

Co-creating practice learning: Social laboratories as an innovative model for social work field education in Rwanda

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Abstract: Social laboratories (Social Labs) provide a collaborative, multidisciplinary, and experimental approach that brings together diverse stakeholders to co-design, test, and refine innovative solutions to complex societal problems. In Rwanda, the University of Rwanda introduced Social Labs in two districts in 2022 as an innovative model for practice-based learning. This study explored the implementation, contributions, challenges, and sustainability of Social Labs in Rwandan social work education. Twenty-one in-depth interviews were conducted with social work students and faculty members involved in implementing the initiative. Data were analysed using thematic analysis informed by social innovation concepts and Hassan Zaid's Social Labs methodology. The findings show that Social Labs strengthened practice skills, enhanced collaboration and co-creation, and fostered innovative community-based interventions. However, implementation was constrained by inadequate funding, limited field practice time, and long travel distances to communities. The study recommends progressively integrating Social Labs into the social work curriculum as a complement to the conventional practicum model through strengthened partnerships, community ownership, and sustainable financing.

Keywords: co-creation; practice learning; social innovation; social laboratories; social work education

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Introduction

Persistent and complex social challenges frequently resist conventional, siloed approaches, thereby producing fragmented interventions and limited overall impact (Barry, 2025; Kreindler et al., 2012). This limitation is particularly evident in social work education, where field placement, central to professional training, could be challenged by weak integration between classroom learning and practice, limited supervision, and insufficient opportunities for meaningful client engagement (Amponsah et al., 2022; Papouli, 2014; Dhemba, 2012; Liu et al., 2013). As a result, there is a need for collaborative and adaptive frameworks that bridge theory and practice while engaging multiple stakeholders in real-world problem-solving. Scholars have defined social labs as community-based ideas that promote cooperation, information exchange, and creative solutions to challenging societal problems (Hassan, 2014; Westley & McGowan, 2017; Synnes et al., 2025). Social labs are considered a form of social innovation because they address social demands and issues and enhance the standard of living for people, communities, and societies as a whole; they need to work together.

The concept of social labs was first used in 2014 by Zaid Hassan to describe a real-world environment where individuals can experiment and collaboratively develop solutions to challenging social problems dynamically and interactively (Hassan, 2014). According to Westley & McGowan (2017), these labs foster innovation, flexible problem-solving, and long-term solutions that apply a systems-thinking approach to address the root causes of societal problems. Hassan (2014) describes social labs as a cooperative strategy for tackling complex social issues by bringing together various stakeholders, including corporations, researchers, lawmakers, and community members. These teams work together to develop and test creative solutions in a systematic, exploratory, and iterative manner. Social labs identify the underlying causes of issues and create scalable, adaptable solutions.

In other words, unlike traditional social work practicum, which is largely placement-based, supervised, and focused on applying pre-existing classroom knowledge in institutional settings, social labs operate as open, iterative, and community-embedded learning systems (Opobo et al., 2025). They bring together multiple stakeholders to jointly define, test, and refine solutions to real social problems in dynamic environments. Rather than fixed supervisory structures and predetermined tasks, social labs emphasise co-creation, experimentation, and systems thinking. This makes learning more adaptive, context-driven, and oriented toward innovation and social change compared to conventional field placement models.

In Africa, social labs have taken an innovative youth empowerment approach to address complex socioeconomic challenges such as adolescent unemployment, substance abuse, and communal violence (Westley & McGowan, 2017). In South Africa, social labs significantly improved community health outcomes and reduced

clinical wait times (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2020), and, when considered social open innovations, they achieved commercial viability while fulfilling a social mission (Yun et al., 2019). To enhance maternal and child health outcomes in rural communities, the Ubuntu Lab in Kenya collaborated with local healthcare professionals, traditional birth attendants, community leaders, and researchers (Gatakaa et al., 2019). This led to improved health-seeking behaviours and reduced maternal mortality rates (Munemo & Mwapaura, 2024). Social labs encourage information sharing and collaboration among participants (Timmermans et al., 2020; Kieboom, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2015). They incorporate a variety of stakeholders in iterative learning, co-creation, and experimentation, focusing on identifying interrelated issues and developing game-changing solutions to drive societal change (Westley et al., 2009).

In Rwanda, social work is a practice-oriented profession requiring both academic study and practical field training (Papouli, 2014). Practical field education extends beyond the classroom to prepare students for field practicums and professional placements (Juneau et al., 2022; Papouli, 2014). However, traditional practicum models, including in-service placement, concurrent, block, and combined approaches, face persistent challenges such as weak integration between theory and practice, scarcity of placement opportunities, and limited supervision (Amponsah et al., 2022; Papouli, 2014; Dhembu, 2012; Liu et al., 2013). Since 2022, a social laboratory approach has been implemented by the University of Rwanda, a public university in Rwanda, to enhance social work education and indigenize training by deploying final-year students into communities (Koku et al., 2024). In this model, students collaborate with community members to identify social problems and co-develop solutions. In the Gicumbi and Huye districts of Rwanda, social work students engage in proactive experimentation and testing with innovative methods and approaches to extract lessons for addressing systemic social problems (Hassan, 2014; Kieboom, 2014). This shift reflects a move from apprenticeship-based models toward community-based, participatory learning.

