GRASS CEILING

D2.3

Synthesis Report presenting the experiences of rural women innovators across Living Labs

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Approved by Leader of Work Package: Bettina Bock, Wageningen University

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Author List: Bettina Bock, Valentina Cristiana Materia, Sophie Kollewijn-Hopkins (WU)

With contributions from:
Croatia: Nataša Bokan, Ramona Franić, Tihana Kovačićek, Marina Tomić Maksan, Tajana Radić, Staka Perić (UNIZG FAZ)

Ireland: Sally Shortall, Muireann Prendergast (SETU)

Italy: Patrizia Pugliese, Lucia Nicastro, Francesco Notarangelo (CIHEAM-IAMB), Vittoria De Luca (LegaCoop Puglia)

Lithuania: Vida Dabkienė (LCSS)

Norway: Rita Moseng Sivertsvik, Maja Farstad (RURALIS)

Scotland: Sue Bradley, Orla Collins, Amelia Magistrali, Melanie Thompson-Glen (UNEW)

Spain: Margartia Rico (UVA)

Sweden: Katarina Pettersson, Theresé Engvall (SLU), Siv Lindén (Hela Sverige)

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Executive Summary

This report, Deliverable 2.3 of the GRASS CEILING project, presents key insights into the experiences of women innovators supported through nine international Living Labs (LLs) over three years, encompassing diverse rural settings: islands, remote highlands, coasts, mountainous regions, and areas experiencing significant population decline and ageing (e.g., Spain, Italy). The primary objective is to understand what drives and hinders women in developing socio-ecological innovations, identify their support needs, explore whether these experiences vary across regions or farming systems, and evaluate Living Labs as a tool for them. The findings are based on academic lead observations shared in Living Lab national reports, documented in Living Lab diaries, individual mentoring talks, and focus group reflections held with the women innovators in Year 1 and Year 3. A notable finding is that, despite considerable differences in geographic region or farming systems, no significant differences were observed in women's fundamental motives, hurdles, or support needs.

Most of the Living Labs followed the training provided by WP3 for the first year, supplementing it with additional material to suit their innovators' needs. The second and third years saw greater deviation from the training in line with the women's requirements, with all Living Labs introducing additional training specific to their participants' needs (e.g., financial literacy). Norway, Spain, and Sweden adopted a participatory approach, using the WP3 material sparingly.

The development process was non-linear, with innovators often revisiting tools and taking leaps in progress. More experienced innovators adapted tools faster, while beginners required more time to clarify ideas. However, advanced innovators also benefited from revisiting initial stages for reflection. Networking and encouragement were often cited as the most important outcomes. This process led to a gradual empowerment and the women's self-identification as innovators, reinforced by external validation.

The obstacles experienced were remarkably similar across all countries, regions, and farming systems. Most women struggled to secure funding and often felt they were not recognised as innovators or relevant clients by mainstream support services like (A)KIS and Local Enterprise Offices.

The key to effective support was creating 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.

In conclusion, we recommend an integrated innovation support system that combines technical expertise with personalised mentoring, tailored training, and networking. Similarly, improving women's access to funding and easing bureaucratic requirements, acknowledging that gender-specific norms undermine their respect as entrepreneurs by funding institutions. The diversity among innovators needs to be recognised, promoting women's visibility, and letting go of the traditional definition of a valuable and successful innovation/innovator.

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1. Introduction

Deliverable 2.3 presents the insights gained from following the experiences of the women innovators who participated in nine GRASS CEILING Living Labs (LLs). The academic leads and co-leads of each Living Lab produced a national report using the template in Annex 1. The national reports use various data sources. They make use of what the (co)leads have learned by participating in the Living Labs and mentoring talks. Furthermore, the mentoring talks provide insight into individual experiences and the factors that impacted women's innovations in their daily lives, outside the Living Labs. At the start of the Living Labs, we encouraged the co-leads to document their observations and reflections, providing them with specific tools they could use (e.g., a Living Lab diary). In addition, the national reports use material produced as part of the Living Lab training modules (with the relevant exercises). This includes two focus groups during which the women innovators collectively reflected on their experiences as women innovators (year 1), on their development as innovators over the three years of the project, and on the impact of the support provided through the Living Labs (year 3).

For deliverable D2.3, we compare the experiences in and across the nine Living Labs. Our objective is to generate an understanding of what drives and inhibits women from developing innovative initiatives, what support is needed to optimise their performance and impact, and to discuss whether and how women innovators' experiences and support needs differ across regions or farming systems. This deliverable focuses on what we can learn about women-led innovation when supporting and joining their innovation journey for three years. We do not explore the Living Lab methodology in any detail, as this is the focus of Deliverable 3.5.

This report is structured in five chapters. The first chapter introduces the content and objectives, the methodology and data used and presents the report's structure. Chapter 2 presents the Living Labs and their participants, discussing the different geographical locations and socio-economic contexts, and the women and their innovation projects by type and stage of development. Chapter 3 explains the programming of the nine Living Labs in content and location, and how they organised stakeholders' engagement and individual mentoring. Chapter 4 unravels the process of innovation development, how it unfolds over time, the hurdles women face, and what effectively supports the development of their socio-ecological innovation projects and their identity as innovators. In the last chapter (Chapter 5) we draw conclusions on what we have learned about rural women's innovation process: their relevance and ambitions (5.1), which support they lack and what they need (5.2), and what needs to change in (agricultural) knowledge and innovations systems and rural policy (5.3) to offer equal opportunities to women innovators and enable them to contribute to sustainable rural futures through their socio-ecological projects.

2.The Living Labs and their participants

In this section, the nine GRASS CEILING Living Labs are introduced. We briefly describe the geographical context in which the women innovators live and work, the demographic composition of the Living Labs, and the representation of different farming systems.

2.1 The geographical context

The Living Labs took place in all nine countries participating in the project (see Figure 1 below). In seven countries, the Living Lab participants were based within the same geographical regions. However, both the Netherlands and Lithuania recruited participants nationwide due to the more compact size of the countries. Overall, this report includes Living Lab participants living and working in different types of regions, including islands and remote highlands (Scotland), coastal (Croatia), coastal and mountainous (Ireland), lakes and forests (Sweden), and hilly and mountainous regions (Croatia, Spain, Italy). Some of the regions experience significant population decline and ageing (Spain, Italy). Most Living Lab participants live on farms, but not all of their innovation projects are related to agriculture (see section 2.2). Among the women living and working on farms, we see the following farm productions represented: dairy (13), various livestock farming (beef, sheep, pigs and goats) (13), horticulture (including fruit, herbs and vegetables) (11), grains and grassland (4), beekeeping (2), eggs (2), olive (2), wine (1) and mixed farming (3).

Notably, we do not observe significant differences in women's motives, hurdles, or support needs across regions or farming systems. However, reflections on the influence of regional location and farming systems on the innovation trajectories of the women innovators are presented throughout the report whenever relevant.

