

Our approach

The MaRS Solutions Lab is a team committed to tackling complex societal challenges that require systems change; challenges to which there are no easy answers, and answers that demand action by many different individuals and organizations.

We convene stakeholders and citizens to experiment, learn and scale new solutions. For this, we apply tools and techniques from various fields, like social innovation, design thinking, change management and social movement theory. And we help build capacity for systems change through policies and learning opportunities that support people and organizations to drive change.

Our design principles

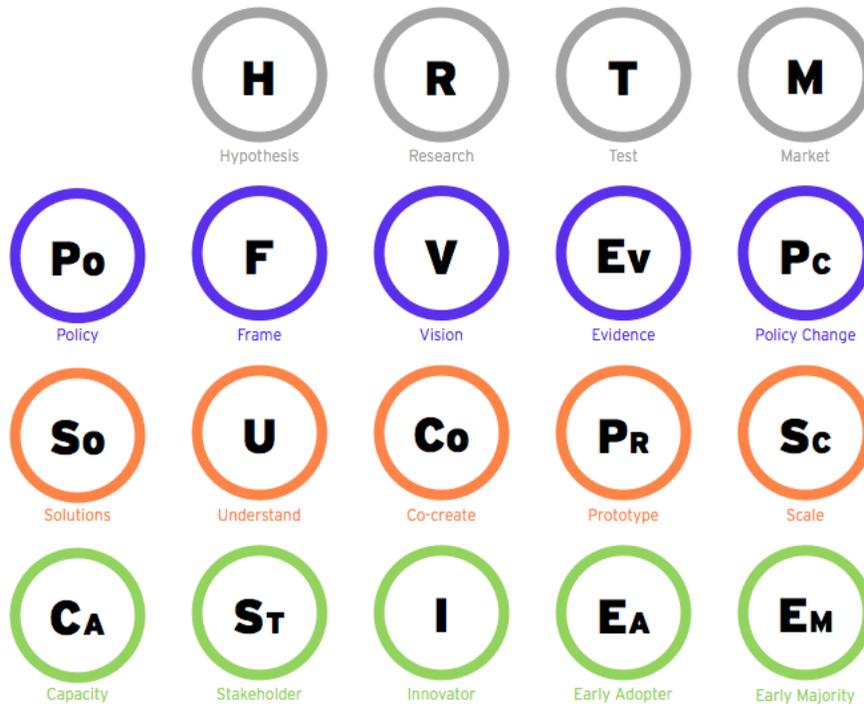
- Start with the citizen, look at the system
- Create solutions with users and stakeholders, not just for them
- Look for the smallest possible intervention with the largest possible impact
- Always work towards scale, but start small and learn
- No action without reflection, no reflection without action
- Work to diagnose problems, galvanize change and deliver real improvements

Periodic Table of System Change

MaRS Solutions Lab has developed its 'Periodic Table of System Change' to describe our strategy and process. It is our attempt to bring together different theories of change, from social innovation to design thinking, from change management to social movements. However, in the years to come we will test our theory, and adjust it where needed. Throughout the process we will work with many different people and organizations. Some will be there the entire way. Others will just briefly travel along. Even stronger, we will have this table in our head, but we do not expect that from our partners. This is a staged process. For each stage we will develop new proposals for action, because that creates trust and it is just impossible to plan for the entire way. This is a learning journey for all of us. That is why there are no arrows in this model. The challenge will define the sequence. But as lab, it is our task to push forward and make sure all the periodic elements are present. Only then system change can happen.

Our working model has four stages that follow the traditional lab-model. At first one poses a hypothesis (**H**) to what the problem might be. Then one starts to research (**R**) which leads to ideas for solutions. Those ideas are then tested (**T**) and the solutions that work are brought to the market (**M**). We apply this lab-approach to solve social challenges, which requires working on three streams simultaneously: Driving policy change (**Po**), Developing solutions (**So**) and Building capacity for change (**Ca**).

Periodic Table of Systems Change



1st stage: $H = U + F + St$

In this first stage the challenge is defined, scoped and framed. On the basis of preliminary research, user and expert interviews and some stakeholder workshops we formulate our hypothesis and understand the challenge (**U**). This results in a challenge brief. However, next to defining the challenge we also need to frame (**F**) it in policy to create urgency for change. Depending on the stakeholders there can even be multiple frames, and we will likely need to campaign to build that urgency. That campaign will likely continue as the process moves forward. We will look for an initial group of key stakeholders (**St**) that want to partner with us in building a wider movement to solve the challenge.

2nd stage: $R = Co + I + V$

The second stage is about analyzing the problem and developing potential interventions. This starts with user research. Through interviews, observations or ethnographic study we want to understand the choices and considerations that are being made and how policies really work. We also map the system, which provides us with better insights where best to intervene. The research leads to a design brief that supports a process of ideation to co-create solutions (**Co**). We reach out to the Innovators (**I**), the 5% of the people in a system already committed to change. We want to learn from them and engage them in the process. With this first community of pioneers we also undertake actions to support visioning (**V**). We aim to create a collective ambition and further develop the urgency for policy change with stakeholders and decision-makers.

3rd stage: T = Pr + Ev + Ea

Change and tangible results are only realized by taking action. In the third stage, we intervene by prototyping solutions in a real setting (**Pr**). They are small experiments, but are meant to scale. As a lab we help to make them happen. But the role of the lab is above all to monitor progress, reflect and learn. We want to gather evidence to see if a solution works (**Ev**): what is the impact, where do we need to improve? That is needed to build our arguments for scaling, and the policies that are needed for this. Most likely, there will be multiple interventions. We make sure everyone learns from them. We help to grow a learning community, reaching out to the early adopters (**Ea**), the 15% of the people that like to get involved when you help them a bit along the way.

4th stage: M = Sc + Pc + Em

In the fourth stage, we synthesize all of our work into a strategy for system change. This consists of three types of strategies. First, we develop strategies to scale those prototypes that work (**Sc**). This means helping them to sustain and grow, e.g. by developing a business model. We work with governments to promote and help formulate the right policies for scaling and policy change (**Pc**). Building upon the vision and evidence we created earlier. And we help to reach scale by building receptor capacity with the early majority, the 33% of the people that will change once you offer them readymade solutions they can apply in their own practice, plus the training and incentives that go with it. The lab helps to develop learning material like toolkits and programs, growing the community of people engaged in making change happen.

Our Periodic Table is evolving while we continue to work on our challenges. On each of the elements we are collecting and developing tools. We are reflecting on it based on our experiences applying this model. Through the website (and later perhaps in a 'living handbook') we will publish our findings.

If you have any comments or feedback, feel free to send it to: solutions-lab@marsdd.com



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