Despite the growing global and regional interest in social labs, there remains a significant gap in empirical research on their implementation within the Rwandan context. Though studies were conducted on social labs before (Hassan 2014, Opobo et al., 2025), there is currently no study investigating the experiences of implementing the new approach in Rwanda, which has been in place for four years. With an emphasis on communities of practice and social innovation, this study explored participants' experiences of the Social Labs approach in Rwanda, examining its implementation, perceived benefits, challenges, stakeholder involvement, and sustainability as an innovative model for social work education. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study of its kind in Rwanda and aims to contribute to the existing literature and inform stakeholders about the status and potential of the social labs approach.

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by two complementary frameworks: social innovation theory and Hassan's social labs methodology. Social innovation theory provides the overarching conceptual lens for understanding how collaborative processes generate sustainable responses to complex social problems, while Hassan's social labs methodology offers a practical framework for implementing and analysing such collaborative processes in real-world settings.

Social innovation emerged as a distinct field of scholarship in the early 2000s through the work of scholars such as Mulgan (2006), Murray et al. (2010), and Phills et al. (2008). Although no single scholar is regarded as its sole founder, the theory is grounded in the assumption that social challenges cannot be adequately addressed through traditional sector-based approaches alone. Instead, lasting solutions emerge through novel ideas, collaborative action, and institutional change that create social value rather than merely economic value (Aksoy et al., 2019; Bimenyimana et al., 2024; Timmermans, 2020). The theory therefore emphasises co-creation, participation, learning, and systems change as essential mechanisms for addressing complex societal problems. While social innovation theory explains *why* collaborative innovation is necessary, it provides limited guidance on *how* such innovation can be organised and facilitated in practice.

Hassan's social labs methodology, developed by Hassan (2014), complements this limitation by providing an operational framework for collaborative social innovation. Drawing on systems thinking, design thinking, and participatory action research, Hassan conceptualises social laboratories as structured environments where diverse stakeholders jointly explore complex problems, experiment with potential solutions, learn from iterative cycles of action and reflection, and adapt interventions based on emerging evidence. The methodology rests on three interconnected principles: multi-stakeholder participation, iterative experimentation, and systems thinking. Rather than viewing social problems as isolated phenomena, it recognises them as interconnected and dynamic, requiring continuous learning and adaptation.

The combination of these two frameworks strengthens the analytical foundation of the study because their respective strengths compensate for each other's limitations. Social innovation theory provides the conceptual explanation of how collaborative innovation contributes to social transformation but offers relatively limited methodological direction for implementation. Hassan's social labs methodology addresses this gap by specifying the processes through which collaboration, experimentation, and systems learning can be organised and sustained. Conversely, while Hassan's methodology offers practical guidance for facilitating social laboratories, social innovation theory situates these processes within the broader discourse of social change and explains their transformative significance. Together, the frameworks provide both conceptual depth and methodological guidance for

understanding how Social Labs contribute to social work education in Rwanda.

The integrated framework informed both data analysis and interpretation. A primarily deductive thematic analysis was undertaken using concepts derived from social innovation theory and Hassan's social labs methodology, while remaining open to inductive insights emerging from participants' experiences. Themes related to the purpose and value of Social Labs reflected the principles of social innovation, including co-creation, experiential learning, and social value creation. Themes concerning stakeholder engagement were interpreted through Hassan's emphasis on multi-sector collaboration, while systems thinking informed the analysis of interconnected community challenges and locally generated solutions. Finally, themes relating to implementation challenges, sustainability, and continuous improvement were interpreted through the concepts of iterative experimentation and adaptive learning. The integration of both frameworks therefore enhanced conceptual coherence and strengthened the interpretation of how Social Labs function as an innovative pedagogical model for social work education.

Methods

Context and research design

The Social Lab, the conventional fieldwork practicum in social work education at the University of Rwanda, is evaluated in this study. The Department of Social Sciences at the University of Rwanda established community social labs as part of the NORAD-funded RESILIENT project, which aims to build resilient communities in East Africa through inclusive education (Opobo et al., 2025). In Rwanda, students are assigned to sectors in each district, working in groups for mutual support and learning. The labs are being implemented to identify innovative solutions to complex social problems. By enabling students to live and work in communities, cooperate, and become catalysts for change. These labs offer an alternative to traditional fieldwork.

The study is entirely qualitative, adopting a phenomenological design, to understand the experiences of academic faculty members, social work master's students, and undergraduate social work students who took part in the Social Labs introduced by the University of Rwanda in the districts of Gicumbi and Huye. Rwanda's administrative structure is hierarchical, starting at the village level (*umudugudu*), followed by the cell (*akagari*), sector (*umurenge*), and district (*akarere*). Districts are grouped into provinces (*intara*), which represent the highest sub-national level (Bimenyimana & Jeong, 2020). This structure supports local governance, service delivery, and community-based interventions such as social labs implementation. Students were placed at the village level because that is where community meetings take place, but of course they were introduced from the district

up to the cell. Following Hassan's ideas of experimentation and community-based activities, students develop weekly and monthly activity plans with predetermined deadlines (Department of Social Sciences, 2022).