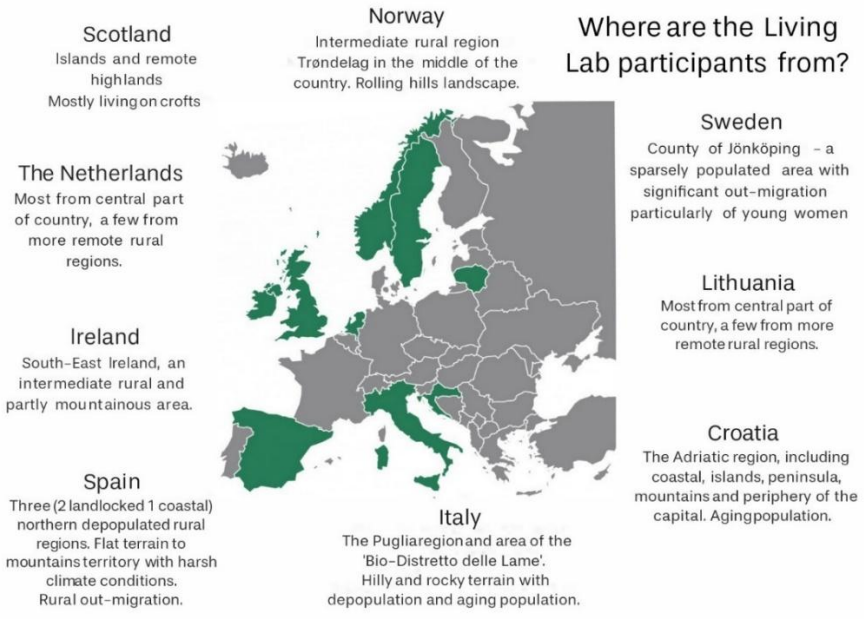

Figure 1: The geographical context of the GRASS CEILING Living Lab participants

Most of the Living Labs took place in rural areas that are relatively well served by good infrastructure, which supported smooth communication among the members. The situation was clearly different for the Scottish Living Lab participants, who live in the Highlands and Islands with limited services. However, for most other women innovators, access to services depends on the availability of private transport. The distance to services is increasing in rural areas, while public transport options are decreasing (in the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Croatia, and Lithuania). Population decline has also led to the disappearance of basic services in the Living Lab regions of Spain, Croatia and Italy. In these regions, youth outmigration also plays an important role, leading to a significantly ageing population. The Swedish team highlighted the significant outmigration of women from Jönköping County.

Across many countries, the lack of available (Scotland, Croatia) and affordable (Ireland) childcare, or other types of social care (e.g., caring for elderly parents in Italy), impacted business development. The need for private transport and inflexible hours were also considerable barriers for many participants in these countries. Relying on family to assist with care was key to many of the Living Lab participants in Ireland, Spain, Scotland, Lithuania and Croatia.

Most Living Labs participants had good access to internet services. However, internet connectivity in all rural areas involved in the project (except the Netherlands) remains unreliable, with poor high-speed internet and phone coverage in mountainous or remote areas of Spain, Scotland and Ireland. There is also a notable generational divide in internet use, with the Living Labs in Lithuania and Italy specifically noting this.

2.2 The participants

A total of 70 women innovators participated in the Living Labs at the beginning of the project, and 66 women completed it. Four women left the Living Labs (in Norway, Scotland, Sweden and Ireland), mainly due to other commitments. In general, the Living Labs consisted of up to eight women each.

The overall average age of the Living Lab participants at the start of the GRASS CEILING project was 45 years. The oldest was 79 (Norway), and the youngest was 24 years old (Ireland). More than 61% of the participants reported being responsible either for childcare (36 women) or care for a disabled adult family member (1). In addition, some women cared for elderly family members. In general, the age of the participant's children (newborn to late teens) varied across the Project Partner countries, and the average age of the innovators corresponds to the reality of having care responsibilities for both the younger and older generations.

The participants in Living Labs in Lithuania, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden were all involved in agriculture, whereas the other labs consisted of a mix of agricultural and rural activities. For example, in Italy, three women were involved in agricultural activities and five in rural activities or activities connected to agriculture and rurality. In Ireland, three of seven women were engaged in agriculture-related activities (dairy and sheep) and one in agriculture-related service. Across all Living Labs, 80% (56) engaged in agriculture, and 42% (30 women) had additional paid employment off the farm.

While socio-economic data were not requested from the women, based on observations and

participation in lab activities and mentoring talks, the co-leads estimated that the innovators across most labs were middle-class, except in the Scottish Living Lab.

2.2.1. Innovation stage at start

Between the countries, there were 18 beginner projects, five early but established projects, 31 advanced projects, and 15 very advanced projects (see Figure 2). These numbers represent the projects' positions at the beginning of the GRASS CEILING project.

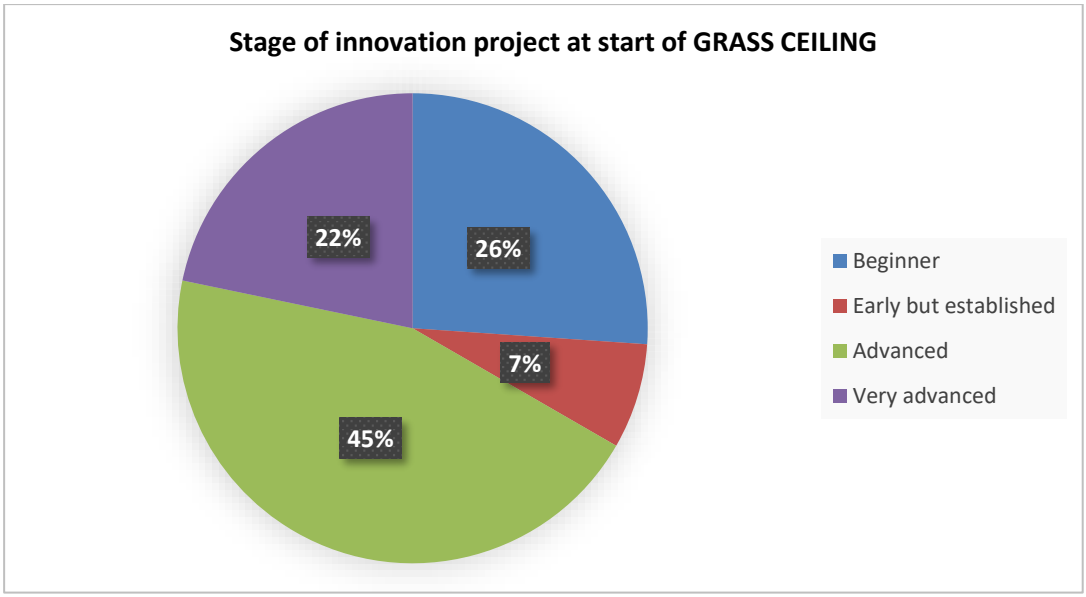

Figure 2: Stage of project development at the start of the GRASS CEILING project

Most of the Living Labs had a mix of beginners and more advanced innovators, except for Ireland (one beginner, six advanced, of which three were very advanced), Norway (eight advanced), Sweden (one beginner, seven advanced) and Spain (all eight advanced) (see Figure 3). This reflects a decision taken by Norway, Spain and Sweden to focus on advanced innovators when initially recruiting participants. The Netherlands had the highest proportion of beginners (six of the eight women). As such, each Living Lab adjusted its approach and training material to fit the local context. Both Spain and Sweden used their first Living Lab meeting to co-create their schedule and content along with their innovators, as they felt the WP3 training was less relevant for such experienced innovators and wished to tailor the time used to their needs.

