted and can be analyzed through the lens of power dynamics, dominant narratives, and their effectiveness within deliberative spaces. Notably, the project involves city-municipality administrators as decision-makers, the NIA as a funding entity, executive leaders from public agencies facilitating innovation implementation, CMU-SPP and municipal coordinators as facilitators and mediators, innovative enterprises as policy innovation designers, community leaders for on-the-ground implementation, civic innovators contributing non-tech innovations, and active citizens offering valuable insights into public problems, with evident participation of the youth in the whole processes.

To identify and address city issues, the City Lab initiated a problem identification process. This involved engaging the public in expressing their “hopes and fears” through online platforms and interactive exhibitions, fostering a semi-formal deliberative space

where participants freely exchanged normative narratives, insights, ideologies, and value systems. With identified problems rooted in the community's concerns, the City Lab engaged with power players, including the city-municipality administration and the NIA, to seek innovative solutions. While tech start-ups were initially considered, the project recognized the importance of civic-oriented interventions alongside technology-based innovations to effectively address the city's concerns. Subsequently, the City Lab recruited both professional and non-professional innovators to address these issues and gain community support.

CMU-SPP played a crucial role in planning actions to address Chiang Mai's identified concerns. Forums involving city-municipality leaders, public agency executives, and innovators facilitated discussions on proposed solutions. A City Lab committee, comprising internal city-municipality leaders, the NIA, and CMU-SPP, selected priority innovations and collaborated on an action plan for implementation. The City Lab communicated with pilot communities, serving as a sandbox for implementing innovation projects, and connected innovators with specific institutions for collaboration. In total, the project saw the implementation of seven tech innovations by professional tech innovators and four non-tech innovations by non-professional civic innovators in 2021. Hence, the curiosity leads us to question, where in the frame of Chiang Mai city lab have the youth been integrated or participated.

Certainly, youth participation has been integral to each stage of the policy process. The engagement of youth was not only acknowledged but actively encouraged throughout the entire process of the Chiang Mai City Lab, from identifying issues to implementing innovative solutions. Their participation contributed to the inclusivity and relevance of the project's outcomes.

By applying the five principles of youth participation outlined by Frank (2006), we can observe identifiable patterns that align with these concepts. Firstly, the youth was given responsibility and a voice. They were encouraged to draw upon their hopes and fears as a foundation for identifying problems. This method to policy-making



incorporates other types of information, fostering empathy in the policy process (Boossabong & Chamchong, 2023). The youth were involved in finding innovative solutions, participated in discussions with key stakeholders, and engaged in the implementation of innovative projects. Second, this process in the Chiang Mai City Labs facilitated the enhancement of the youth's capacities by providing opportunities to actively participate in public discourse, including engaging in forums, conversations, and on-site activities. The emphasis on civic engagement, in addition to technological advancements, indicates a concerted effort to narrow the divide between the skills and capacities of young people and the requirements of the City Lab. Third, the City Lab's approach aligns with youthful styles of working by fostering a semi-formal deliberative space for expressing "hopes and fears." The utilization of participatory and collaborative policy analysis, together with participation via online platforms and interactive displays, demonstrates the integration of dynamic and interactive methodologies. Fourth, in terms of involving adults in the process, the development and success of city labs highly relied on the academics from CMU-SPP, officials Chiang Mai city-municipality administration, and other stakeholders. Adult facilitators and mentors performed crucial roles in directing and providing assistance to adolescent involvement. Lastly, the City Lab was established because of the National Innovation Agency's (NIA) establishment of the Innovative City Index (ICI) in 2019. The selection of Chiang Mai as a pilot city took into account the sociopolitical setting, which includes policy governance and innovation ecosystems. The City Lab sought to tackle urban issues within the prevailing sociopolitical frameworks.

To summarize, the Chiang Mai City Lab adheres to the principles of youth participation as articulated by Frank (2006). Young individuals are entrusted with duties and empowered to express their opinions. Their abilities are developed via active participation, and their unique approaches to work are promoted. Adults are included at every step of the process, and the social and political environment is taken into account to facilitate impactful youth involvement. To get a comprehensive understanding of youth involvement, we examined the precise mechanisms through which young individuals are actively involved in the policy-making process (see Table 1).



