

GRASS CEILING

D6.9

Practice abstracts – batch n.2





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E

xecutive Summary

This document summarises the key findings of the experiences of rural women innovators across Living Labs (described in greater detail in Deliverable 2.3). The report compiles evidence from women-led innovation processes that were co-created collectively within the Living Labs, involving women innovators and diverse stakeholders from several European countries.

The deliverable presents nine country-based summaries highlighting the results and learnings emerging from the Living Labs, including their composition and organisational structures, innovation processes and observed changes, stakeholder interactions and perceptions, and the collective learning generated through these experiences.

Additionally, the document provides a comparative overview of the main outcomes across the participating countries, identifying common challenges, enabling factors, and emerging opportunities for women-led innovation in rural contexts.

This work has been coordinated by academic teams from nine European countries, with the synthesis of European-level content carried out by the Dutch academic team.

This deliverable, together with the previous batch of Practice Abstracts (Deliverable 6.8), can be found on the GRASS CEILING website as part of the Online Academy materials. The documents are available separately for each country, in English and, where applicable, in the respective national languages, at the following link: [LINK](#)

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01 Norway

Women and agri-food innovation in rural areas of mid-Norway: Lessons from the GRASS CEILING project

1.1. Introduction

The Norwegian Living Lab (LL) of the GRASS CEILING project included seven women innovators from rural areas of Mid Norway (the Trøndelag region) with the aim of supporting them in their advanced innovation processes within the local food sector. This summary presents the main outcomes of the Living Lab experience, focusing on how the participants have shared experiences and supported each other, on their interaction with key stakeholders, and on the collective learning processes that have emerged throughout the LL.

1.2. Case study results and learnings

1.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Labs

Trøndelag is an intermediate rural region in the middle of Norway, with a land area of 39,493 square kilometres. It is one of the largest agricultural regions in Norway with a contribution of 23 % towards the national agricultural production. The region has 5518 agricultural farms. The most significant categories of agricultural production, measured in employment and economic growth, are dairy and beef production. The accessibility of relevant infrastructure is generally good.

The LL group is diverse in age (36–79 years) and background (a mix of vocational education and higher education within different disciplines). All the innovations involved are based on local food production in one way or the other, and cover food, beverages, and local food-based travel and tourism. The innovations involve businesses within the marine and agricultural sectors. Some of the farms also serve local food and provide accommodation, hosted events, and guided river fishing. Most of the firms are based on additional business activities related to a farm.

The nine meetings combined debates, training sessions, a farm visit, and dialogues with relevant stakeholders. Face-to-face sessions were appreciated and prioritised for fostering trust and informal relationships. The group conducted seven physical meetings and two online meetings. The flexibility of each session, participants' involvement in the session design, and input through mentoring talks helped to adapt the content to their needs.

1.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

The seven women who remained in the Living Lab during the entire process all have fully developed businesses and are earning an income. They had already been working on their business for years, which implies that they were all well established and quite far ‘into the game’. Still, the innovation projects were supported throughout the Living Labs with tasks, ideation, brainstorming and discussions about various aspects of their innovation journeys. The Lab has not focused mainly on product innovations but rather on inputs to and dialogue around issues that can strengthen their resilience as established innovators, how to be best equipped to withstand change, how to build a structure that makes it sustainable to continue being an innovator and exchange of experiences on how to position oneself in the market.

1.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

The value of the stakeholder sessions– how useful, educational and inspiring they were - depended greatly on the stakeholders involved in each session. Their ability to understand the LL members, to manage expectations about their visit, and to communicate effectively, had a strong influence on the outcomes. Some LL members felt that some of the content was too basic. Even though they all work in the local food industry, their contexts and approaches differed widely. As a result, it was difficult for stakeholders to address everyone’s needs and interests in every talk. While not all sessions were equally rewarding, most LL members found the majority of sessions beneficial and relevant to their work. Some members had specific preferences regarding the stakeholders they wanted to engage with and appreciated that these requests were taken into account.

1.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

The Living Lab members agreed that the collective learning process that worked best for them involved preparing a case and presenting a specific challenge to the group. Other participants would then provide feedback and together they would reflect on possible solutions. Although the participants presented different roles, they often faced similar types of challenges. Having a forum that encouraged focused discussions around potential solutions was highly valued. Despite being well advanced in their innovation journeys, further progress was observed in several cases between the first and final Labs - whether through improved processes, product development or access to new markets. Despite being well established, participants appreciated receiving recognition, and validation from peers operating at the same level. The process of listening to and learning from others’ experiences also generated significant reflection and insight.

1.3. Conclusion

The Norwegian case has confirmed that LLs are a good tool for supporting women-led innovation processes in rural areas. Beyond practical progress, innovation is also built on resilience, collective empowerment, networking, and interaction with stakeholders. The Living Lab primarily served as a space for sharing experiences, offering mutual support, and gathering valuable input and insights from diverse stakeholders. The flexibility of the Living Lab design enabled content to be adapted to participants’ contexts and needs. The structured dialogue and exchange of experiences facilitated by the LL provided a forum for useful discussions among women innovators within the same sector. Over time, this process has built mutual trust and respect, enabling problem-solving at a deeper level than in other networks.