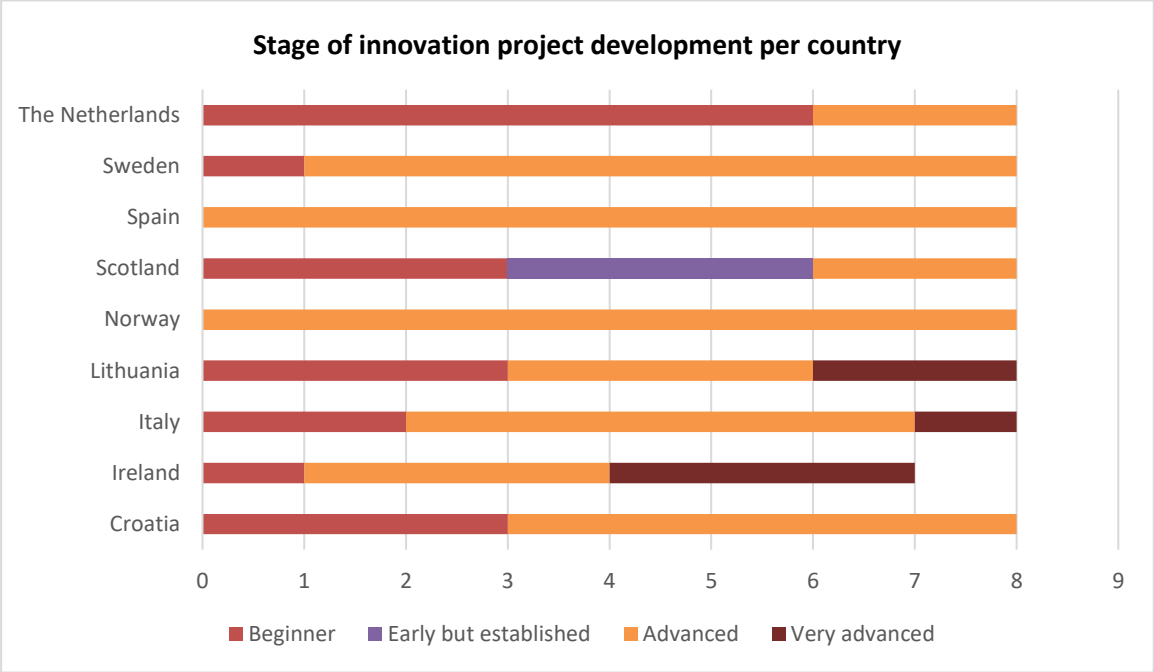

Figure 3: Stage of innovation project development per country[1]

2.2.2. Innovation type

All Living Labs recruited participants involved in socio-ecological innovations. Socio-ecological innovation revolves around overcoming challenges with sustainability at the core. *"Our concept of socio-ecological transition is one that aims to put in place a new social and economic model that intelligently responds to social and ecological challenges. It involves rethinking the way we live together in a territory, work, and produce to reduce our environmental impact. Ecological innovation needs to function with social innovation to realise the societal transition needed for a sustainable future."* (Grant Agreement, 116). The long-term resilience of rural communities is key.

Some labs have projects with a specific focus reflecting, for instance, the particularities of regional agricultural production (e.g., Spain), whereas others include a wide diversity of projects (e.g., the Netherlands, Croatia, Italy). However, several common themes have been identified:

- The drive to **promote local rural identity and culture** is at the core of many projects**.** For example, producing snacks with locally produced oats and honey (Ireland), establishing a local farmers' network (Scotland), embedding ice-cream production into the narrative of local heritage (the Netherlands), and selling milk directly to customers through a vending machine (Ireland).
- The importance of **connecting to the local community** is consistently present. For example, employing local people in beer brewing (Norway) and facilitating local work placements for youth with disabilities (Italy).

[1] One woman left the Irish Living Lab after the first meeting; she is included in this table but not in the rest of the national Living Lab analysis.

- **Education** is another theme that can be identified in many projects, either directly by giving lessons or by entwining information and knowledge into projects such as information boards on nature walks. For example, on-farm tourist & educational activities connected to traditional olive oil production in an ancient olive oil mill (Italy), forest events (Sweden) and children's croft tours (Scotland).
- Many women innovators engage in promoting **sustainability**—for example, by organic milk production (Sweden), growing microgreens (Ireland), engaging in the rewilding of farmland (the Netherlands), or the promotion of zero-kilometre products such as honey (Spain).
- Using waste products and creating a **circular economy** can be identified in many innovations. For example, by-products such as wool were used for crafting felt (Scotland), wool was made into balls for the dryer (Croatia), and waffles were made from whey (Norway).
- Innovations have often not been radical but focused on **incremental change**, adjusting slightly what is already there, because it improves soil health, community feeling towards nature, and knowledge of the land's history. For instance, in Lithuania, an existing project changed its focus from cultivating vegetables to processing them into a diverse product range.
- Several projects are focused on directly **challenging the position of women within agriculture**. Spanish women, for example, used social media to increase the visibility of women in the sector (Spain), and Dutch women promoted women's participation in the agricultural policy process (the Netherlands). But it can also be argued that this theme runs throughout all the projects as the innovators have chosen to participate in GRASS CEILING and share the values and motivation behind it. As part of the process, and with help from the training and support provided by GRASS CEILING, the women increased their own visibility and that of women in their sectors.

In general, the women entered the Living Lab with quite specific innovation projects, which most of them further elaborated. However, some women changed their ideas for a project. In Croatia, three innovators were forced to slow down their project development due to unexpected challenges, including large fires, devastating storms, and other career changes restricting the time available. In Ireland, one participant sold her business to another Living Lab participant due to childcare demands. In the Netherlands, two women needed to give up on their initial project; one because the farm needed to be sold, the other because the soil proved inadequate for tree farming. A third woman changed from one project to another, which intrigued her more. It is interesting to note that all but one of the women mentioned above continued to participate in the Living Lab meetings as they felt they could still learn a lot and support their fellow innovators by sharing their experience and knowledge.

3. The organisation of the Living Labs

This section briefly describes how the co-leads in the nine countries organised the Living Labs (LLs) and the mentoring talks. It includes information on the recruitment and selection of participants, the preparation of the Living Labs (training and environment) and their outlook (location, stakeholder participation and mentoring). This section is mainly based on information provided by the co-leads. More detailed information about the Living Lab methodology can be found in deliverable D3.5.

3.1 Living Lab preparations

3.1.1 Recruitment and selection

The way innovators were chosen varied across Living Labs, with **location, innovation type and stage, and regional representation of skills** playing a role. Some Living Labs based their decisions on the stage of development; the Spanish Living Lab, for instance, selected women farmers who had been active in the agricultural sector for 5 years or more and were already engaged in innovation on their farms. The Dutch Living Lab sought women of different ages and at various stages of innovation. Similarly, in Ireland, the Living Lab strived for a blend of businesses that had some common focus (rural innovation) but would not be in direct competition with each other; innovators at different stages of business and innovator experience were also considered (Ireland).

> *Meeting people like you, with the same problems, but the same drive or even more, and learning about other types of farms, animals, crops…honestly, that's really enriching"* (Spain)

In Croatia, women were chosen to represent a variety of product development, farming systems, and regional representation, while also including women of different ages and levels of innovation experience. In Italy, the premise was that all the innovators were located within the territory of "Biodistretto delle Lame" in the Puglia region. The decision to focus on a specific territory was considered to provide the innovators with a more concrete, sustainable opportunity after the conclusion of the Living Lab programme; this strategy contributed to the longer-term empowerment and meaningful participation of women in the specific bio-district framework (Italy). In other locations, such as Norway, the innovators were chosen to reflect the area's production. Sweden selected innovators who could already support themselves through their business activities. They also ensured that the area's agricultural production (mainly milk and beef) was sufficiently represented. In Scotland, all women belonged to the crofting farming community.

