

GRASS CEILING



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How to support rural women innovators

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.

Case study results and learnings

Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

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.

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.

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.

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.

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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Website: <https://www.grassceiling.eu/>

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)

<https://teagasc.ie/news--events/daily/rural-men-sought-for-grass-ceiling-project/> (2025, in English)

<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:share:7373291221739356161> (2025, in English, LinkedIn post with more views)

https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ_nlu4jFbB/ (2025, in English, Instagram post with more visits)

<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)

<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-ltvra/> (2023, in English, GRASS CEILING web piece of news with more visits)



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