**Table 1:** Youth participation in Chiang Mai, Thailand City Lab

Stage/Process	Youth Participation
<i>Problem Identification</i>	Actively expressed hopes and fears through online platforms and interactive exhibitions.
<i>Finding Innovative Solutions</i>	Contributed their perspectives and ideas to explore innovative solutions.
<i>Planning for Action</i>	Participated in discussions and forums alongside city-municipality leaders, executives, and innovators.
<i>Implementation of Innovation Projects</i>	Actively engaged in pilot communities to test and refine innovative solutions.

The table we've presented serves as a comprehensive lens through which we can appreciate the multifaceted role of youth engagement within the Chiang Mai City Lab's intricate processes. As discussed earlier, their involvement spans across each significant phase, and this comprehensive engagement carries profound implications. In the crucial initial stage of problem identification, youth actively participated by articulating their "hopes and fears" through various channels, including online platforms and interactive exhibitions. This not only empowered the younger members of the community by giving them a voice but also ensured that the City Lab's initiatives were firmly grounded in the authentic concerns and aspirations of this demographic. Their input, driven by their unique perspectives and experiences, acted as a catalyst for a more holistic understanding of the city's challenges.

Moving forward to the subsequent phase of finding innovative solutions, youth continued to occupy a central role in the project. Their active participation meant that their perspectives and ideas were not just welcomed but sought after as essential components of the solution-finding process. By involving youth in brainstorming sessions and discussions, the City Lab tapped into their creativity and brought fresh, dynamic insights into the mix. This diversity of thought injected a sense of vibrancy into the innovative solutions, making them not only technically sound but also more responsive to the evolving needs and preferences of the younger generation.

The collaborative spirit persisted as the project progressed into the planning phase. Youth were given a seat at the table alongside city-municipality leaders, public agency executives, and other key stakeholders. This inclusive approach ensured that the resulting action plans were well-rounded and balanced, considering the interests and priorities of all segments of the community. Moreover, this intergenerational dialogue fostered cooperation and mutual understanding, enriching the decision-making process and enhancing the overall quality of the strategies devised.

The journey didn't stop at the planning phase. Youth remained actively engaged as the innovative solutions were implemented in real-world settings, particularly in pilot communities. Their hands-on involvement was indispensable in the testing and refinement of these solutions. By participating directly in on-the-ground activities, they played a crucial role in gauging the effectiveness and relevance of the proposed innovations. This level of engagement ensured that the solutions effectively addressed the concerns and needs of the broader community, thus making them more likely to succeed.

In sum, the table we've elucidated encapsulates a holistic approach to youth engagement within the Chiang Mai City Lab's processes. It showcases how youth participation transcends tokenism and becomes an integral part of shaping innovative solutions. Their contributions emphasize inclusivity, celebrate diversity of perspectives, and ultimately validate youth as indispensable stakeholders in the development and execution of innovative strategies aimed at effectively addressing the city's multifaceted challenges. This comprehensive approach is not just about engaging youth; it's about harnessing their potential to create positive and lasting change within their community.

### **Lessons from the Youth Co:Lab Philippines and Youth Social Innovation Labs**

A quick cursory glance on PSI Labs in the Philippines show that there is an observable rise of innovation labs in the Philippines that aim to tackle public sector issues. In 2014, the UN Global Pulse conducted an interview with Karl Satinitigan, Aid and

Policy Officer for Social Entrepreneurship, in the Office of former Senator Paolo Benigno “Bam” Aguirre Aquino IV. Satinitigan (2014) cited the role of design thinking in promoting innovation in public sector issues like promoting local economic development, disaster risk reduction and management, and even big data policy. Design thinking entails a shift in the conceptualization of policymaking where it is drawn out from the client perspectives where problems and solutions are co-created and co-produced through citizen participation (McGann et al., 2021) and engaging the stakeholders directly (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016). In this section, we will be discussing how a public sector innovation lab developed by the UNDP is leveraging youth participation in the Philippines in the policy process. Specifically, we will explore the process of how the selected PIL leverages youth participation using insights from Frank’s (2006) design principles.

Youth Co:Lab, initiated in 2017 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Citi Foundation, stands as a regional program that has been applied in the Philippines with the objective of empowering the Filipino youth. According to the UNDP Philippines, it was conceptualized with the purpose of investing in the potential of young minds, positioning them as catalysts for change, and expediting the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To realize this goal, the Youth Social Innovation Lab (YSIL), the flagship program, was implemented in 2019. YSIL serves as a platform where young visionaries are invited to address pressing challenges in their communities. The Filipino youth are provided with space and support to craft social innovations with the potential to reshape their society.