3.1.2 Planning the training

Most of the Living Labs **followed the training** provided by WP3 for the first year, supplementing it with additional material to suit their innovators' needs. The second and third years saw greater deviation from the training in line with the women's requirements; marketing and communication skills were popular **additional workshops**. Croatia offered extra training in financial literacy and work/life balance, as the more experienced innovators underlined the importance of learning early on in their journey how to avoid burnout. Italy included, among others, extra training in social media photography, business benchmarking and a popular World Café workshop. Sometimes, additions were introduced based on the experiences women shared in the Living Labs and during mentoring talks. For example, the Netherlands invited an expert in family business dynamics after it was identified that negotiating family dynamics was relevant for many innovators within the lab. Similarly, the Spanish fifth Living Lab consisted of two workshops: leadership and digitalisation in cooperatives, and shared ownership in law for agricultural holdings. In Ireland, they held a Network IQ workshop and took part in a regional entrepreneurial (breakfast) meeting. In Sweden, many of the women were already taking part in training outside the Living Labs. So, the focus was on informing the innovators about the support available by inviting some stakeholders to present themselves in the meetings and encouraging the women to follow up on the training themselves. Further workshops addressed gender inequality, focusing on the farming sector and involving stakeholders in a discussion. Similarly, Lithuanian innovators participated in the Agro Forum 2023 – 2025, and free external courses were arranged to support their eagerness to gain knowledge. In Norway, they invited experts to present the WP3 material they thought might be too basic for their advanced innovators; they arranged business mentors and financial advisors as key stakeholders, too. One of the co-leads and mentors in Scotland was an experienced businesswoman who could offer personalised support to the innovators. Engaging innovators in co-designing the lab also made them feel more valued and more likely to remain in the process.

> *"I have rarely been involved in something so directly targeted. 'This is a problem I am concerned about right now', and then you get many people around you to think about that particular problem. And then we discuss it. I think it was quite…It was very special."* (Norway)

The Living Labs also differed in how they structured their exercises. For instance, in Ireland and Scotland, they identified a community 'lab project' as a consistent case study used for various exercises; in Sweden, the women worked together to create an event to host at the end of the project; in Norway there was less priority in doing the individual exercises in general; and in the Netherlands, the women alternated in offering their project as a collective exercise.

Two countries did not use the material provided by WP3. From the beginning, Sweden designed its Living Lab together with innovators around what the women were interested in learning, using a **participatory approach**. They argued that the majority of their innovators were already very advanced and felt that going 'back-to-the-basics' was not needed or appropriate. Similarly, Spain's Living Lab consisted of women at an advanced level of innovation, and therefore, the co-leads decided to draw up a schedule of meetings with the innovators in the first Living Lab; individual

interviews following these meetings helped the team identify the content the innovators needed. Norway's Living Lab members agreed from the beginning that they would use the material offered as part of the training, e.g. the empathy map, individually when relevant and not as part of in-class exercises. In addition, they invited an advertising expert to help the innovators polish their marketing strategies and increase their visibility.

3.1.3 Creating a suitable and safe environment

All Living Labs were structured to create a **trusting and safe space** for innovators to share ideas and experiences. Whilst this is not something that can be forced, allowing time for discussions and engaging activities, such as the LEGO building in the first Living Lab, facilitated openness amongst the women. **Sharing time also fostered trust and respect** within the group. It grew organically, facilitated by sharing doubts and uncertainties while listening to one another. For many women, the relationship within the group (and the opportunity to build this) was more important than the technical training.

> *"What women need most is not training, but a sense of community"* (Lithuania)

In the Swedish Living Lab, they ensured there was always time for **informal conversations** during breaks, not only between innovators and stakeholders, but also among the innovators themselves. Creating time and space for women to interact was key to building trust and community, for example, by staying behind to talk after the meeting had concluded (e.g., the Netherlands) or by extending a visit to see local sights together (e.g., Lithuania). In Scotland, the in-person Living Labs all involved an overnight stay and dinner together with the innovators and co-leads. In Croatia, five Living Labs also included an overnight stay so they could visit innovators and community projects on-site. Car sharing (e.g., the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Croatia) between the innovators clearly led to deeper bonds between participants, too.

Involving innovators at **different stages** of their projects has encouraged more experienced innovators to mentor those at the beginning of their idea development. Learning from one another has been consistently important across all Living Labs. In Lithuania, they stress that the difference in experience fostered **collaboration rather than competition**. Women appreciated having time for introductions and continuous updates, and holding group discussions was considered very valuable, all of which were key to building genuine relationships among the innovators and between innovators and co-leads. For women in all of the Living Labs, sharing experiences also raised awareness of the **commonality of their obstacles**. Being in the Living Labs also gave the innovators access to larger events and audiences. In Lithuania, the innovators worked together during a conference which fostered a strong sense of **community**. In Sweden, they were empowered to co-organise an event to increase the visibility of female rural innovators and bring the dialogue directly to the Prime Minister.

3.2 Programming the Living Labs

3.2.1 Location

The Living Labs organised their meetings differently; some always met in person (the Netherlands,

Sweden, and Italy), while others included some online (or hybrid) meetings (Ireland, Scotland, Croatia, Norway, Lithuania, Spain). In-person meetings could also vary in formality.

Formal and informal settings

The Living Lab meetings in Scotland were all (except one online) held at the same **informal** community centre, in the port, making meetings accessible. Because of the significant travel time, the meetings also included an overnight stay and a joint dinner, which helped build trust. The Croatia Living Lab also involved overnight stays due to distance challenges, and the women highly valued these informal gatherings. The in-person locations in Lithuania were chosen to observe (external) projects in practice and as learning opportunities, such as visiting specific plant cultivations. Some locations were also selected for pride in the country and to give innovators access to memorable venues. The central meeting point in Spain (Palencia) was still a significant distance for many innovators, requiring a journey of up to five hours one way. Due to geographical constraints, one innovator in Spain has been able to attend the meetings only online.

In the Netherlands, the location differed between more formal settings in the first and second year (e.g., at the Ministry of Agriculture or the Farm Union) and more informal settings at the innovators' business in the third year. In Ireland, five of the seven in-person Living Labs took place at the South East Technological University, with another formal meeting being held at Ireland's Foreign Direct Investment Agency. Only one informal meeting took place at a participant's factory/café. Italy rotated their Living Lab meeting points within the Puglia region, all of which were connected to the innovator projects and were no more than an hour's travel. It was understood that this played a role in building more genuine relationships. Most Living Labs organised **meetings at innovators' farms and project locations**. Such visits were often seen as highlights. In Lithuania, there was little interest in doing this, so locations were chosen to enhance the learning experience. Visiting other projects external to the Living Lab was also highly appreciated as deepening knowledge and inspiration (Sweden).

Online vs. in-person

The Living Labs differed in their use of digital formats for meetings; some held only in-person or online meetings, others alternated between in-person and online meetings or included hybrid sessions (see Figure 4).