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02 Spain

Women and agri-food innovation in depopulated areas of northern Spain: Lessons from the GRASS CEILING project

2.1. Introduction

The Spanish Living Lab (LL) of the GRASS CEILING project was conducted in depopulated rural areas of northern Spain (Castilla y León, Aragón, and Asturias) with the aim of supporting eight women farmers and livestock breeders in their advanced innovation processes. This summary presents the main outcomes of the experience, focusing on how the participants have redefined their identity as innovators, on their interaction with key stakeholders, and on the collective learning processes that have emerged throughout the LL.

2.2. Case study results and learnings

2.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

The participants live in territories marked by depopulation, ageing, and a severe lack of basic services, with small and medium-sized farms of limited profitability. Most combine productive and care responsibilities. The group is diverse in age (35–62 years) and profile (farmers and livestock breeders), all with solid agricultural training, some holding university degrees and with previous experience in innovation. The nine meetings combined debates, training sessions, field visits, and dialogues with institutional representatives. Face-to-face sessions were the most valued for fostering trust and informal relationships, although geographical dispersion and connectivity problems required a constant hybrid format. Individual mentoring and a WhatsApp group provided ongoing support. The flexibility of each session, the participants' involvement in session design, and continuous follow-up made it possible to adapt the content to their real needs.

2.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

At the beginning of the project, most women did not perceive themselves as innovators. The LL enabled them to understand the broad meaning of innovation—economic, social, and environmental—, to value their own work, and to strengthen their self-confidence. One of the most significant advances was their growing awareness of the importance of cooperativism, formal and informal association, and network creation. The diversity of ages, trajectories, and production systems enriched the process and revealed different forms of female leadership in rural areas. Together, they have helped make visible a model of innovation based on cooperation, sustainability, and commitment to the territory.

2.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

The involvement of public administrations, cooperatives, associations, and academics proved decisive. Concrete impacts were achieved through the participants' dialogue with different stakeholders. New opportunities for visibility and training also emerged. Although some actors initially appeared distant, over time they developed greater gender sensitivity and recognition of women's roles. Beyond their informational and educational roles, stakeholder participation has made it possible to connect women's individual experiences with institutional frameworks and public policies, creating an open dialogue between practical and political spheres. The diversity of actors involved has enriched the discussions and fostered the creation of synergies. This direct contact improved mutual understanding, strengthened the legitimacy of their proposals, and increased the visibility of their innovations.

2.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

The women have perceived the LL as a transformative space. They highlight the recognition they have received, the strength of working within a network, and how they have overcome fears and insecurities. They value the opportunity to rationalise and discuss their challenges, to structure ideas, and to share them in a trusted environment. They also emphasise the importance of mutual support and of the interactions developed between themselves and with other project actors. Among the improvement proposals, they express their desire to maintain the network they have created, expand it to include other women, and sustain it beyond the project. The network could be complemented with visits to successful farms and with the involvement of a wider range of actors. Ensuring this continuity will be key to consolidate the innovations developed during the project, enable their transfer and adapt to other rural contexts, generate new alliances and expand their impact within the agricultural system and public policies.

2.3. Conclusion

The Spanish case study has confirmed that LLs are an effective tool to support women-led innovation processes in depopulated rural areas. Beyond technical progress, innovation is also built on resilience, collective empowerment, networking, and interaction with stakeholders. To improve their innovation journey, women have identified several key needs: work–life balance and personal support, better rural services and connectivity, economic sustainability of the agricultural sector, and more participatory and less bureaucratic policies. Maintaining and expanding these support networks is essential to ensure that women-led innovations contribute to territorial revitalisation and to a CAP with a genuine gender perspective. Altogether, the Spanish case study provides valuable insight into how LLs can strengthen rural women's innovative identity and open spaces for transformation in contexts of strong depopulation and male-dominated agricultural systems. Furthermore, the final conclusions offer guidance for designing innovation policies and programmes that integrate local knowledge, promote inter-institutional collaboration, and recognise women as strategic agents of territorial transformation.

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03 Croatia

Innovators revitalising the rural economy: the GRASS CEILING project encourages eco-women entrepreneurs

3.1. Introduction

The Croatian Living Lab "Eco-Women Entrepreneurs" (LL EWE), established in 2023, brought together eight women innovators from rural areas, mainly from the Adriatic Region, known for its numerous national parks, diverse natural features, rich history, cultural heritage, varied agricultural traditions, and recent dependence on tourism, but also facing depopulation, an insufficient transport service, and a lack of social infrastructure. Over three years and nine full-day meetings, the innovators received training in the design thinking method and networked with each other and key rural stakeholders, including representatives of local governments and national institutions. This summary presents the main outcomes of this experience, highlighting how the innovators empowered themselves through new knowledge and networking, enhanced their skills through shared learning, fostered cooperation with key stakeholders, and developed their innovations during the Living Lab.

3.2. Case study results and learnings

3.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

The Living Lab participants were women aged 36 - 63 from various professions, including a kindergarten teacher, a lawyer, a designer, an agronomist, an agricultural consultant, and farmers. They participated because their current work and innovations contribute to sustainable rural development and the bioeconomy. Their products, such as organic olive oil, fruit juices, autochthonous cattle meat, wool felt clothing, felt therapy balls, wooden lamps and services including workshops on medicinal herbs and olive growing, are contemporary interpretations of local culture, traditional knowledge, and environmental conservation.

