



GRASS CEILING

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SPAIN

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

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.

Case study results and learnings

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Location:

Spain

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