The YSIL is essentially a hackathon that is structured around a series of activities that begins with convening the youth from a call of participants as youth innovators in a two-day event where the youth pitch and develop ideas centered around socially inclusive and sustainable enterprises (UNDP, 2019). To be specific, according to their brief for 2022, interested Filipino youth applicants must apply in teams and submit their application in the form of a pitch of a social enterprise that is already in the prototyping or validation stage. Successful applicants are given capacity building through synchronous

and asynchronous activities such as training, modules, and webinars. Furthermore, the successful applicants, now participants, are required to join a Discord server where they can virtually collaborate and discuss with their teammates and fellow applicants. Throughout the process, the participants go through intensive learning sessions that are “grounded human-centered and design thinking” where they are grouped with experts to develop and refine their ideas (UNDP, 2019).

Furthermore, 2020, in response to the unprecedented crisis, the YSIL has adopted a virtual implementation of the program and have adopted another principle—leave no one behind (UNDP, 2021). It sought out and welcomed participants from diverse backgrounds, including out-of-school youth, those affected by conflicts, LGBT+, differently abled youth, and individuals from ethnic and religious minorities (UNDP, 2022). The objective was to make YSIL more inclusive.

**Table 2:** YSIL Winning Innovations and Their Objectives 2019-2022

2019	2020	2022
<b>AccesiWheels</b> <i>Objective: Create a ride-hailing mobile app made by and for individuals with disabilities.</i>	<b>WeMind</b> Objective: Build a digital mental health platform for individuals and supportive workplaces.	<b>Babaye</b> Objective: Normalize health-care access for LGBTQIA+ and women, starting in Davao City.
<b>#Ethnicoco</b> Objective: Innovate products from coconut agriculture waste in indigenous communities.	<b>Eunoia</b> Objective: Develop an SMS-based learning platform for effective modular learning feedback.	<b>Sphere</b> Objective: Guide Filipino high school students in tech careers through personalized mentorship.
<b>Transkonek</b> Objective: Connect transgender individuals to job opportunities and support services online.	<b>COVID+Fun</b> Objective: Create interactive board games to educate children and youth about COVID-19.	<b>GINA</b> Objective: Use AI to manage waste in barangay schools for better disposal and recovery.

**Table 2:** YSIL Winning Innovations and Their Objectives 2019-2022 (continue)

2019	2020	2022
<b>Project Ka-sama</b> Objective: Provide virtual mental health and counseling classes for people with chronic medical conditions.	<b>Team Maharlika</b> Objective: Enhance communication for people with communication barriers using voice and gesture technology	<b>Grow School</b> Objective: Empower Las Piñas City's youth with environmental and agricultural programs.
<b>Greenhows</b> Objective: Foster creativity and collaboration among students, artists, and displaced communities through environmental initiatives.	<b>GoodGov PH</b> Objective: Improve legal support using the Facebook Messenger chatbox platform	<b>LIMPYO EcoSys</b> Objective: Encourage Bantayan Island homeowners to recycle or upcycle trash.

*Source: Compiled by the authors from press-releases of UNDP from 2019-2022*

To provide a snapshot of the social innovations that have been ideated through this program, we compiled the winners from 2019-2022 from press releases of UNDP (See Table 2). It should be noted these are only 15 winners of the YSIL but there are other initiatives and social innovations initiated by the participants that are as innovative as these activities but unfortunately did not win competition.

Analyzing table 2, a discernable and noteworthy pattern is how the solutions take advantage of advances in digitalization, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and harnessing of big data to address a variety of challenges. Furthermore, the scope of the problems is extensive, both in depth and breadth. The social innovations range from addressing problems that tackle general community problems such as solid waste management, environmental education, COVID-19 pandemic, and mental health. Additionally, the other social innovations tackle sector-specific issues that will have community-wide consequences such as advocating for LGBT rights and empowerment, supporting indigenous communities, and improving transportation accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

Applying Frank's (2006) framework, elements of the principles that were advocated are observed. First, in terms of giving the youth responsibility and voice, the YSIL as a PIL gives a great degree to the youth's voice through inviting the Filipino youth in pitching a social innovation and co-developing it with the both the YSIL team and select pool of experts. Furthermore, as the social innovations tend to focus on issues that the participants themselves experience in their own locality, this allows them to develop a sense of responsibility in relation to their community's challenges.