The Living Lab provided a time, place, and method for co-learning and networking, with nine full-day meetings, four of which were held in the local communities of the women participants. These meetings lasted two days each and included informal networking and skill exchanges among innovators. The most significant outcomes of the three-year Living Lab were the connections formed among rural women, their exchange of experiences and mutual support. Education on the innovation process contributed to the development of ideas and innovations. However, in mentoring conversations, the innovators most often highlighted mutual connection, socialising, and support as the most valuable results of the meetings. The innovators were eager to acquire new knowledge and suggested topics they wished to explore further. As a result, project activities included eight additional training sessions on financial literacy, agri-tourism, digital marketing, and mental health. Some innovators became empowered and engaged in local public policy activities, while others addressed specific infrastructure issues (such as



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road access to the farm) through interactions with stakeholders.

Organising Living Labs in local communities improved the visibility, recognition, and acknowledgement of the work and efforts of innovators from these areas. It also became clear that local government increased their interest in the topics and challenges faced by women innovators and entrepreneurs in rural areas.

3.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

All innovators completed the education on the innovation process and learned a great deal from it but were not always able to apply the newly acquired knowledge to their innovations. Due to various life circumstances, the innovation and business paths of some innovators changed during the three years of the project, however none abandoned their innovation. The differing dynamics of individual projects and unforeseen circumstances also led to improving the innovators' flexibility and adaptability to changing personal, social, economic and (agri)political conditions, which is a valuable skill for future challenges in the rural economy.

3.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

The LL meetings included stakeholders from local, regional, and national administrations, the civil sector, and research institutions. Through joint discussions on the problems women face in their entrepreneurial and innovation work, the need to recognise the specific circumstances of women entrepreneurs, such as the need for microfinancing or credit tailored to women entrepreneurs' specific needs, became apparent. This collaboration also resulted in a proposal for greater financial support for women farm managers through the Strategic Plan of the Common Agricultural Policy (SP CAP). In October 2025, these changes to the CAP were adopted, enabling women farm managers to receive increased support of 15% (in addition to the basic 40%) for interventions using renewable energy sources and investments in primary agricultural production.

3.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

Co-learning and collaboration through the Living Lab extend beyond project activities. Women innovators, together with stakeholders, initiated their work by establishing an operational group focused on the use of sheep wool. Additionally, the innovators joined the Thematic Working Group "Women in Rural Areas" (National CAP Network), established in 2024, with the head of the Croatian LL elected as president. In 2025, a visit to the European Parliament in Strasbourg was organised for the innovators, including a meeting with a Croatian representative who is vice-chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality and a deputy in the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

3.3. Conclusion

Connecting innovators and providing a space for exchanging experiences, informal networking, and online groups are perceived by participants as the greatest benefits of participating in the project. The women also highlighted the need for additional training, and stakeholders' participation in the LL increased their local visibility and recognition of their work and innovations. Local representatives have gained important knowledge about the obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs and ideas on how to begin overcoming them, following examples from other EU countries. A final benefit is the



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participation of innovators in local and national decision-making bodies, as well as their involvement in new networks and ideas for future projects.

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04 Ireland

Persistent gender norms, the importance of “finding a tribe” and the critical role of stakeholders: Key takeaways from the Irish Living Lab

4.1. Introduction

The Irish Living Lab (LL) of the GRASS CEILING project took place in the urban adjacent region of the south east of Ireland, encompassing the counties of Waterford, Kilkenny, and Wexford. The aim of the Labs was to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by six women innovators and to support their entrepreneurial projects over the three years of the project. This summary establishes the profiles of the women innovators, along with the specific operational approach of the Irish Living Labs and key learnings from the process based on feedback from the women.

4.2. Case study results and learnings

4.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

The six (initially seven) participants in the Irish Living Labs ranged in age from the mid-20s to the late 50s and included the youngest innovator from across all nine GRASS CEILING Living Labs. All women, except this youngest participant, who was an aspiring entrepreneur in 2023, were established innovators at the start of the project. Most women combine their innovations with caring responsibilities. Three women have small children, another woman has adult children, and one is the primary carer for an adult brother with severe special needs who lives with her. Through observations during the Living Labs, it was assumed that all participants were middle-class, and they all noted that having private funds to invest was critical to the development of their innovations.

Seven of the nine Irish Living Labs were held in person. Six of these took place in different locations on the Waterford campus of South East Technological University (SETU). One Living Lab session took place in the factory/café space of a Living Lab participant, located approximately 90km from SETU. Two Living Lab sessions were online, taking place on the Zoom platform. Having most sessions on the university campus gave the Living Labs a formal feel.

4.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

As most participants were established innovators at the start of the project, they would probably have developed their projects independently of their participation in the Living Labs. Moreover, mentoring sessions, such as those in Dutch and Scottish Labs, were not a feature of the Irish Labs. However, a noteworthy aspect of the Irish Living Lab is that in the second year of the sessions, one innovator sold her business to the youngest Lab participant and aspiring entrepreneur. The reason she gave for this sale was the demands of childcare.

4.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

Stakeholders, understood as representatives of government bodies, banks and innovation support organisations, were involved in only two of the nine Living Labs. This was criticised by the women, who wanted more decision-makers to hear their stories, suggestions, and concerns, so changes could be made to the current funding and policy landscape to benefit future women innovators.