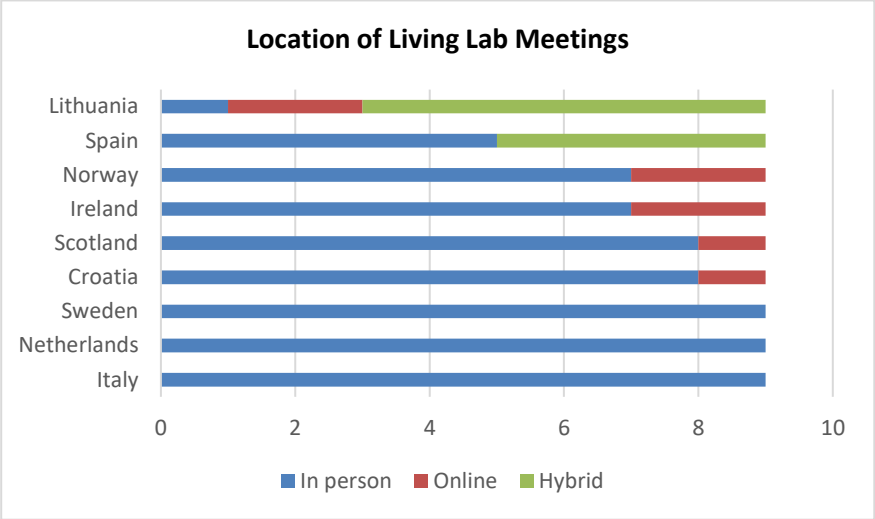

Figure 4: In-person and online meetings

In general, **in-person meetings** were favoured because they were more interactive, with participants more engaged than during online or hybrid[2] sessions. In Lithuania, three sessions were held online, but there was always an option to join online in a hybrid meeting, as experts often participated this way for presentations and discussions. In Ireland, two meetings took place online, and all others were in person. The online meeting was not successful in Scotland due to poor connectivity, and the women felt distracted at home. This is a sentiment shared by those in Spain, as five of the in-person meetings were also hybrid, but with significant drawbacks due to technical issues and poor connectivity, preventing full engagement in the discussion. Being online (also in hybrid mode) in general meant missing spontaneous, informal conversations during the break and was dependent on the quality of connectivity.

However, **online meetings** had clear advantages as well. Meetings became accessible to those obstructed by lengthy travel (Spain) or by weather conditions, particularly in winter (Norway), during flu season, and for childcare (Scotland, Lithuania). Having the option to attend without travel was important and still offered the positive effects of the working network. The Spanish co-leads observed that successful engagement mainly depended on the women's attitude and their willingness to make the most of those connections. Norway had similar experiences; initially, they were concerned that meeting online might hamper innovators' willingness or confidence to participate. Yet, in practice, it worked quite well. Norway conducted the third Living Lab (focused on the empathy map, see D3.5 for details) online, as they could explain the task, and the innovators worked individually on their own projects, all returning together for joint presentations and discussions. They also used an online meeting to follow up after Living Lab 5 to make up for time lost during the in-person meeting. In Croatia, some meetings were in person and others online (see Figure 4).

The Netherlands, Italy and Sweden held their Living Labs exclusively in person, across a mix of formal and informal settings. There was no option to join online or a hybrid set-up, meaning that if an

[2] Hybrid is understood as one or more innovators joining the meeting online. In some circumstances stakeholders joined online but this is not classified as hybrid for the purposes of Figure 4.

innovator could not attend, they missed the session entirely. The informal relationships between the innovators and between innovators and co-leads appear to have greatly benefited from in-person meetings (e.g. Spain, the Netherlands, Lithuania). In-person meetings also encouraged more feedback from one another when sharing products (Lithuania). The Irish Living Lab observed that participants engaged more with the exercises during an in-person meeting. This was particularly the case for the less experienced participants.

3.2.2 Stakeholder engagement

All Living Labs involved stakeholders. As foreseen in the Grant Agreement, the Living Lab included a co-lead from a stakeholder organisation (for example: the Netherlands: Farm union, Italy: Bio-Distretto delle Lame) (see D3.5). In addition, it was the idea to invite stakeholders (representing relevant companies, public authorities, policymakers, education research institutions, and citizens' organisations) to participate in the Living Lab session; the idea was that stakeholders could not only provide access to relevant support but also learn how to improve support given to women-innovators while witnessing their innovation journey. The latter proved more complicated than anticipated. As discussed in more detail in 4.3, it was essential for the participants and co-leads to have time together to build relationships and create a safe environment. In addition, exchanging experiences and peer-to-peer learning proved to be very effective mechanisms. As a result, stakeholders were participating in most Living Labs to a somewhat lesser extent than anticipated. In hindsight, this may have limited the degree to which stakeholders and women innovators learned from each other; involving them more often might also have improved women's access to stakeholders. On the other hand, it proved very important to plan the Living Labs according to women's needs and priorities.

In practice, the Living Labs differed in whom they invited and to the extent of their engagement. Some Living Labs limited stakeholder participation to specific meetings and events to ensure the Living Lab primarily functioned as a safe environment for women to meet (in the Netherlands, Lithuania, Croatia, Sweden). Others involved the stakeholders in all or most meetings (Norway, Spain, Italy). Scotland and Ireland had limited stakeholder engagement, though the women in Ireland were pleased to engage with stakeholders from key government departments and regional funding bodies during the final Living Lab discussions. The following section provides more details.

In Italy, stakeholders were involved in every Living Lab, with a minimum presence from a representative of the Bio-Distretto delle Lame, the territory from which all the innovators were recruited. More stakeholders were involved in several Living Labs and specific events external to the meetings. The contact details of all innovators were also circulated to an agreed list of stakeholders to assist with networking. In Lithuania, stakeholders were also present at all the Living Labs, including government representatives and skilled trainers. AgriFood Lithuania was a recurring participant. Also, in Spain, stakeholders were involved in most of the Living Labs. For example, Living Lab 6 included eight innovators (two online), seven co-leads and ten stakeholders, many of whom were regular attendees so well known to the innovators. In Ireland, stakeholders were invited to the third and the final meetings. In attendance at this Living Lab were the government ministries with responsibility for agricultural policy and rural policy, and both really engaged with the project findings. Also, in attendance were training and advice institutes, the sister project FLIARA and the

university. In Norway, one or two stakeholders attended eight of the nine meetings, with the most (6) joining Living Lab 7 when the women gave a five-minute presentation to the panel, which included representatives of academia, the government, industry, and the non-profit sector. It was a similar situation in Sweden, with one to three stakeholders being involved for six of the Living Labs. The final Living Lab (9) took place in a larger event with over 110 participants, including the Swedish Prime Minister. In Croatia, multiple stakeholders joined seven Living Labs, representing numerous governmental departments, tourism and farming sectors and regional governance. In Scotland, one or two stakeholders joined seven of the nine Living Labs, all of which were online and included one representative from the Scottish Crofting Federation. In the Netherlands, stakeholders joined five Living Labs in total, including governmental and banking representatives and (A)KIS trainers.

The invitation of stakeholders fulfilled multiple functions. Some stakeholders would give **specific advice** (e.g., on financing and the empathy map), while others were invited to become familiar with the women's experiences (e.g., the Ministry of Agriculture in the Netherlands and Lithuania; the Regional Food Strategy in Sweden). In Croatia, some Living Labs were organised within the local communities of innovators, and, as such, relevant local stakeholders were invited to join. This increased accessibility for **interested parties** and the **visibility of the innovator** in their local area. In these remote rural communities, it significantly helped to highlight women entrepreneurs' roles in rural development.

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. At the same time, all Living Labs indicated that involvement should be managed, and stakeholders themselves should not be the focus. Stakeholders were not always well-prepared and sometimes spent too much time introducing themselves. Their presence could also mean having less time for training and peer-to-peer exchange. Croatia, for instance, concluded that part of the Living Lab session should always be with innovators only, a sentiment shared by others, such as Lithuania, Italy and the Netherlands.