This study is further situated within an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' lived experiences and contextual meanings (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This paradigm supported a reflexive approach to knowledge production by recognising multiple perspectives on the implementation and outcomes of Social Labs. To enhance methodological rigour and transparency, the study adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), including explicit reporting of researcher positionality, participant recruitment, data collection procedures, coding processes, and theme development.

Participants and data collection

The study data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 social work students and a University lecturer who participated in the social labs approach in the two districts. An interview is a qualitative research technique used to collect detailed thoughts and insights from individuals about a specific concept, idea, service, or product (Qu & Dumay, 2011). By posing open-ended questions that invite participants to express their opinions and views, the interviewer can guide the conversation with follow-ups. Compared to surveys or other quantitative because they allow participants to express themselves and voice their thoughts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Green & Thorogood, 2018).

Participants were selected using a network sampling technique, beginning with individuals involved in initiating the social labs approach in 2022. Initial participants, including social work students and a lecturer, referred the researchers to others across different locations. Priority was given to participants who played leadership roles during implementation, as they possessed in-depth insights into the process. This approach ensured the inclusion of information-rich participants with direct experience in social labs practice.

In the network sampling technique, you start with one participant who links you to the next (Mouw & Verdery, 2012), and it was adopted because participants were in various locations at the time of the interview. The researchers noted that a number of the study participants were leading groups during the social labs' implementation, which gave them a flag to have more information as leaders. In addition to interviews, the main source of data collection was a document review to collect data from previous studies. 21 research participants were assigned codes (Table 1) to seek anonymity and to protect their identification as per ethical considerations.

In conducting interviews, field notes were made in Kinyarwanda, the native

language, before being translated into English; however, respondents who were comfortable responding in English, which is the manuscript language, respondents who were comfortable responding in English, which is the manuscript language, were allowed to do so. Furthermore, a cross-check of the content was carried out to ensure that no respondents' input was overlooked throughout the data processing process. The purpose of the interview guide was to collect data for a large-scale study involving implementers and supervisors of the social labs approach implementation in the Gicumbi and Huye districts of Rwanda.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of the social labs approach. Questions focused on their roles in implementation, collaboration with community members and local leaders, challenges encountered, lessons learned, and perceived outcomes of the approach. Follow-up questions were used to deepen responses and clarify emerging issues. After the 17th interview, the researchers began to observe a marked repetition of information across participants, with no substantially new insights emerging. Four additional interviews were conducted to further confirm this pattern. By the 21st interview, data saturation was deemed to have been reached, as no new themes or concepts were being generated.

In the context of the current study, Social lab implementers refer to individuals directly involved in executing the social labs approach in practice within the Gicumbi and Huye districts. They include social work students and supervisors who facilitated community engagement, coordinated activities, and supported problem identification and solution development. These implementers were key actors in operationalising the social labs methodology in real-world settings.

Data management and analysis

To manage the collected data, they were translated, coded, and put into a qualitative data management program called MAXQDA 2022 for mapping and visualisation. The MAXQDA visualisations enabled researchers to see patterns and trends in qualitative data. The visualisations facilitated further study by allowing for intuitive, graphical comparisons across codes, cases, and variables. Furthermore, visualisations made it easier to interpret findings and explain them clearly to others through figures.

Themes were developed through a systematic qualitative thematic analysis of interview data. Transcripts were repeatedly read to achieve familiarity, after which initial codes were generated using participants' verbatim statements. Related codes were then clustered into meaningful categories, which were refined into broader themes and subthemes reflecting patterns across participants' experiences. The coding process was supported by MAXQDA software, enabling comparison across cases and visualisation of relationships. Themes were subsequently reviewed, defined, and illustrated using representative quotations.

The qualitative data were analysed using Attride-Stirling's theme network analytical approach (Green & Thorogood, 2018). First and foremost, after closely examining the transcripts, codes were created for the participants. The codes were broken down into fundamental topics. The researchers also categorised the fundamental ideas under organising themes. Finally, the global themes were formed from the organising themes. The researchers were able to present the findings in a way that was as meaningful as feasible thanks to the thematic technique of data analysis (Green & Thorogood, 2018). The methodical investigation of students' Social Lab experiences, motivations, difficulties, opportunities, and sustainability was among the fundamental recurring themes that emerged. All of these themes suggested that the students' practical participation in the Social labs improved their sense of experience and integration.

This study recognises key methodological considerations relevant to the interpretation of its findings. The use of network (snowball) sampling enabled access to information-rich participants directly involved in social labs implementation; however, it may have shaped the range of perspectives captured. To enhance rigour, participants were drawn from multiple roles and locations within the two districts. In addition, researchers' positionality was carefully managed through continuous reflexive practice, given researchers' contextual familiarity with the social labs process, to support a balanced interpretation of the data. Furthermore, interviews conducted in Kinyarwanda were systematically translated and cross-checked during transcription to ensure conceptual equivalence and preserve the integrity of participants' meanings.

Ethics

Before participation, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 01/CASS-DRI/2024). Participants were fully informed about the study's aims, methods, and potential benefits and were allowed to ask questions and withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by ensuring that personal information was not disclosed without permission. Data were securely stored in a password-protected folder accessible only to the research team and used solely for this study.

