

GRASS CEILING



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

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.

Case study results and learnings

Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

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.

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.

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.

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.

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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