3.2.3 Mentoring

The initial description of the Living Lab strategy in the Grant Agreement did not refer to individual mentoring. It was after the project began that the Living Methodology was further developed (see D3.1). The Project Partner responsible (SETU) suggested organising individual mentoring sessions between the Living Lab sessions to track the women's innovation journey and allow continuous updates to the Living Lab programmes. They also provided the co-leads with a questionnaire and form to make notes, although it was agreed that the forms would not be shared with them for confidentiality reasons. Only Living Lab methodology-related insights were exchanged during the Living Lab review meetings (see D3.5).

The national case study reports show that the nine Living Labs handled mentoring differently in practice. Three countries did not organise any regular mentoring. In Sweden, most of the women were already on a coaching trajectory; instead of mentoring, the co-leads interviewed the women-innovators three times during the project. In Norway, there was a similar recognition that the co-leads could not provide business mentoring; instead, the co-leads held two individual meetings with all participants to check on progress and gather feedback from the women involved. In Ireland, no

mentor talks were offered. Notably, all three countries had mainly advanced women innovators in their Living Labs.

In all the other countries, the two co-leads conducted regular one-on-one conversations between the Living Labs with all Living Lab participants. In Spain, the initial mentor talks included both members of the academic team and the co-leads to understand the projects better and help structure the content of the forthcoming Living Labs. After that, Spain used a WhatsApp group between the innovators and the academic co-lead to evaluate what happened after each session. Similarly, in Lithuania, the academic co-lead served as a mentor to all the innovators. After the initial phone calls, the mentoring moved to a Messenger group, where the women supported each other. In Italy, mentoring took place individually in person, except following Living Lab 4, which was conducted by phone. The Living Lab was split into two geographically distinct groups and co-managed by the two co-leads. In Scotland, both co-leads spoke with all Living Lab participants after each Living Lab session and did every mentoring session together. The Netherlands and Croatia followed the practice of dividing the mentees among the co-leads, with individual follow-up conversations after each Living Lab meeting. For the women innovators, the mentor talks offered a valuable opportunity to discuss **individual project issues** and to receive advice from the mentors. Steps to overcome issues could be addressed, and educational and training needs identified (Croatia). It was noted in the Lithuanian lab that the more advanced innovators had expected tailored coaching rather than the mentoring that was offered. However, the women took up the task themselves and shared experiences and advice, including how to care for crops and set prices for their products. The **regularity of mentor talks** was seen as a *"critical pillar"* of the Living Lab programme, as a space for sharing advice and building on the Living Lab meetings, and for giving innovators personal attention (Italy).

Similarly, these conversations were meaningful for mentors to understand each innovator's needs and motivations in greater depth, identify training gaps or opportunities, and keep mentees engaged in the process. For the co-leads, the mentoring talks provided helpful feedback on the meetings and input for programming the training, as well as insights into rural women's innovation journeys. In Norway, for instance, mentoring talks were used to discuss content, suggest stakeholder involvement, and answer questions, especially if an innovator missed a Living Lab. These calls were also used to keep the women motivated to remain in the project. The mentor talks were crucial at the beginning of the process, as the women provided valuable input on the Living Lab's content to meet their needs.

4. The process of developing the innovations

The previous section described how the Living Labs were organised by location and programming, and how the Living Labs aimed to support the development of participants' innovation projects. This section focuses on how the development process unfolded, what facilitated their learning process, and what obstructed it. In doing so, it looks beyond the Living Labs as a vital part of the design process, to the 'real world' outside the Living Labs and to the women's everyday private lives. The section is structured around significant themes identified by the women innovators themselves during a focus group on their learning process and by the co-leads based on their observations of the Living Lab meetings and mentoring talks. Where relevant, we discuss if and how women innovators' experiences differed across regions and farming systems.

4.1 Process in time

Whilst most women followed the same training, it was a non-linear process in which innovators could be static in some parts and take enormous leaps, revisiting the stages of development and tools when needed. In general, the more experienced innovator could adapt to and use the tools quickly (Croatia, Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy, Scotland). Beginners needed more time to clarify their ideas and sometimes returned to using tools introduced earlier when their plans were more worked out. It may, hence, seem that beginners at the initial stages of development benefited the most from the training. Yet, those who stepped into the Living Lab at an advanced stage of innovation also benefited from revisiting the initial stages for reflection and to clarify new ideas (Norway, Spain). In Lithuania and Scotland, the more advanced innovators significantly supported the beginners by sharing their experience and knowledge. However, it was the beginners' enthusiasm that, in turn, motivated the more advanced to move forward with their own projects, thus revealing the important role of **group dynamics**. Here, the type of region or farming system did not make any difference.

Taking part in a three-year project seems to have been universally positive, despite some initial hesitation about the commitment it would need. The time scale is seen as necessary because it gives the women space to work through challenges and make changes. For example, for some, learning to delegate was key to dealing with an increased workload. Meeting at regular intervals in Living Labs and during mentoring talks allowed participants to ask questions about the tools and information provided, which, for some, felt technical and abstract. By being part of the GRASS CEILING project for three years, the women had the support to address "not just a practical component in learning how to delegate more effectively, but also a mental obstacle" (Italy).

The latter already indicates that the Living Labs played an important role not only in providing technical guidance on innovation design, but also in offering **emotional support** and **encouragement** offered by the co-leads and the group. It helped the innovators to keep on track and not give up when encountering hurdles. "In general, the women were always genuinely interested to hear about the other participants' experiences and current situation, and they were

explicitly supporting each other through applause, advice and supportive words" (Norway). Many women received confidence from the group as new solutions and experiences were shared, and they inspired others. The trust and support between participants grew with each meeting. "Our impression is that for the women participants, the most important outcome of our Living Lab sessions is networking and encouragement, and innovation learning is in second place" (Croatia).

Over time, both the women and the co-leads witnessed a process of **empowerment** unfold, including a gradual identification as innovators. Discussing the definition of 'innovator' during the first Living Lab was key to setting expectations for many women (e.g., Lithuania, the Netherlands, Spain). The external confirmation that co-leads saw the women as socio-economic innovators seemed to have reinforced how the women saw themselves and their role in the transformation. They felt legitimised and were able to articulate their expectations (Spain).

Some of the women wanted to participate in the GRASS CEILING project and its legacy for gender equality; they wanted to change gender relations in agriculture and rural areas and improve the situation of women (e.g., Ireland and the Netherlands). However, some women were frustrated that the Living Labs' impact did not reach far enough, with few cross-lab interactions. In several Living Labs, this became the focus for a group project. Spain focused on developing a strong communication strategy for women innovators and gender equality, with direct and wide impact, utilising local and national media to bring the dialogue into the mainstream. In Italy, the group were invited to collaborate on a project funded by the municipality to promote the reconnection of rural and urban spaces and communities in the biodistrict. In Sweden, the group planned and executed a public event as an opportunity for women innovators to 'meet and mingle' with (non-)government representatives from farming, forestry, and rural areas, as well as business support and talks.