The women were especially critical of the representative of the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) in the online session for LL3, who they felt was not hearing their concerns around the need to simplify cumbersome funding applications and models of entrepreneurship, favouring export ambition and scaling upwards, which do not suit many women innovators focused on community, circular economy and sustainability.

The final Living Lab, which included representatives of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCG), was favourably received by participants who felt that their points were being heard and that they could really be contributing to a positive change in existing policy and funding models.

4.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

The women mentioned regularly that they valued the opportunity to come together in a women-only space to share frustrations, successes and advice with each other. One spoke of the value of “finding a tribe” with women on similar entrepreneurial paths. It was clear that the aspiring entrepreneur benefited greatly from having established entrepreneurs to give feedback and guidance, while the established entrepreneurs gained valuable confidence through sharing experiences and advice. However, the women commented that they did not stay in contact between Living Lab sessions.

4.3. Conclusion

Living Labs are valued by participants as a safe and supportive space for sharing successes and challenges in a women-only environment. They also provide an important platform for capturing the barriers faced by women, such as regressive gender norms in caring roles, issues with current funding models and patriarchal understandings of entrepreneurship. However, it must be acknowledged that Living Labs also face key challenges: the adaptation of methodological tools to meet the needs of experienced innovators, expectations of mentorship models involved, and effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the process. A key takeaway from the Irish Living Labs is the importance of embedding stakeholders in each session for women to appreciate the true value of their participation and to understand their critical role within the wider aim of the project of effecting evidence-based policy change.



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05 Italy

Rural women innovations in *Biodistretto delle Lame*, South-East Italy: Lessons from the GRASS CEILING project

5.1. Introduction

The Italian Living Lab was set up in the Puglia region, a hilly, rocky landscape characterised by medium-sized agro-towns, some of which fall within a national park and UNESCO Global Geopark: the area of the *Bio-Distretto delle Lame*. Inspired by organic values and principles, the bio-district itself represents a living laboratory of stakeholders from different sectors of the local economy and community. They share a vision of sustainable, integrated, and inclusive development, committed to protecting and enhancing local agriculture as well as urban and rural landscapes, while reconnecting them with the life projects of local youth. This abstract summarises the characteristics of the LL participants and their innovation journeys, together with key findings and learnings from the case study.

5.2. Case study and learnings

5.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Labs

Aged between 27 and 60, the eight women innovators participating in the LL all belong to the middle class, with a wide range of professional backgrounds and experiences, and a heterogeneous level of digital skills. Most combine their professional activities with significant family care responsibilities. Besides the three participants directly engaged in agriculture, the group included two social workers and three cultural entrepreneurs, whose work is also linked in various ways to agricultural and rural environments.

All LL sessions were held in person at different locations, either at the women's workplaces or homes, or at relevant institutional venues. The meetings, organised with a flexible and adaptive approach by the two co-leading teams, guided participants through their individual and collective innovation journeys, providing tools for structuring and reflecting on their ideas and creating opportunities for exchange with a range of actors. Individual mentoring sessions were also conducted between LL sessions to clarify doubts, consolidate achievements, and support further progress. A WhatsApp group facilitated ongoing communication and the sharing of thoughts and experiences throughout the process.

5.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

The women's learning paths and consequently their progress through the innovation process, was not uniform: some returned to earlier stages, or spent extra time consolidating particular steps, while others advanced more rapidly. Overall, participation in the LL made women more aware of the potential of their innovative ideas and of their role as individual innovators.



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The group as a whole emerged as a visible and valuable pool of competences, qualifications, skills and personalities, prompting the management board of the *Bio-Distretto delle Lame* to involve them in the implementation of a newly funded project on the reconnection of rural and urban spaces and communities.

5.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

During specific sessions of the LL process, participants had the opportunity to engage with stakeholders, interact with experts, and establish useful connections with relevant institutions. These encounters enabled them to learn about available funding and training opportunities and to meet high-level representatives working on gender issues.

The women mostly appreciated those interactions where they could gain practical insights into specific tools or programmes and receive individual feedback from the invited stakeholders on their projects and innovation pathways.

Interestingly, the stakeholders also appreciated the opportunity to engage directly with rural women innovators and to gain a deeper understanding of their challenges, ambitions, and specific support needs.

5.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

Peer-to-peer exchanges were fundamental. They enabled the women to be exposed to diverse contexts, life stories, and new perspectives. The welcoming atmosphere and climate of trust established within the group and with the co-leading teams, helped women to refine their individual business ideas and plans. As the LL programme progressed, a virtuous group dynamic took shape, leading to genuine friendships as well as professional collaboration. The experience generated cultural and personal enrichment, helping some participants to feel less alone, and all to grow together emotionally and professionally.

5.3. Conclusion

The rural context is often underserved and characterised by deeply rooted traditional (patriarchal) norms and values and can represent a challenging environment for ‘ordinary’ women wishing to pursue their innovation dreams. Limited access to information and funding, as well as pressures and workload associated with family care, can easily undermine women’s determination to follow innovative pathways to make their living.

In the Italian experience, the LL offered participants a ‘suspended time’ and ‘comfort zone’, away from daily routines, pressures and constraints, to discover, become aware of their innovation potential, gradually unfold their innovation identity and develop useful skills. It was a place where they could ‘feel good’ while reflecting on and planning their professional and personal development.