Results

This section presents the study findings through the identified themes and subthemes derived from the interview data. To start with, and to ensure anonymity and uphold ethical considerations, all 21 research participants were assigned unique identification codes. Coding was systematically applied according to participants'

academic status to enhance clarity while protecting identities. Accordingly, the 17 undergraduate social work students were coded as UG-SWS-1 to UG-SWS-17, the three postgraduate students as PG-SWS-1 to PG-SWS-3, and the lecturer as SWL-1. This coding system facilitated the organisation and presentation of findings while ensuring that individual participants could not be directly identified.

Table 1
Sociodemographic data and Coding of Interviewees

SN	Category	Gender	Age	Year of Study	Location	Role in Social Lab	Code Assigned
1	UG Social Work Student	M	24	Year 4	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-1
2	UG Social Work Student	M	31	Year 4	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-2
3	UG Social Work Student	M	25	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-3
4	UG Social Work Student	F	24	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-4
5	UG Social Work Student	M	27	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-5
6	UG Social Work Student	M	26	Year 4	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-6
7	UG Social Work Student	F	23	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-7
8	UG Social Work Student	F	24	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-8
9	UG Social Work Student	M	35	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-9
10	UG Social Work Student	M	41	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-10
11	UG Social Work Student	M	24	Year 4	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-11
12	UG Social Work Student	F	23	Year 4	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-12
13	UG Social Work Student	M	25	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-13
14	UG Social Work Student	M	37	Year 4	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-14
15	UG Social Work Student	M	24	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-15

16	UG Social Work Student	M	29	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-16
17	UG Social Work Student	M	34	Year 4	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	UG-SWS-17
18	PG Social Work Student	M	35	Year2	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	PG-SWS-1
19	PG Social Work Student	F	29	Year2	Huye	Social Lab Implementer	PG-SWS-2
20	PG Social Work Student	F	39	Year 2	Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	PG-SWS-3
21	Social Work Lecturer	M	63	NA	Huye & Gicumbi	Social Lab Implementer	SWL-1

Table 1 summarises the sociodemographic characteristics of the 21 interviewees involved in the Social Lab implementation. The participants were mainly undergraduate Social Work students (n=17), with three postgraduate students and one lecturer. Most participants were male (n=15), aged between 23 and 63 years, and were based in Gicumbi and Huye districts. Their involvement as Social Lab implementers provided diverse perspectives from students and academic staff, while the assigned codes ensured confidentiality during data analysis.

Table 2 provides a summary of the themes, subthemes, and illustrative participant quotations, offering an overview of the key findings. The themes are subsequently presented and interpreted in detail, with participants' quotations used to support and contextualise the authors' analysis.

Table 2. Development of Themes and Subthemes from the Interview Data

Themes	Subthemes	Sampled Quote
Understanding of social labs	Solving social problems	In my understanding, social labs are a collaborative approach to addressing complex social challenges, (SWL-1, Pos. 14)
		Social labs are collaborative interventions that bring together diverse stakeholders to address complex, systemic societal challenges. (UG-SWS-5, Pos. 14)
	Social work practice	It is also known as social work field education (UG-SWS-2, Pos. 14)
		In short, it is a community practice for social work students. (UG-SWS-3, Pos. 14)

Social Labs-Motivating factors	Innovative solutions	 <i>Innovative solutions</i> (PG-SWS-1, Pos. 19) The intention to contribute to the innovative solution of these problems influenced my academic practice through social labs (UG-SWS-16, Pos. 16)
	Getting Hands-on skills	Social labs offer real-world experiences where I to the field. (UG-SWS-13, Pos. 16)
	Academic requirement	it is an academic requirement to have field practice (UG-SWS-8, Pos. 16)
Identified social problems	Early pregnancy	early pregnancies. (UG-SWS-1, Pos. 18)
	Unemployment	unemployment (UG-SWS-14, Pos. 18)
	Family Conflicts	<i>Family problems wife.</i> (UG-SWS-6, Pos. 18)
	School dropout	school dropout (UG-SWS-1, Pos. 18)
	Poverty	Many problems were identified, including poverty. (UG-SWS-12, Pos. 18)
Stakeholders in social labs	Social Work students	Social Work students work as a bridge between local leaders and the community (in our case, it was teenage mothers) (SWL-1, Pos. 22)
	Academic Supervisors	and university lecturers, (UG-SWS-1, Pos. 20)
	Local Leaders	We have collaborated with local leaders,..... (UG-SWS-4, Pos. 20)
	Community members	Community members,..... (UG-SWS-13, Pos. 20)
Opportunities in Social Labs	Access to information	Collaborating with community members helps us to access accurate information,..... (UG-SWS-7, Pos. 29)
	Learning practical skills	working together on the field helped us gain new skills in working on the field (UG-SWS-3, Pos. 29)
	Collaboration	Collaborating with community members helps us..... (UG-SWS-7, Pos. 29)
Challenges in Social Labs	Long distance to the field	long-distance travel from the University to intervention locations. (UG-SWS-4, Pos. 26)
	No financial facilitation	No financial funds to facilitate the implementation of social labs,..... (UG-SWS-11, Pos. 24)
	Short time	Limited time to do a deep assessment of the beneficiaries' problems..... (UG-SWS-8, Pos. 27)