Most effective elements of Living Labs:

- Mutual feedback among the women innovators
- Accessing or revisiting tools when needed
- Using case studies and group work to make problems more manageable
- Redefining the traditional definition of socio-economic innovation
- Individual mentoring to keep innovators 'on track' and confident

Figure 5: Most popular elements of the Living Labs

4.2 Hurdles

All innovators experienced hurdles during the development of their project and their participation in the Living Lab. Some obstructions were explicitly addressed as part of the Living Lab, such as a lack of knowledge or a need for emotional support; others were beyond the reach of the Living Labs or were experienced during the Living Lab. Altogether, they offer a good insight into what hampers specifically women's innovation process. It is notable how similar the obstructions women experience are, with hardly any differences across countries, regions, or farming systems. Climate change has affected women's projects in some regions (e.g. Croatia). Sweden experienced higher temperatures and too little or too much rain; Italy suffered severe drought and violent weather,

causing extensive structural damage to one innovator's community project. Living in remote areas makes it more difficult to access training and advice. Still, as explained below, the type, size, and stage of innovation projects matter most, followed by women's experience and self-confidence.

> *"Inner processes that you go through cannot be substantiated in methodologies sometimes, which is a real hurdle"* (the Netherlands)

4.2.1 Finance

Access to funding was a significant problem for most of the women. Many had experienced **difficulties obtaining loans or subsidies** because their projects were considered too small or had too few employees and, therefore, were less profitable. In Croatia, a prerequisite for engaging in entrepreneurship is having material and financial security, including access to private funds —an initial hurdle. Being a start-up and not involved in exports made it challenging to get sufficient funding in Ireland. Others found the administrative burdens associated with complex application systems tiresome (Sweden) and the bureaucracy *"discouraging and time-consuming"*, reinforced by a lack of advisory support and especially challenging for start-ups (Spain). Economic uncertainty was a key factor in Italy, with women reporting anxiety about applying for funds and that when funds were awarded, the distribution was slow. It was like having *"a knife at your throat"* (Italy). Some projects, such as events, were downscaled (Italy) or failed to be realised (Lithuania) due to the lack of funding opportunities. Finding staff to complement the project proved difficult in both Sweden and the Netherlands. Projects that sought to realise still-unknown, novel concepts, such as rewilding (in the Netherlands), also had difficulty obtaining funding. Elsewhere, entrusting others with your projects and delegating responsibility were issues (Italy), whilst the lack of funds also made this an impossibility (Italy). Spain and Croatia mentioned that restricted funding also limited the ability to include additional training in the Living Labs.

4.2.2 Time shortage

The lack of time was a common hurdle across all the Living Labs (e.g. Sweden, Norway). For some, the **balance between work and life** was a challenge, especially as many (beginner) innovation projects were in addition to other employment or commitments. Some women felt they had to justify to their partners the time they spent on the GRASS CEILING project as part of their own self-development (e.g., in the Netherlands). Many of the women in the project held a second paid job, which also restricted the time they had available for their project. It was not uncommon for beginners to *"struggle to balance ambition with reality, or uncertainty regarding the feasibility of an idea or its scale"* (Croatia). The lack of time was also a challenge in Italy, where time and resources were sometimes limited, hindering the innovator's progress.

A strained **work-family balance** was regularly cited as a hurdle in Living Lab preparations (Spain, Norway, Ireland). Asking women to complete tasks between the meetings was therefore not always successful. In Ireland, innovators often preferred to take part in dialogue and action within the group format. Six of the nine Living Labs in the Netherlands began with some women apologising for not having invested much time in their work. In general, the struggle with a shortage of time reflected

the *"complexities of women's private and professional life"* (Croatia). This included innovators having to justify themselves and their projects within the family. Babies were born during the projects (the Netherlands, Sweden), which meant that the innovators paused their projects' development during parental leave.

The **pace of life** being different from the training was often (e.g., Italy) cited as a source of frustration, as innovations often developed at a pace different from the training trajectory. In Sweden, the reflection was that all women made large or small developments on farms and businesses, but whether these were *"parallel or coincidental to the Living Labs process"* was impossible to say (Sweden). Timeline visions differed between older participants, who focused on abstract change, and younger participants, who focused on personal and more immediate changes (Spain).

4.2.3 Gender norms and self-confidence

Some women received little support for their projects from their immediate environment. For example, family members not offering or assuming any help with childcare made it hard for women to invest time in their projects; some women mentioned that they had postponed projects until children were grown up (Ireland), or that they had struggled to manage care and work during the school holidays (Lithuania). Others felt criticised and judged when challenging traditional roles (the Netherlands). Some women were used to 'hiding' their ideas from critical and doubtful friends and family. In Italy, there was concern of a *"closed mindset"* within the agricultural sector, putting negative pressure on innovation. Across all Living Labs, it was clear that fear of **criticism**, combined with high expectations, undermined the self-confidence of many participants (e.g. Croatia, Lithuania, Scotland). Across many of the Living Labs, there was a lack of confidence in identifying oneself as an innovator (e.g., Scotland, Spain). Women had difficulty making decisions, e.g. about investments, and were easily influenced by significant others' criticism, concerns, or lack of support. For example, in Croatia, there was reluctance to test prototype products with potential customers and friends and family were therefore engaged.

4.3 Effective support

This section discusses how participating in the Living Labs supported the women in (further) developing their socio-ecological projects. We do not discuss the different exercises and tools used in the Living Labs, as the Living Lab training methodology is analysed in deliverable D3.5. Here, we focus on what the women innovators brought to the fore when reflecting on the **impact the Living Labs had on the development of their projects and their identity** as innovators and entrepreneurs. In doing so, we make use of the insights that the second focus groups organised within each Living Lab offered, and the thoughts women shared with the co-leads during the individual mentoring talks. Again, it is notable how similarly the women reflect on how the Living Labs supported them. As we will present in more detail below, **women's experience and stage of innovation mattered**, with moral encouragement being most important for beginners. At the same time, **comradeship and peer-to-peer learning** were valued also by those who were more advanced and experienced. We did not identify apparent differences between regions or farming systems either. This may be explained by the fact that what mattered most to them—a safe space and a women-only support

group—responds to the gender-specific discrimination, lack of recognition.

> *"These amazing women think that what I'm up to isn't a pile of nonsense. That counts for something"* (Scotland)

4.3.1 Safe space

All women underlined the importance of the Living Lab, offering a safe space to discuss their projects, **express their doubts and ambitions**, and **share experiences**, progress and retreats. Among themselves, women *"allowed each other to speak"* (Ireland). They were fair, and instead of competition, there was "*mutual respect and appreciation*" (Croatia), where everyone was heard respectfully (Lithuania), and the lack of support was shared openly (Sweden). The women felt they were listened to, taken seriously and valued by both their fellow participants and the co-leads (e.g. Scotland). In Norway, it seemed that women found it valuable to establish a sense of community for open discussion and support. It was a place to be vulnerable (Sweden) and to discuss personal obstacles or voice opinions *"without facing backlash based on gender"* (Italy). In Norway, they appreciated discussing real-time problems with the group. As a result, the women's self-confidence increased, and their ideas became more focused (Croatia). It was a positive and enriching experience for the women and the academic and practical co-leads (Spain).

> *"(What) I've found the most useful is…the actual participants and getting their knowledge… So, knowledge transfer in the group".* (Ireland)

The Living Lab meetings also enabled the women to **take time away** from hectic schedules to focus on new ideas (Scotland) and share these with the group. Sometimes this was the first time a woman had the courage to speak about their idea aloud (the Netherlands). Self-doubt was a significant hurdle for many women involved, but the safe space in the Living Lab not only allowed them to share support but also to break down assumptions. For example, when even more advanced, 'strong' women in the Netherlands shared vulnerability, self-doubt, and fear of failure, those at the beginning stage started to feel more equal; they also learned that fear of failure is normal and not a sign of weakness, which added to their **self-acceptance and self-confidence**.

