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The Netherlands



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Tailored support to women innovators contributes to sustainable rural futures

Introduction

The Dutch Living Lab is not confined to a specific region; given the country's small size, we invited eight participants from rural areas across the country. Six of the eight women are engaged in farming. This summary presents the main outcomes of the Living Lab, including the hurdles the women faced in developing their projects, the support they need, and the results achieved. The conclusions identify the changes needed to ensure that women are adequately supported and that their innovations better serve the future of rural areas.

Case study results and learnings

Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

The Dutch Living Lab started in 2023 with eight women innovators aged 26 to 57. Most of the women combined working on or off the farm with care responsibilities. The Living Lab included six women with initial ideas for innovative projects, and two with quite advanced project plans.

The Dutch Living Lab provided additional training to the common programme, including storytelling, personal leadership, and farm family dynamics, to address the group's needs. All Living Labs were held in person at various locations, including the participants' farm. Each session was followed by online 1-to-1 mentoring. The participants themselves stayed in regular contact via WhatsApp.

Innovation process and observed changes

All women followed the same training, which supported them in the stepwise development of their projects. Using the tools offered was easier for the more advanced innovators; yet by sharing their knowledge and experiences, they supported those who were starting and needed more time to clarify their ideas. Roughly speaking, the projects developed through the following stages: clarifying ideas, testing and experimentation, implementation plan, first roll-out steps, and seeking financing.

All women appreciated the support the Living Lab provided and indicated that the support received over the three years had significantly contributed to the development of their projects and their personal growth as innovators and entrepreneurs. The innovation design training equipped them with useful tools, while the group's networking and mutual support strengthened their self-confidence. The women encouraged each other to continue, while mentoring helped them to overcome individual hurdles.

Stakeholder interaction

The Dutch Living Lab invited stakeholders to participate in specific parts of the programme. They included representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature, business advisors from a major bank, an advisor in farm family dynamics, a communications expert, and a personal leadership coach. These meetings were appreciated by both the women and the stakeholders. However, looking back, some of the women wished individual business advice had been included.

Perceptions and collective learning

The Living Lab has created a strong, supportive bond among the women, with mutual exchange of experiences a key success. The women shared contacts, gave advice, and transferred knowledge, tips and tricks. The women regularly spoke about how this network would benefit many others and were keen to share their support.

There was extensive discussion of their shared experiences as women and the obstacles faced due to traditional gender norms. They frequently discussed the common-sense definitions of an innovator and entrepreneur as gendered, and the lack of recognition they received for their projects because of their smaller investments or social rather than technological orientation. Sharing these experiences strengthened their determination to carve out space for themselves, knowing they had each other's backs.

Conclusion

The Living Lab experiences underline the importance of tailor-made support for rural women innovators. It should be provided in women-only groups and provide room for both project design and the development of entrepreneurial identity. It is pertinent, however, to expand the common definitions of innovation and entrepreneurship and to recognise the value of a stepwise approach, projects of smaller size and a socio-ecological orientation. Rural women innovators make an important contribution to the future of farming and the quality of life in rural areas. Currently, they do so with little support. Imagine how much more could be achieved if more women were effectively supported! We therefore call upon funding, advice, and training institutes to offer:

- Women-only training with room for exchange of experiences.
- Support in project design adapted to the innovation phase.
- Coaching in personal leadership and entrepreneurial identity formation.
- Funding for starting small-sized projects and non-production-oriented innovations.

Location:

The Netherlands

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More info:

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