

GRASS CEILING



D6.9

Practice abstracts
batch n.2
Croatia



Croatia

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

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.

Case study results and learnings

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 road access to the farm) through interactions with stakeholders.

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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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Croatia

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More info:

<https://www.grassceiling.eu/living-labs/croatia/>

Featured posts:

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