As for enhancing youth capacities, the implementation of the YSIL since 2019 has been designed to include the youth in intensive integrated learning sessions rooted in human-centered and design thinking methods. This aspect of the program indicates a deliberate effort to enhance the capacity of young participants. Through mentorship and exposure to experts, the young innovators were given the opportunity to further develop a technical understanding of the social challenges they wish to address through their social innovation. This process also entails that adults are part of the process and are co-producing and co-designing the understanding of the problems and solutions.

In terms of promoting youth-centric approaches, the commitment to social inclusion is indicative that as a process, there is intention on the part of YSIL to center the issues around the wide-range of issues that the youth are facing. Furthermore, the utilization of digital platforms (i.e., discord and zoom), and digital solutions in the proposed social innovations is indicative of capitalizing on the youth of today being digital natives. Lastly, in terms of adapting social-political context, preliminary research seems to suggest that this is the weakest. While the social innovations identified by youth innovators were responsive to the context of the communities, there is little evidence to suggest that such initiatives eventually entered the formal policy-space.

### **Role of Digitalization in Youth Co-learning and Co-designing in PSI Labs**

The previous two sections highlight specific lessons that can be derived in so far how each PSI labs approaches youth participation. In this section, we highlight emerging good practices in the realm of digitalization from each case can learn from.



The importance of this section as it draws potential insights in utilizing digital technology in promoting co-learning and co-designing with the youth in addressing public problems. In the Chiang Mai City Lab, the role of digitalization goes beyond mere convenience; it's about empowering the youth to be active contributors to their community's development. Through online platforms and interactive exhibitions, the youth were given a prominent voice in the problem identification phase. This not only tapped into their unique perspectives but also ensured that the City Lab's initiatives were firmly grounded in the authentic concerns and aspirations of this demographic. In a rapidly evolving digital landscape, this approach also resonates with the way young people naturally communicate and engage with the world.

Similarly, in the Youth Co:Lab Philippines, digitalization isn't just a tool; it's a reflection of the evolving needs and capabilities of today's youth. The program's virtual implementation during the pandemic was a testament to its adaptability. It acknowledged that the youth are not just consumers of digital technology; they are its architects and drivers. By embracing digital platforms like Discord and Zoom, YSIL not only continued its mission but expanded its reach, ensuring that young innovators from diverse backgrounds could actively participate. This move recognizes that digital connectivity is a powerful equalizer, transcending geographical and social barriers.

Design thinking, a central principle in both cases, underscores the importance of co-creation and citizen participation (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016). Digitalization complements this approach by providing the tools and spaces for collaborative problem-solving. In Chiang Mai, the City Lab leveraged digital platforms to create a semi-formal deliberative space where participants freely exchanged ideas and perspectives. This inclusivity facilitated a richer understanding of the city's challenges. In the Philippines, the YSIL program integrated digital tools for capacity-building activities, enabling young innovators to access knowledge and resources remotely. This not only enhanced their skills but also fostered a sense of global connectivity.



In addition, principles such as co-designing, co-creation, and co-production in problem identification and solution identification can be integrated into how we approach learning strategies. Specifically, the two cases show that co-learning between and across sectors (i.e., age, gender, and geographic origin) is imperative in developing innovations. With the rapid digitalization of learning environments ramped up by the pandemic (e.g., distance learning, online courses, etc.), teaching strategies may draw lessons from PSI labs as alternative learning strategies to stimulate innovation and creativity. The diversity of strategies for engaging the youth demonstrated in the cases reviewed in this study is indicative of ways to actively engage the youth in addressing public problems in a meaningful way.

In terms of theory, the study highlights and builds on Frank's (2006) principles as it provides further nuance and specificity of what youth participation entails in an increasingly globalized and connected world due to the internet of things (Xia et al., 2012). Specifically, each of the cases lends itself differently to youth participation in the public sector. The case of Chiang Mai City Labs approaches youth participation as a process of including the youth by actively imploring them to share their context-specific knowledge and worldview in shaping public policy. This deliberative and empathetic process is a process of participation that recognizes the messiness of the policy process and the necessity of developing a policy process that is inclusive instead of a fixed, hierarchical, and technocratic policy process. The case of the Philippines emphasizes the importance of universal and global principles of equality as a core premise for engaging the youth. This is exemplified in their 'no-one left behind principle' where they explicitly embed principles of equality and equity in their design of their program. Moreover, their strategy of utilizing hybrid platforms to expand reach and access has allowed for a more collaborative process of co-production of knowledge and strategies for addressing public problems.

