

LIVING LAB IRELAND



As reported by the Irish Farmers Association in 2019, of the 137,500 farms in Ireland, 12% are in female ownership while 4% have joint male/female owners.

In Ireland, women are more likely to access land ownership through marriage rather than inheritance. Joint Farming Ventures (JFT), through which women can access co-management, if not co-ownership of land, are studied as a potential way for rural women to develop a leadership position on farms.

A positive income stream developed for rural women innovators is the ACORNS programme (Accelerating the Creation of Rural Nascent Start-ups), funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through the Rural Innovation and Development Fund since 2014.

Rural women have reported several drivers to becoming innovators including the need to contribute to the sustainability of family farms; environmental values; the desire to develop a potentially profitable business idea conceptualised during “off-farm” work and business education.

The Irish Living Lab comprises women innovators in the southeast region interested in the pursuit of agri- and rural socio-ecological innovations drawing on ‘the local’ through a sustainable lens.

During the first meeting, the women shared examples of numerous innovative activities they are engaged in throughout the region. During the discussion, they highlighted several challenges to successful innovation: limitations on resources (including time, finance and human resources) that constrain their innovation potential; gender-specific barriers that impact on their confidence as innovators and their success in getting support for new ideas for business development; a lack of vision on the part of support agencies for new/innovative approaches; a lack of joined-up thinking and processes between some rural and business support services. This creates a replication of paperwork and administration for women seeking business support.

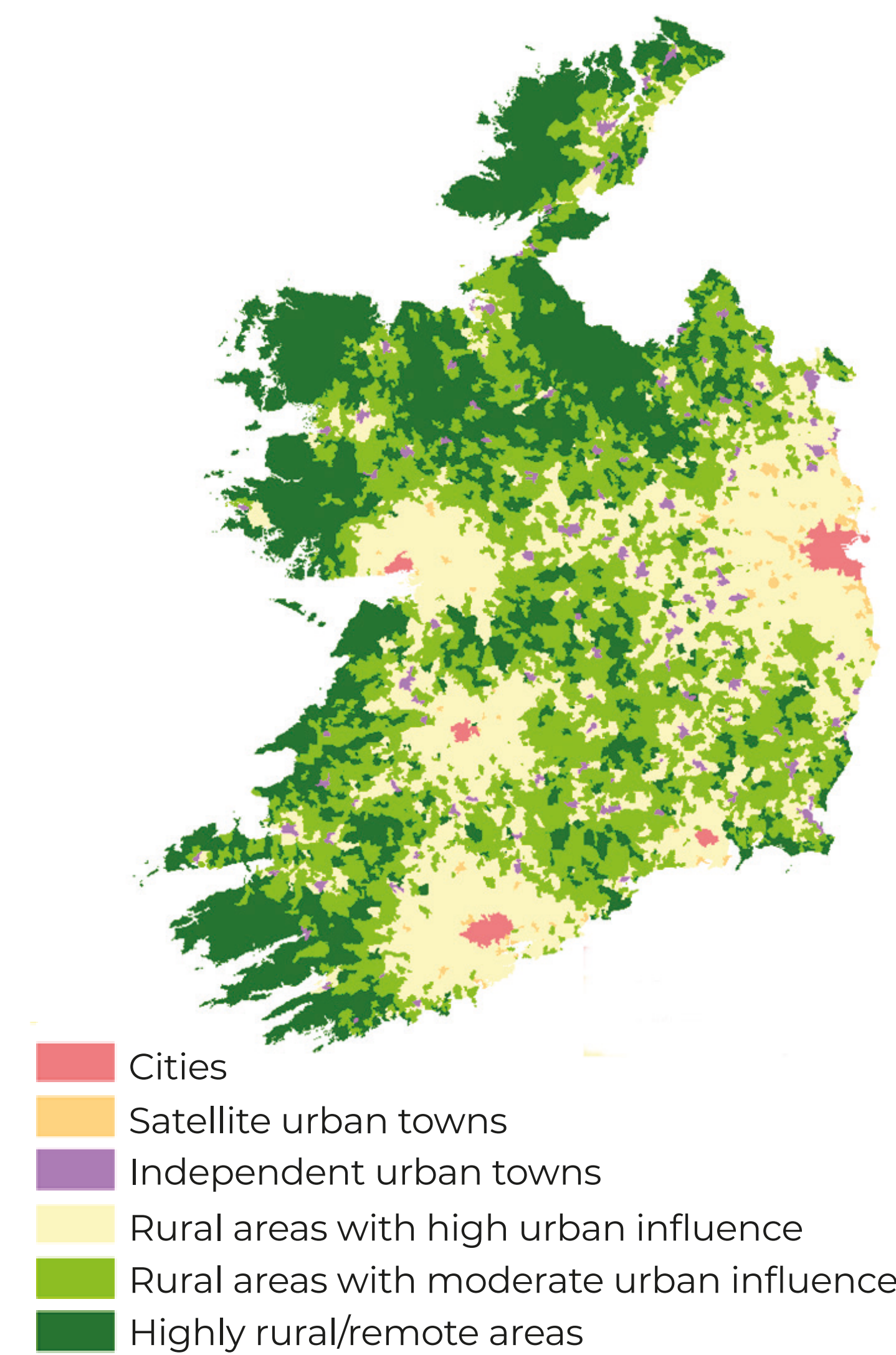
Suggestions to support the work of rural women include greater visibility of champions; a change of language about the rural environment and rural women in the media;

shared graduate placement models and work hubs offering diverse professional skills to underpin innovation in situ; and, increased engagement of young women with agri- and rural innovation advisory services.

The Living Lab has the following **objectives**:

- Engage rural women at early and more advanced stages of innovation and rural business experience.
- Understand their innovation requirements through the exploration of local sustainable models of rural innovation/development.
- Enhance their innovation capability and visibility.
- Support their innovation journeys by embedding them in an innovation ecosystem.
- Map key insights from the Irish Living Lab to enhance young women's ability to innovate within their rural setting.

Living Lab Ireland will draw on Macra Na Feirme's young rural members, and on SETU's eco-innovation experience in the agri sector to support these goals. Living Lab Ireland will support women as innovation champions in our rural communities.



Population distribution by six-way urban/rural classification using Census 2026 results (2019)
Source: CSO Ireland

Living Lab Ireland will explore group and individual rural business innovation through the Grass CEILING project's innovation process. In meeting 2 (Oct 2023) we will begin to explore a group innovation potentially focusing on a 'brand rural Ireland' cooperative product and/or service.

Individual **innovations** being discussed and planned include:

- Educational offering: Small farms as hubs of environmental protection and education which support the retention of traditional skills.
- Sustainable horticulture underpinned by local short supply chains.
- The nutritional development of horticulture products.
- Agri-tech and AI-focused rural marketing and PR services.
- Dairy farm diversification – local handmade products using traditional processes, and biodegradable, compostable packaging.
- Artisan Irish rural product development rooted in excellence, craftsmanship and traditional techniques.



Lab participants are women at early and later stages of innovation and rural business experience. Some are aspiring entrepreneurs while others have been actively engaged in innovative business start-up and development activities for several years.

Many of our participants have successfully brought their local product/service offerings to national retailers and markets. Some participants have been involved in the ACORNS programme and several others have been recipients of prestigious awards and bursaries including the Irish Government Circular Economy Innovation Grant Scheme.

The innovative rural business offerings include diverse dairy-based products and services, artisan sustainable chocolate products and services, local short supply chain horticulture products and rural marketing and PR services for leading agri-business clients.