Sustaining Social Labs	Integration into the curriculum	There is also a need to add social labs in modules that social work students learn in class and practice in the field. (UG-SWS-9, Pos. 30)
	Funding Social Labs	There is a need to facilitate students in social labs with financial means and the needed tools for them to be more productive (UG-SWS-6, Pos. 33)
	Community Ownership	For social labs to be sustainable, there is a need to ensure community ownership,..... (UG-SWS-1, Pos. 30)
	Strong Partnership	strong partnership and collaboration, which may include more stakeholders (UG-SWS-11, Pos. 30)

Table 2 above presents the main themes and subthemes emerging from the interview data. The findings show that Social Labs were perceived as a collaborative approach for solving social problems and enhancing social work practice. Participants highlighted motivations such as innovation and practical learning, identified key community challenges, and emphasized the role of multiple stakeholders. While Social Labs provided opportunities for skills development and collaboration, challenges included limited funding, time, and field accessibility. Sustainability was linked to curriculum integration, resources, community ownership, and partnerships.

Understanding of social labs

During interviews, participants expressed differing understandings of social labs. Some described them as collaborative spaces for addressing social problems, while others viewed them primarily as a form of social work field practicum. One participant stated: ‘Social labs are understood as a space where people come together to tackle complex social problems by finding problems to those problems’ (UG-SWS-11, Pos. 14). Another noted: ‘This is a process by which academic staff help by placing them into a field to put what they learned theoretically into practice. It is also known as social work field education’ (UG-SWS-2, Pos. 14).

These responses indicate a lack of shared understanding among University of Rwanda students regarding the concept of social labs. While some align with Zaid Hassan’s conceptualisation of social labs as collaborative, problem-solving spaces, others equate them with traditional field practicum models. In contrast, social labs are intended as community-embedded learning processes in which students and community members jointly identify pressing social challenges and co-create effective, sustainable solutions based on real-world engagement.

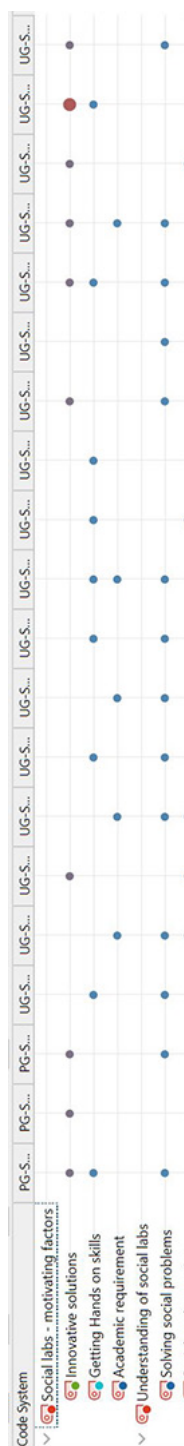
Social lab application- motivating factors

Participants provided varied explanations for their motivation to join social labs. Some indicated that participation was primarily driven by academic requirements, as the social work practicum is a mandatory component for completing a degree at the University of Rwanda. This is reflected in the following statement: ‘We joined social labs because a social work practicum was needed and recommended by the University. (UG-SWS-4, Pos. 16).’

Others reported being motivated by a desire to contribute to innovative, community-driven solutions to social issues. As one participant noted: ‘My decision to continue my studies and social work practicum through social labs was influenced by my passion for innovative, community-driven solutions to social issues’ (PG-SWS-3, Pos. 14). Additionally, some participants highlighted the importance of gaining hands-on experience through community engagement, as illustrated by: ‘The decision to carry on my studies and social work practicum through social labs was influenced by several key factors including getting hands of experience,.....’ (PG-SWS-1, Pos. 17-18). Figure 1 presents a visual summary of participants’ motivations and their understanding of social labs.

Figure 1 illustrates participants’ understanding of social laboratories and their motivations for participation. The findings show that most participants viewed social labs as a collaborative approach to solving social problems, while others associated them with social work field practice. The most frequently reported motivations for participation were gaining hands-on skills and contributing to innovative solutions, whereas academic requirements were mentioned less frequently. Overall, the figure highlights experiential learning and innovation as the primary drivers of engagement in social labs.

Figure 1: Visualised understanding and motives for social labs (extract from MAXQDA-2022)



Identified community problems and social labs approach

Social labs provided students with a participatory and experiential platform to engage directly with communities and identify complex social problems affecting people's everyday lives. Through community interactions, students were able to move beyond theoretical understanding and recognise interconnected challenges such as early motherhood, poverty, school dropout, unemployment, and family conflicts, as well as the social and economic burdens associated with these issues. One participant explained: 'The big problem identified was teen motherhood. The intervention provided was to educate them about reproductive health and family planning methods and mobilise them to form saving groups.' (UG-SWS-13, Pos. 18). Another interviewee highlighted how engagement with community members enabled students to identify multiple challenges and understand their underlying consequences:

'Identified social problems are poverty, school dropout, and early pregnancy. In dealing with these issues, we had to organise training for affected people on how they can deal with those challenges. We also advocated for them, and the local government supported them, allowing them to participate in short-term vocational training in carpentry, tailoring, and shaving. After completing the training, the district provided them with materials for them to start income-generating activities.' (UG-SWS-1, Pos. 18).