The LL has proven to be an effective tool and an inspiring experience for the co-leads and stakeholders involved. It encouraged them to critically analyse and carefully address the potential and multi-dimensional support needs of rural women innovators.

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06 Lithuania

Lithuanian Living Lab: Women Farmers Driving Innovation in Small-Scale and Sustainable Agriculture

6.1. Introduction

The Lithuanian Living Lab (LL) was implemented across different regions of the country with the aim of supporting eight rural women farmers in developing and applying innovations within their farms and businesses. The participants represented a wide range of agricultural and processing activities: from vegetable growing and beekeeping to mushroom cultivation, herbal product creation, and the preservation of culinary heritage. This summary presents the main outcomes of the Lithuanian LL, focusing on how the participants strengthened their identity as innovators, interacted with various stakeholders, and developed collective learning and collaboration processes that emerged throughout the project.

6.2. Case study results and learnings

6.2.1. Composition and organisation of the living labs

The Lithuanian LL brought together eight rural women from different regions of the country, representing a wide diversity of activities – from organic vegetable growing, beekeeping, and shiitake mushroom cultivation to herbal blends, candle-making, elements of culinary heritage, and handcrafted value-added products. The participants varied significantly in age, experience, education, and farm size – from newcomers to experienced entrepreneurs with established brands. What united them was a shared motivation to improve their businesses, introduce new products, and strengthen their role in their local communities. The LL activities included group discussions, hands-on sessions, and topic-specific guidance provided in response to participants' interests. Face-to-face meetings were highly valued for fostering trust, peer learning, and open dialogue. A flexible and participant-centred approach allowed the sessions to adapt to women's real needs, while ongoing communication through online channels supported continuity and collaboration beyond formal meetings.

6.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

At the start of the project, the women were at very different stages of their innovation journeys – some were only shaping ideas, while others were already testing or commercialising new products. The LL acted as a catalyst for these processes, providing guidance, structure, and a supportive environment for developing and implementing innovations. Training sessions and mentoring followed the stages of innovation development, offering practical advice that helped participants make faster and more confident decisions.

Through this collaborative and iterative process, even those initially hesitant towards certain tools or approaches began to experiment, adapt, and apply new methods. The experience fostered greater openness, creativity, and courage to take initiative – qualities that became visible in their daily activities and business practices.

6.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

Stakeholder engagement in the LL took place through multiple and complementary forms. Experts were invited based on the specific needs expressed by women participants, covering topics such as digital technologies, business development, media visibility, and leadership in the agri-food sector. Some sessions were integrated into broader national or regional events, allowing participants to connect with public institutions, policymakers, and innovation networks. Others involved local actors, such as representatives of community initiatives and associations, who shared practical insights on activating local resources and promoting cooperation in rural areas. Academic and research experts also contributed by linking practice to theory and encouraging critical reflection on gender, innovation, and sustainability. This flexible and demand-driven approach created meaningful exchanges between women and experts, expanding their professional networks, strengthening self-confidence, and enhancing their understanding of rural development opportunities.

6.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

The Lithuanian LL was experienced as a new and transformative learning environment for women farmers. For most participants, it was the first time they were involved in a structured innovation process within agriculture. The LL format proved to be an effective tool to stimulate reflection, creativity, and collaboration, helping women recognise their own capacity to innovate and to see their farming activities from new perspectives. The women especially valued the sense of community, the exchange of experiences, and the opportunity to discuss their challenges in a trusted and supportive environment. They highlighted that expert guidance and peer discussions helped them overcome doubts and encouraged them to take concrete steps in their innovation paths. Participants expressed a strong desire to continue the collaboration network established during the project. Ensuring the continuity of this network would allow the sharing of knowledge, strengthening of cooperation, and further dissemination of innovations across different rural contexts in Lithuania.

6.3. Conclusion

The Lithuanian case confirms that the LL approach is an effective and innovative tool to support women-led entrepreneurship and innovation in agriculture. It provided a flexible, inclusive, and practice-oriented environment that encouraged reflection, experimentation, and collaboration among women farmers at different stages of their innovation journeys. The participating experts played a key role in maintaining motivation and building confidence. The experience highlighted the need for long-term, context-sensitive support systems combining technical advice, mentoring, and networking opportunities. Participants also emphasised the importance of balancing work and family responsibilities and improving access to rural services. Strengthening women's institutional representation in agricultural decision-making and sustaining the network created through the project would be crucial to ensure continuity and lasting impact of women-led innovations in rural

Lithuania.

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Relevant social media posts during the project or public engagement in media outlets:

LSMC EKVI website news – <https://www.ekvi.lt/en/news>

LSMC EKVI Facebook page –

https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61564715920278&locale=lt_LT

AgriFood Lithuania Facebook page – https://www.facebook.com/AgriFood.lt?locale=lt_LT

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07 The Netherlands

Tailored support to women innovators contributes to sustainable rural futures

7.1. Introduction

The Dutch Living Lab is not confined to a specific region; given the country's small size, we invited eight participants from rural areas across the country. Six of the eight women are engaged in farming. This summary presents the main outcomes of the Living Lab, including the hurdles the women faced in developing their projects, the support they need, and the results achieved. The conclusions identify the changes needed to ensure that women are adequately supported and that their innovations better serve the future of rural areas.

