

GRASS CEILING



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Practice abstracts
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Italy



Italy

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

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.

Case study results and learnings

Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

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 heterogenous 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Conclusion

The rural context is often underserviced 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.

**Location:**

Italy

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