Beyond identifying social problems, social labs encouraged students to analyse community needs collaboratively and develop locally relevant responses. For instance, after recognising poverty and limited economic opportunities as key challenges, students worked with community members to establish and strengthen savings groups as a strategy for financial empowerment. Their involvement included providing guidance on group formation, registration procedures, governance structures, rules, regulations, and shared objectives. As one participant noted, students helped to 'mobilise them to form saving groups' (UG-SWS-13, Pos. 18).

These findings illustrate that social labs function as a mechanism for community-based social problem identification, where students, community members, and local stakeholders jointly explore social realities and prioritise areas requiring intervention. Through this collaborative process, students developed a deeper understanding of the structural and lived dimensions of social problems while contributing to practical responses addressing poverty, unemployment, and early pregnancy. However, while the approach demonstrates potential for enhancing experiential learning and community engagement, questions remain regarding its integration and established relevance within social work education. The findings are therefore presented descriptively, highlighting both the transformative potential and the challenges of using social labs as an emerging model for social work learning and practice.

Stakeholders in the social labs application

Interviews revealed that social labs involved collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Students worked with community members to identify and address social problems, while university lecturers provided academic guidance and local leaders facilitated access to communities and supervised field activities. Figure 2 illustrates these identified social problems and stakeholder roles. One participant explained:

Different stakeholders were involved in social labs, including local leaders, community members, students, and academic supervisors. Community members were directed to solve social problems. Local leaders helped introduce us to the community so that they would know about our practice. Academic supervisors provided supportive functions to students. (UG-SWS-16, Pos. 21).

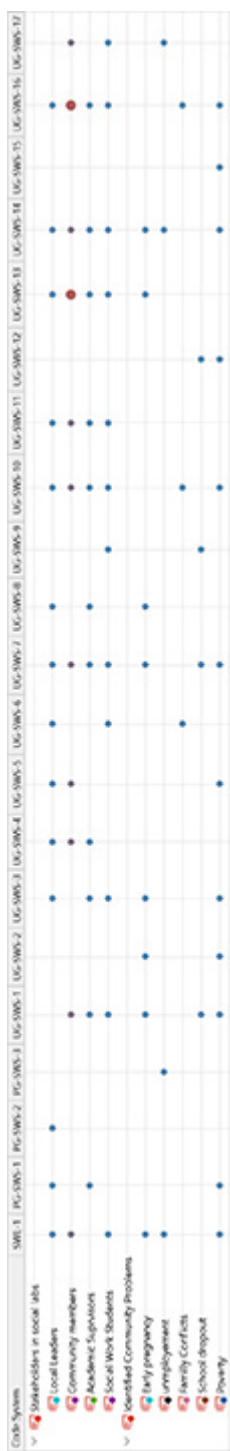
Figure 2 presents a code co-occurrence matrix showing how different stakeholder groups and identified community problems are represented across the interviews (SWL-1, PG-SWS-1 to PG-SWS-3, and UG-SWS-1 to UG-SWS-17). The distribution of dots indicates that *local leaders*, *community members*, *academic supervisors*, and *social work students* were consistently mentioned across most interviews, suggesting broad participation in the social labs. Among the identified community problems, *poverty* and *early pregnancy* appear most frequently, indicating that they were the dominant issues discussed by participants. In contrast, *unemployment*, *family conflicts*, and *school dropout* were mentioned less often, implying that these concerns were either less prevalent or less emphasised during the discussions. Overall, the figure demonstrates a diverse range of stakeholder engagement while highlighting poverty and early pregnancy as the most consistently identified community challenges.

Opportunities and Success stories of social labs

In interviews with research participants, it was confirmed that social labs present multiple opportunities that may motivate future participation. These opportunities are primarily linked to experiential learning, collaboration with community members, and engagement with multiple stakeholders in addressing social problems. Participants emphasised that social labs enable them to translate theory into practice while strengthening practical skills. As one participant noted:

One opportunity in social labs is that students get a chance to put theories into practice. Collaborating with community members helps us to access accurate information and enhance our research skills. Working together to identify social problems and find solutions. Advocating for those affected by the social problems and linking them with service providers. (UG-SWS-7, Pos. 29).

Figure 2: Identified social problems and stakeholders while in social labs



Another participant added: ‘Collaboration between social workers and the community helped in sharing and receiving accurate information. Opportunity to advocate for people in need of social protection, to promote human rights and social justice, and job opportunities.’ (UG-SWS-5, Pos. 30).

Beyond learning opportunities, participants reported several success stories emerging from social lab interventions. These include the formal creation and registration of savings groups at the cell level, with ongoing processes for sector-level registration. In addition, students supported vocational graduates by advocating for sewing machines, while others awaiting training were placed in future cohorts. This is illustrated by:

‘advocating and requesting support of sewing machines for the members who finished vocational training and putting on the waiting list the remaining group members who haven’t done any vocational training so that they can be enrolled in the next cohort’ (PG-SWS-1, Pos. 32).

Participants also reported community-level recognition of groups, income-generating initiatives such as pig farming and bracelet-making, and the transformation of a savings group in Gicumbi into a cooperative receiving agricultural support for mushroom farming.

Challenges and limitations faced in implementing social labs

No new approach can be implemented without encountering challenges, and these limitations also provide important insights for improving future implementation of social labs. In conversations with research participants, several key challenges were identified. The most frequently mentioned included limited time for implementation, as students had to return to academic coursework, long distances between campuses or student residences and field sites, and a lack of financial support for transport, as students largely relied on self-funding.