7.2. Case study results and learnings

7.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Labs

The Dutch Living Lab started in 2023 with eight women innovators aged 26 to 57. Most of the women combined working on or off the farm with care responsibilities. The Living Lab included six women with initial ideas for innovative projects, and two with quite advanced project plans.

The Dutch Living Lab provided additional training to the common programme, including storytelling, personal leadership, and farm family dynamics, to address the group's needs. All Living Labs were held in person at various locations, including the participants' farm. Each session was followed by online 1-to-1 mentoring. The participants themselves stayed in regular contact via WhatsApp.

7.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

All women followed the same training, which supported them in the stepwise development of their projects. Using the tools offered was easier for the more advanced innovators; yet by sharing their knowledge and experiences, they supported those who were starting and needed more time to clarify their ideas. Roughly speaking, the projects developed through the following stages: clarifying ideas, testing and experimentation, implementation plan, first roll-out steps, and seeking financing.

All women appreciated the support the Living Lab provided and indicated that the support received over the three years had significantly contributed to the development of their projects and their personal growth as innovators and entrepreneurs. The innovation design training equipped them with useful tools, while the group's networking and mutual support strengthened their self-confidence. The women encouraged each other to continue, while mentoring helped them to overcome individual hurdles.

7.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

The Dutch Living Lab invited stakeholders to participate in specific parts of the programme. They included representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature, business advisors from a major bank, an advisor in farm family dynamics, a communications expert, and a personal leadership coach. These meetings were appreciated by both the women and the stakeholders. However, looking back, some of the women wished individual business advice had been included.

7.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

The Living Lab has created a strong, supportive bond among the women, with mutual exchange of experiences a key success. The women shared contacts, gave advice, and transferred knowledge, tips and tricks. The women regularly spoke about how this network would benefit many others and were keen to share their support.

There was extensive discussion of their shared experiences as women and the obstacles faced due to traditional gender norms. They frequently discussed the common-sense definitions of an innovator and entrepreneur as gendered, and the lack of recognition they received for their projects because of their smaller investments or social rather than technological orientation. Sharing these experiences strengthened their determination to carve out space for themselves, knowing they had each other's backs.

7.3. Conclusion

The Living Lab experiences underline the importance of tailor-made support for rural women innovators. It should be provided in women-only groups and provide room for both project design and the development of entrepreneurial identity. It is pertinent, however, to expand the common definitions of innovation and entrepreneurship and to recognise the value of a stepwise approach, projects of smaller size and a socio-ecological orientation. Rural women innovators make an important contribution to the future of farming and the quality of life in rural areas. Currently, they do so with little support. Imagine how much more could be achieved if more women were effectively supported! We therefore call upon funding, advice, and training institutes to offer:

- Women-only training with room for exchange of experiences.
- Support in project design adapted to the innovation phase.
- Coaching in personal leadership and entrepreneurial identity formation.
- Funding for starting small-sized projects and non-production-oriented innovations .



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Revamping EU Agriculture to include women farmers:

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08 Scotland

Scottish Living Lab case study overview

8.1. Introduction

This abstract summarises the case study about the Scottish Living Lab, written as part of WP2, task 2.3, to understand what drives and inhibits women from developing innovative initiatives.

The women engaged in the Scottish Living Lab were all based in the Highlands and Islands. The Scottish Living Labs took place in Ullapool, a village on the west coast, with all but one session taking place in-person. The women travelled to the Living Labs by ferry from Stornoway or driving from the Isle of Skye. Some were closer to Ullapool, but in general they had quite a distance to travel which involved overnight accommodation.

8.2. Case study results and learnings

8.2.1. Composition and organisation of the living labs

The eight participants of the Scottish Living Lab are between the ages of 30-65. Most of the women were either at an initial stage of their innovator journey or had early-stage but established businesses. Two of the women had advanced businesses. All of them are involved in crofting, a type of agricultural land holding particular to Scotland. A Scottish croft is relatively small (averaging around 5 hectares), normally held in tenancy, and may or may not have buildings or a house associated with it. Most of the women lived on their crofts and their innovations were related to the croft.

Most of the women in the Scottish Living Lab were at the beginning of their innovator journey. Few of them considered the activities they undertook as being a business. Those that did see themselves as being businesswomen were still open to developing their skills.

8.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

Interestingly, most of the women had multiple innovations developing and running at different stages. As the Living Lab process progressed, some ideas would fail and be replaced with new ideas. It was a creative, evolving and non-linear process. One driver for this innovation is necessity. Very few people croft full-time and make a sustainable living from their crofts. Developing a diversified business model with multiple products and services is essential to maximise income from a croft and reduce waste. However, the women in the Scottish Lab were also proactive and thoughtful in their engagement with their environment, sustainability, and their local communities, with their innovations often designed to deliver both additional income and co-benefits for these elements. This included educational activities, youth engagement, re-use of surplus products, and collaborations with other local farmers and businesses.

Having a second job outside the craft business, plus the other unpaid community roles that our innovators took on, meant the women had less time to innovate and learn new skills, and less opportunity to be exposed to other businesses' ideas and processes. A range of other factors affect the capacity of crofting women to engage in or develop innovative initiatives. These are remoteness, transport infrastructure, and distances to travel (e.g. to abattoirs, markets, training sessions), all of which affect the women's businesses and their capacity to innovate and network. The women involved in the Scottish Living Lab preferred meeting face-to-face, and staying overnight together to socialise, due to their day-to-day isolation.

