

System Change Requires Structural Space for 'Makership'

A phenomenological study of field labs

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Background

Start-ups and SMEs play a major role in a country's economic development and contribute to a more sustainable global food system through the means of innovation. As these ventures develop, **support programs** such as field labs offer testing grounds with the necessary resources to grow. However, little is known about its relevance for sustainable entrepreneurship. To find out, this study analyses the sustainable entrepreneur's experience with participating.

Objectives

This study aims to uncover how sustainable entrepreneurs ascribe meaning to their experience with the transformative value of field labs. Sustainable entrepreneurs in the Dutch food industry were interviewed, who all had proof of concept and seek to scale their idea.

Introduction

Existing literature on field labs is highly fragmented due to an abundance of definitions (incubators, accelerators, testbeds etc.) and it is unclear whether this growing **phenomenon** contributes to the promotion of sustainable entrepreneurship. This research therefore aims to reveal this by answering the question:

How do entrepreneurs in the sustainable food industry ascribe meaning to their experience with the transformative value of field laboratories?

Transformative value means the program can create and transform '**disjuncture**' (trigger for learning) in favour of assisting in their new venture process.

After examining relevant literature and establishing the methodology based on its philosophical underpinnings, an analysis of multiple interviews provides an answer to the research question.

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Methods

To answer the research question, a **qualitative phenomenological approach** was taken. Using **semi-structured interviews** allowed for uncovering the **lived experience** of the participants. By analyzing the acquired information several themes emerged that helped describe the collective experience of the entrepreneurs.

Results

- Sustainable entrepreneurs experience a wide variety in content offered.
- Learning can originate from internal and external networking.
- Bottom-lines as prerequisites allow for pragmatic decision-making.
- Field lab participants critically evaluated the field lab and its offering, at any point during the participation.
- Programs should facilitate transformation through proactivity and initiative.

Conclusion

Key to the sustainable entrepreneur's lived experience is their developed ability to **critically evaluate** the offering's worth, enabled by other people's **support**, feedback, and the **role of identity** through a transformative process of learning.

Field labs can provide significant support for sustainable entrepreneurs and become more adaptive, given that they implement a **structure** in their program with a stronger narrative.

Future research could look at field labs as a separate entity rather than a continuation of incubator/accelerator literature. Field labs are beginning to emerge with distinct characteristics and aims to further the transition to a more sustainable food industry.