However, the journey doesn't end with innovative ideas; it's about translating those ideas into actionable policy measures. This is where both cases shed light on

a common challenge. While youth participation thrives within the innovation labs, the transition to the formal policy space remains a complex terrain. It requires bridging the gap between grassroots solutions and high-level policy discussions. It necessitates a deeper commitment from policymakers to recognize and integrate these innovative solutions into the broader policy landscape.

The digitalization of youth participation in the Chiang Mai City Lab and the YSIL Philippines represents a forward-looking approach to addressing societal challenges. It taps into the digital fluency of today's youth, empowers them to co-create solutions, and adapts to changing contexts. Yet, it also serves as a reminder that the true impact of youth-driven innovation lies in its ability to influence policy and bring about lasting change. It's a journey that celebrates the power of technology but ultimately seeks to reshape the way policies are crafted and implemented for a better future.

## **Conclusion: Imagining innovations from Thailand and the Philippines**

Public policy literature that investigates innovation in the public sector argues innovation to be of value if it increases the ability of governance to improve the quality of services, efficiency and it addresses the purpose of government (Hartley, 2005). This means that while “new products” can be an innovation in the public sector, innovation in the public sector encompasses other aspects of governance and the policy-process such as the process, modality of service delivery, and conceptual changes and reforms in the functions of government (De Vries et al., 2016). Using this continuum approach to public sector innovation, the case of the YSIL in the Philippines and the Chiang Mai City Labs in Thailand differ in terms of the public sector innovations they offer.

The Philippine case approaches innovation to address challenges through the introduction of a new service that seeks to capitalize on innovations in technological advances such as in ICT, bigdata and artificial intelligence to address context and sector specific issues that the youth identify to be important. They do this through employing a competition format where youth participants are to pitch their proposed social

innovation. The innovation in the process of doing so entails the use of online platforms such as Zoom and Discord to connect youth participants with fellow participants and experts with the objective of improving their social innovation pitches. The emphasis in the case of the Philippines is therefore the creation of an innovation as an outcome of the process. The process of getting there involves an innovative strategy of developing communication lines between the youth participants with mentors and experts however, the emphasis is on the development of an innovation product that will compete with other innovative solutions. This competition format is a consequence of the YSIL's format as a hackathon like project development grants.

Youth engagement and participation is viewed here as a separate process that while the participants engage with adults, the primary actors in this platform are the youth who are co-designing and co-producing social innovations. The case of Thailand is different as it puts greater emphasis in the process as innovation where through mirroring the policy process of agenda setting, deliberation, discussion of alternatives and stakeholder engagement. They do this through integrating the youth as a sector that engages with other sectors of city labs. Furthermore, the youth may not need to represent the youth as other sectors may include those who fall under the category of the youth. This process, unlike the Philippine case, does not follow a rigid format or process but instead lends itself to flexibility in terms of different stages of the policy process is constructed. The process, while structured, is user-driven using deliberation and design thinking. The outcome policy alternatives that are considered are considered by the creators of the Chiang Mai City labs as a "sound policy" as it seeks to actively surface the interests of people through decentering expert knowledge as the end-all-be-all of policy. This does not mean that technical knowledge is sacrifice but is instead viewed in equal footing to knowledge developed from deliberation (Sacramento & Boossabong, 2021). This form of innovation, therefore, falls under in the process-oriented innovation where even if the outcome policy is "traditional", the fact that it is product of an innovative process already makes it an innovative process.

Furthermore, youth engagement in the case of the Chiang Mai City labs is done through considering them as a sector in the policy process as opposed setting aside a specialized platform for innovation to prosper. The two cases are illustrative of the different ways in which youth participation in PILs results in different forms of innovation in the public sector. However, it should be clear that we are not advocating that one form innovation is better than the other, instead it is recognition of the pluralisms of public innovation in the public sector. What is more valuable takeaway from the two cases is how youth participation can take place in different forms and context, and how this flexibility results to innovations that may lean towards innovation in services or innovation in processes.

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