8.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

Most of the women took time revising their ideas, processes and business models through testing and discussion, both within and outside the Living Labs. Were we to run the Living Labs again, we would factor in more time in sessions for the innovators to give updates on their businesses and ask questions. Some of the women used these sessions to prototype and test products, and to share challenges and receive advice on how to overcome them.

8.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

We feel that the mentoring talks were invaluable to the women, to personalise the Living Lab learning and advice, tailoring it to each woman's business and life. It helped the women to use the innovation skills in their own business, as well as combining personal development support and more traditional business coaching methods. In turn, the mentoring enabled the Living Lab co-leads to identify emerging needs and tailor upcoming sessions to meet them.

8.3. Conclusion

We found women innovators benefit from personal development and confidence building to get to a point where they recognise themselves as business owners and feel empowered to access mainstream business advice and innovation support. This also helps women to feel confident carving out time for their businesses, and to assert themselves financially in their personal lives.

For women involved in crofting in Scotland, we recommend innovation support initiatives that encompass all or some of the following elements:

- One to one support from a dedicated crofting business advisor, from start-up to growth. The advisor could also play a brokering role signposting to crofting grants and opportunities.
- Appropriate finance available at every stage of the business growth.
- More local networks could be stimulated – to support businesses generally with place-based advice.
- Mentoring – even informal mentoring, with some personal development support.
- Sustained support and resource from government - Scottish government offers great support for women in agriculture which should be maintained long-term.



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09 Sweden

Women rural entrepreneurs in farming and forestry: Lessons from the Grass Ceiling Project

9.1. Introduction

The Swedish Living Lab (LL) of the GRASS CEILING project was conducted in Jönköping County, characterised as a region having a ‘traditional gender contract’, and which is close to the bottom of ‘gender equality lists’ in Sweden. Men own four out of five farms, while forestry is more evenly distributed among women and men. A feature of the Swedish context is the publicly funded childcare, health care, elderly care and social care.

9.2. Case study results and learnings

9.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Labs

The LL involved seven women engaged in farming and forestry. To recruit engaged and motivated women for our LL, we arranged a nomination and selection process. We developed the Living Lab process as a participatory method, as we viewed the women’s knowledge as key to the process and therefore included exercises in the workshops for them to reflect on each other’s farm business, ideas and challenges. We held all LLs in person and visited each participants’ business to build trust and to inspire them in the development of their own business.

9.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

The participants have (continued to) develop their ideas and businesses – in parallel with the LL process but perhaps not tightly connected to it, or directly due to the content of the LL workshops. We also developed a broader set of issues besides innovation – thus including gender equality, rural development and sustainability – and have therefore sought to provide a space for the participants, and us as co-leads, to learn together. Early on in our discussions on the LL-process we discussed the ambition of the participants potentially developing something together, which materialised in the form of the last LL being a larger event for women in farming, forestry and rural areas, attracting over 100 participants and 15 stakeholder representatives, including the Swedish prime minister.

9.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

Based on the discussions throughout the LL-process we identified different stakeholders who seemed meaningful to invite to different LLs. Stakeholders came to five of the nine LLs and we made study visits during one LL. All the interactions with stakeholders led to lively discussions. At two LLs the thematic focus was on gender-equal economy, the importance of farm ownership and having an income, and the gendered division of care work, which led to interesting and eye-opening discussions.

9.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

The overall impression was that the women were positive to having been part of the LLs. In short, their experiences were:

- “I have new energy. I get ‘peppered up’ by hearing from everyone else”.
- “To be able to reflect – the megatrend task helped to lift our gaze from our own little home. New reflections and new inspirations”.
- “That we went around to each other’s has meant a lot, because as a self-employed person you become a bit isolated in your own little world”.
- “I like it when it’s not so controlled. It’s during the conversations when things happen”.
- “You get new ideas all the time when you see how others are doing. You reflect on each other”.
- “It has been positive to be only women”.
- “When we talked about parental leave, the family situation and equal economic conditions, it would have been very different if we had been a mixed group”.

9.3. Conclusion

We think that the LL-process has been a fantastic tool to support women entrepreneurs. We conclude that the women entrepreneurs need the following support:

- Services in rural areas – childcare, schools, mail services etc. perhaps especially for women in families with young children.
- Visibility, making women in farming, forestry and rural areas visible, as farmers, forest-owners and rural entrepreneurs.
- Funding and economic support for women-dominated sectors of the economy.
- Spaces to discuss and reflect, networking, inspiration from other women and stakeholders, and women role-models.
- Knowledge about how societies, particularly in farming, forestry and rural areas, are gendered, and marked by gender inequalities.
- That the national strategy plan (CAP and RDP) should not just pay lip service to gender equality but integrate it.

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<https://www.helasverige.se/nyheter/celebert-besok-nar-kvinnor-lyfte-grastaket/>

10 European Union

How to support rural women innovators

10.1. Introduction

This practice abstract summarises insights from collaborating with 70 rural women innovators across 9 GRASS CEILING Living Labs over 3 years. The primary objective is to understand the drivers and obstacles to women's development of socio-ecological innovations, identify their support needs, explore whether these experiences vary across regions or farming systems, and examine the support offered by the tools in the Living Labs. This practice abstract synthesises the results obtained in 9 countries, including Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden. More insight into the situation in specific countries may be gained through the national practice abstracts.