Other participants noted additional challenges, such as initial cultural adjustment difficulties when engaging with communities, as well as expectations from some community members for financial incentives to participate in social labs. However, these latter issues were less frequently mentioned compared to the logistical and financial constraints. These challenges and limitations, together with opportunities and recommendations for sustainability, are presented in Figure 3.

The challenges are further supported by interview extracts: ‘Lack of transport fees with long distances to the field to visit beneficiaries. Limited time to provide in-depth assistance with beneficiaries’ problems. Lack of mobile network and internet in the field.’ (UG-SWS-8, Pos. 27). Another participant added: ‘there are various challenges and limitations about the implementation of social labs and these include financial difficulties, geographical location of the area of intervention (UG-SWS-14, Pos. 25).

Figure 3 presents the opportunities of participating in social labs, the challenges encountered by social workers and student implementers, and the proposed recommendations for the sustainability of social labs, which are discussed in detail in the subsequent subsection. The dots in the figure represent the occurrence of subthemes across interviewees. For example, a strong partnership was most frequently mentioned by UG-SWS-11, UG-SWS-12, and UG-SWS-14.

Sustaining the social labs approach

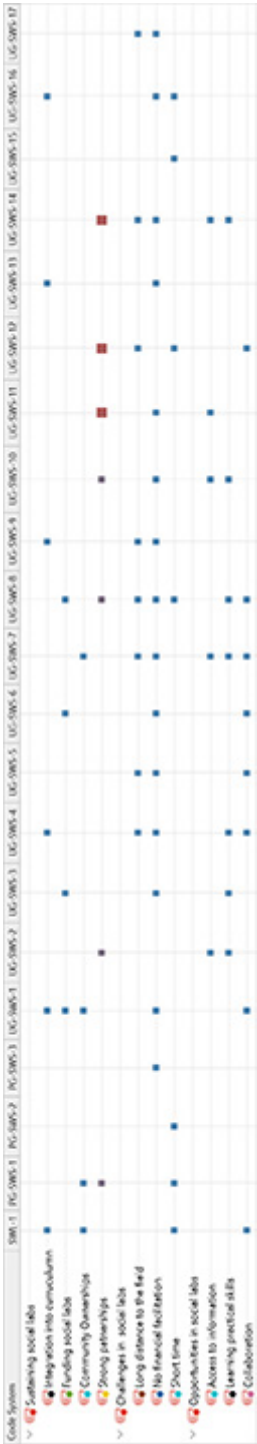
When participants were asked about strategies for sustaining social labs, they emphasised the need for institutionalisation, stakeholder commitment, and community ownership. Participants viewed social labs as a valuable approach within the Rwandan context, particularly because they promote innovative and collaborative responses to social challenges. One participant highlighted the importance of continued institutional support: *‘Yes, social labs are applicable in Rwanda, and it is of help because the social profession is new and needs innovations. The government should support the work done by social workers for their work to be valued.’* (UG-SWS-10, Pos. 35).

Participants further stressed that sustainability requires embedding social labs within existing systems, particularly social work education and community practice. They recommended integrating social labs into academic curricula, strengthening collaboration between universities and field placement organisations, and ensuring that students and practitioners have the necessary skills and resources to implement the approach effectively. As one participant explained: *‘There is a need for tools; they need to be more productive. There is a need for University lecturers to speak with field supervisors to provide them with a brief overview of social work theories.’* (UG-SWS-6, Pos. 33-34).

Community ownership and capacity building were also identified as critical for maintaining social labs beyond individual projects. One participant emphasised: *‘To ensure the sustainability of the social lab model within communities and higher learning institutions, a holistic approach is essential, such as the need to emphasise community ownership, capacity building, and transparent communication.’* (SWL-1, Pos. 35).

Overall, the findings suggest that sustaining social labs requires moving beyond short-term interventions toward long-term institutional support, community engagement, continuous capacity development, and resource mobilisation. These conditions are essential for establishing social labs as a sustainable innovation in social work education and community practice.

Figure 3: Perceived Opportunities, challenges, and sustainability of Social Labs



Discussion

The findings indicate that social labs are perceived as a collaborative, practice-oriented approach that connects students, communities, and multiple stakeholders in addressing pressing social problems such as poverty, unemployment, and early pregnancy. Participants demonstrated varied understandings of social labs, ranging from community problem-solving platforms to extensions of social work field education. The approach was associated with motivations such as academic requirements, innovation, and skills development, while also enabling experiential learning, stakeholder collaboration, and tangible community outcomes. However, structural challenges, including limited time, financial constraints, and long distances, were also identified.

These findings are interpreted through the combined lens of social innovation theory and Zaid Hassan's social labs methodology, which emphasises co-creation, systems thinking, and multi-stakeholder collaboration (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans, 2020). The results illustrate how social labs operationalise these theoretical principles in practice. The collaborative engagement between students, communities, and institutional actors reflects the core tenets of social innovation, particularly the generation of context-sensitive, participatory solutions to complex social challenges. This supports Hassan's (2014) view of social labs as experimental spaces where diverse actors iteratively engage with systemic problems.

The study demonstrates that social labs foster locally grounded, community-driven approaches that integrate indigenous knowledge systems into social work education (Benander et al., 2018). This aligns with arguments that indigenised social work should move beyond imported models to embrace culturally responsive and contextually relevant practices (Tusasiirwe, 2019; Nyirinkwaya et al., 2025; Bimenyimana et al., 2024; Nazım & Karaağaç, 2026). Through co-creation with community members, students actively reconstruct theoretical knowledge in relation to local realities, thereby contributing to the decolonisation of conventional practicum models. In this regard, social labs function as both pedagogical and epistemological innovations.

The findings also resonate with existing scholarship on experiential and practice-based learning. Consistent with Cunha and Benneworth (2013), social labs create a dynamic interface between teaching, research, and community engagement, enabling students to engage in active scholarship rather than passive knowledge transfer. This is further supported by literature on communities of practice, which emphasises the importance of collaborative learning environments in shaping professional competencies (Edmonds-Cady & Sosulski, 2012; Wenger et al., 2023). The integration of theory and practice reflects Kolb's (2014) view, where learning is understood as a cyclical process grounded in concrete experience. Through direct engagement with community challenges, students transition from knowledge consumers to producers of contextually relevant, evidence-based solutions (Amadasun, 2021).

The systemic orientation of social labs, evident in students' focus on root causes rather than symptoms, illustrates the application of systems thinking embedded in Hassan's framework. For instance, interventions that address school dropout by linking students to government support services demonstrate how interconnected social issues can be addressed holistically. This aligns with broader social innovation literature, which advocates for addressing structural drivers of social problems rather than isolated manifestations (Timmermans, 2020; Agwu et al., 2022). Additionally, the integration of local knowledge and traditional practices supports calls for culturally embedded interventions that align with community values and belief systems (Chitere, 2018; Kiguwa, 2019; Celestin et al., 2025).

At the same time, the challenges identified included financial constraints, long distances, and limited time, which altogether reflect broader structural limitations within African higher education systems (Twikirize, 2014). These findings suggest that while social labs are conceptually robust, their effectiveness is contingent upon institutional support, resource availability, and sustained engagement. The relatively short duration of implementation raises questions about scalability and long-term impact, indicating the need for iterative refinement and longitudinal evaluation. As highlighted by Belone et al. (2016), meaningful stakeholder engagement and supportive research environments are essential for enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of community-based initiatives.

The findings suggest that the adoption of social innovation approaches such as social labs should be gradual and context-sensitive. Scaling up requires addressing key challenges, including financial constraints, time limitations, and logistical barriers, while strengthening institutional support and stakeholder collaboration to ensure sustainability and effective integration into social work education and practice. This study contributes to the growing discourse on indigenised and community-engaged social work by providing early insights into how social labs could be a viable model of community-centred social work practice and social work-led multidisciplinary cooperation in low-resource settings. The findings demonstrate how 'social lab' approaches can facilitate bottom-up, context-driven social experimentation, challenging rigid, top-down models of knowledge production and practice in social work. In doing so, they underscore the value of integrating social innovation theory and social labs methodology as analytically generative frameworks that enhance community ownership and empirical rigour in social work-led problem-solving in society.

Overall, the application of social labs demonstrates a gradual shift from conventional social work practicum models toward a collaborative and experimental approach where students, communities, and stakeholders jointly identify problems and develop context-sensitive solutions. While community-based and participatory approaches are increasingly recognised in African social work education, structured social lab methodologies remain underexplored. The findings suggest that social labs have potential to strengthen practice-based learning and academia–community

partnerships; however, their sustainability and scalability require institutional support, adequate resources, continuous capacity building, and more dedicated study on how the approach is evolving.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has some limitations. These include the lack of a comparative analysis between the social lab model of social work field practicum and traditional placements at agencies; missing questions about whether students felt overwhelmed working across multiple agencies and with a pool of professionals instead of focusing on specific remits; the absence of a decolonisation framework, even though the study aligns with a decolonised approach to social work education; and a small sample size typical of qualitative studies that restricts broader applicability. These limitations present opportunities for future exploration, helping to strengthen the evidence base for social lab approaches in social work practice.

Conclusion

Social labs demonstrate significant potential for advancing the indigenisation of social work education in Africa. The findings indicate that they strengthen community engagement, promote the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, and support experiential learning through contextually grounded and participatory approaches. This contributes to a more culturally relevant and responsive model of field education. In the Rwandan context, social labs provide a structured yet flexible framework that enhances students' field learning by enabling continuous collaboration with communities to understand and address local challenges. The use of guiding principles and minimal critical specifications facilitates open participation and reflection within the engagement process (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019).

Consistent with Hassan (2014), the findings show that social labs foster collective problem-solving, experiential learning, and social learning through iterative and collaborative processes. They also demonstrate the potential to bridge the gap between academic institutions and communities by promoting knowledge co-creation and mutual learning (Lambert & Biddulph, 2015). However, the study also identifies limitations, particularly the short duration of student engagement, which constrains the full realisation of social labs' benefits. Based on these findings, the study recommends strengthening the operationalisation of social lab features, gathering more evidence on the subject and integrating them incrementally into the academic curriculum, providing funding to researchers and implementers of social labs, and fostering stronger stakeholder partnerships. Additionally, developing a structured experiential testing process to enhance community ownership and evidence of application is essential.

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