10.2. Case study results and learnings

10.2.1. Composition and organisation of the Living Labs

All Living Labs recruited participants involved in socio-ecological activities. Some Living Labs focused on advanced innovators, while others looked for a mix of ages and innovation stages. The nine Living Labs were located across nine European countries, encompassing diverse rural settings: islands, remote highlands, coasts, mountainous regions, and areas experiencing significant population decline and ageing. Most women innovators live on farms, including dairy, livestock (beef, sheep, goat), olive, fruit/herb/vegetable production, and mixed farming. However, women's innovation projects are not necessarily related to agriculture, even when living on a farm. Their innovations included the implementation of environmentally friendly agricultural production methods, food production and sale from the farm gate, new rural enterprises offering local employment, community services, including childcare and education, and the promotion of women's political representation.

10.2.2. Innovation process and observed changes

Overall, women's development process was non-linear, with innovators often revisiting tools and taking leaps in progress. More experienced innovators adapted tools more quickly, while beginners took longer to clarify their ideas. However, advanced innovators also benefited from revisiting initial stages for reflection. Networking and encouragement were often cited as the most important forms of support, while mentoring helped solve individual problems. This process led to a gradual empowerment of the participants to their self-identification as innovators, reinforced by external validation.

10.2.3. Stakeholder interaction

All Living Labs involved stakeholders (representing relevant companies, public authorities, policymakers, and advisors) in some or most meetings. The invitation of stakeholders fulfilled multiple functions. Some stakeholders offered specific advice (e.g., on financing); others were invited to become familiar with the women's experiences. In general, inviting stakeholders was considered valuable because of the extra information they could share and the visibility the women innovators and the project gained, which helped to highlight women entrepreneurs' roles in rural development.

10.2.4. Perceptions and collective learning

Comparing across countries, regions, and farming systems underscores the similarities in what drives and constrains rural women's engagement with socio-ecological innovations. Women's motives ranged from further development of their businesses and the sustainability of farming to improving the local economy and the quality of rural life. In addition, many women explicitly stated that safeguarding the environment was crucial to the futures of rural communities and farmers. The most common hurdles included a lack of recognition by institutes offering training and advice, difficulty accessing funding, responsibility for care, and a lack of family support, all of which undermined women's self-confidence.

Key to effective support was the creation of a safe, women-only environment that addressed gender-specific hurdles. Sharing vulnerabilities helped break down assumptions and increased self-confidence, particularly for beginners. Peer-to-peer learning, in which advanced innovators shared knowledge and practical skills, was highly valued, fostering a dynamic and supportive atmosphere.

Part of that development was growing awareness of gender-specific experiences, the lack of institutional recognition, and the need for support. The Living Labs, hence, also served as a tool of empowerment; over the years, the women innovators became collective actors of change. At the individual level, the Living Labs importantly contributed to the development of women's identity as innovators and entrepreneurs.

10.3. Conclusion

Supporting rural women developing socio-ecological innovators requires a tailor-made approach. It should be offered in women-only groups and include training in both project design and support for the development of entrepreneurial identity. Women innovators represent the new generation of farmers and rural entrepreneurs. They build businesses that generate individual income while offering employment and services that enhance rural communities' resilience. They develop new agriculture production methods too, and value chains aligned with what society wants and what nature needs.

Currently, they do so with little support. Imagine how much more could be achieved if more women were effectively supported and funded!

Location:

Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden

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What is the GRASS CEILING project?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaJTMQngvrl&t=19s>

Policy forum: <https://www.grassceiling.eu/policy-forum/>

Women in Rural Areas (Rural Pact Community Platform group): https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/groups/community-group-women-rural-areas_en

GRASS CEILING online academy: <https://www.grassceiling.eu/mooc/>

Featured posts and publications:

<https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/horizon-magazine/breaking-through-barriers-women-driving-rural-innovation-europe> (2025, in English)

<https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/article/breaking-the-grass-ceiling-gender-inequality-in-agriculture/194747/> (2025, in English)

<https://redpac.es/en/news/grass-ceiling-project-brings-together-rural-women-nine-european-countries-around-agricultural> (2025, in Spanish)

<https://www.slu.se/en/research/research-catalogue/projekt/g/grass-ceiling/> (2025, in English)

<https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/457738-promoting-gender-equality-in-rural-areas> (2025, in English)

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<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:share:7373291221739356161>

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:share:7117422505526460417> (2025, in English, LinkedIn post with more views)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyNImUFV7JU> (2025, in English and Croatian, YouTube video with more views)

<https://www.facebook.com/265764376447314/posts/708952732128474> (2025, in English, Facebook post with more visits)

<https://www.facebook.com/reel/4116673591893811> (2024, in English, Facebook post with more visits)



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<https://x.com/user/status/1766010025107964396> (2024, in English, X (Twitter) post with more visits)

<https://redpac.es/en/news/grass-ceiling-project-brings-together-rural-women-nine-european-countries-around-agricultural> (2023, in English)

<https://www.agro-alimentarias.coop/projects/grass-ceiling> (2023, in Spanish)

<https://www.grassceiling.eu/community-led-innovation-and-the-consideration-in-the-ltva/> (2023, in English, GRASS CEILING web piece of news with more visits)