4.2.2 Women-only

The 'women-only' sessions were crucial for the safety of the Living Labs; here, the women felt that they could express themselves without judgment or evaluation (Croatia) and *"without 'prestige'"* (Sweden). It was observed that many women across all the Living Labs found **solidarity** within their groups when they realised that they had been sharing similar barriers. This occurred naturally as part of the sharing of experiences but was also supported by initial and final focus groups and foresight exercises included in the Living Lab programme (see D3.5). Discussing the general and personal challenges women face in rural contexts was empowering and enlightening for many. "*It was a beautiful moment of growth and dialogue*" (Italy). Seeing that others faced the same problems was an eye-opening moment for the innovators. This created **space for dialogue** that otherwise would have been stifled, such as the impact of childcare (Ireland). This was reportedly echoed by

women in Sweden who "*would perhaps have limited sharing experiences of unequal treatment and prejudices in a mixed-gender group*".

> *We as women 'own' certain questions, like being a mother or gender equal economy, as there are inequalities. Those are more easily discussed in a homogenous group"* (Sweden)

It also supported the development of a strong **community**, which extended beyond the Living Lab meetings, when women would communicate with each other, e.g. via WhatsApp or Messenger, or call upon each other for advice (e.g. Croatia, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Sweden, Scotland), or share information with innovators who had missed a meeting (e.g. Spain). In the Netherlands, for instance, a woman who had produced ice cream on her farm before would invite a starting ice-cream producer to share her tips and tricks. *"The strong sense of collective achievement and group synergy fostered motivation among the women to continue collaborating, learning, and acting together"* (Lithuania). In many Living Labs, it was witnessed that more advanced innovators shared knowledge with beginners. The Living Lab was frequently described as a supportive channel that enabled **peer-to-peer learning**. Engaging in collective exercises lowered the threshold for applying tools, such as the empathy map, and allowed participants to learn from each other. The sharing of advice and opportunities was consistent across all Living Labs, creating a more 'dynamic' atmosphere with energy when the women were helping one another; "*finding a tribe*" (Ireland). The friendly, trusting environment was complemented by praising and encouraging one another while sharing advice, information, or contacts (e.g., Croatia, Norway, the Netherlands). The Living Lab design in Sweden was focused on women using their knowledge and experience to help one another. For example, during a 'tree analysis' exercise, the women presented their own projects and welcomed feedback from others.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Rural women's innovation process: motives and hurdles

The women who participated in the GRASS CEILING Living Labs were all rural women, many of whom lived and worked on farms; they represented diverse farming systems, including farms with livestock (for dairy and meat), various types of vegetable, fruit, or herb production, and more. The women lived in different types of rural regions (including more central and more remote regions, islands, coastal and mountainous regions, and depopulating and ageing regions). Regardless of their geographical location and farming system, all women were committed to developing socio-ecological innovations in farming, the rural economy and rural communities.

Their **innovations** included the implementation of environmentally friendly agricultural productions (Lithuania) or production methods (Spain), food production (Norway) and sale from the farm gate (Sweden), new rural enterprises offering local employment (Ireland), community services (Scotland), including childcare (Italy) and education (Croatia), or the promotion of women's political representation (the Netherlands). The women's projects varied in size but, in general, required limited financial investment. The latter, of course, also depended on the stage of innovation. Three of our Living Labs focused on experienced women innovators working on advanced innovation projects; in most of the other Living Labs, the participants were still at the start of their projects.

Comparing across **countries, regions, and farming systems** underscores the similarities in what drives and constrains rural women's engagement with socio-ecological innovations. There were differences in gender norms across countries and sometimes regions, with traditional expectations more prominent in, for instance, Croatia than in Norway. Nevertheless, women in all countries reported that their household and family responsibilities mattered to their innovation process. The same applies to childcare accessibility, which women across regions identified as an obstacle. When it comes to farming styles, multifunctional agriculture is well known as a sector in which women are respected and recognised. Yet, the hurdles identified by the Living Lab participants in agriculture did not differ across farming sectors or regions. Access to funding, balance between work and family and disagreements within families were the most common hurdles women experienced across regions and farming systems.

The same is true for differences in age or socio-economic background; again, it is notable how similar the **hurdles** they faced were. Women's responsibility for family and household chores was among the most frequently mentioned hurdles; these chores demanded considerable time investment because, in most rural areas, public and private services were available only at a significant distance. The same was true for services that could offer information, training, and advice. Most women had difficulty accessing them at distant locations, but most importantly, because of their limited understanding of women's needs. Most (A)KIS and Local Enterprise Offices were used to serve men innovators with projects that required technical, e.g., agronomic assistance. Women innovators often felt they were not recognised as innovators and, therefore, not considered relevant clients, with services offered that did not respond to their needs. Finally, most of the women innovators had difficulty securing funding, whether in the form of loans or subsidies. Again, they had the

experience that either they, as innovators, or their projects, were not considered adequate or profitable enough, or funding schemes did not match their ideas. However, our analysis reveals that experience makes some differences in terms of self-confidence, readiness to confront gender-specific hurdles, the need for recognition, and the ability to delegate tasks.

The **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, and to strengthening women's voices in rural and agricultural policymaking. Sometimes they were motivated by the lack of any other employment opportunities in remote regions. In addition, many women explicitly stated that safeguarding the environment was crucial to rural and farmers' futures. More generally, we may conclude that the women engaged in diverse types of innovation, including social, economic/business, and technical innovations, with motives that combined individual and collective interests.

5.2 Rural women's needs for support: Living Lab's experiences

Working with women innovators in the GRASS CEILING Living Labs for three years provided valuable insights into what women innovators need and desire, and what effectively supports them in developing their innovation projects. We learned by experimenting with different tools and workshops and repeatedly discussing with the women, in groups and individually, what they experienced, which assistance they valued and what they missed.

All women agreed that the **women-only Living Labs offered a safe space** to exchange experiences with other women innovators, learn together and inspire each other. Having face-to-face meetings for several years played an important role. Being able to trust their fellow women innovators offered room to share emotions, show vulnerability, and boost confidence to experiment and continue. Sharing successes and disappointments, happiness and disillusionment, offered a space to build a network based on strong relationships and to develop courage and self-confidence.

It also offered **time away** from daily routines, with **opportunities to learn** individually and through a co-creative process. 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, demanding more support and recognition of their contributions in (A)KIS and fair representation in policymaking (see 5.3). At the individual level, the Living Labs importantly contributed to the **development of women's identity as innovators and entrepreneurs**; this was most important for women at an early stage of innovation, and who lacked self-confidence and were sensitive to doubts raised by family and friends.

> *"For the first time, I'm seeing myself as someone who should be paid"* (Italy)

Altogether, the Living Labs fulfilled a **clear need** among women innovators **for networking** with other women innovators, for one-to-one **mentoring and coaching**, and for group support for **technical knowledge and practical skills** that responded to their questions and desires and supported social learning. The women also appreciated the meeting between local authorities and

stakeholders for the information they provided and the networking opportunity. We could not identify any differences between women based on the type of region they came from or farming system.

5.3 Need for change in (A)KIS and rural policy

Supporting rural women developing socio-ecological innovators requires existing (agricultural) **knowledge and innovation support** ((A)KIS) to change. They need to open their eyes to the potential of women innovators, their specific support needs, their values, and their approach to innovation. They, hence, need to recognise the diversity among innovators, with women often acting and thinking differently than men, given their position in rural society and farming, the **gender-specific norms** that limit their room for manoeuvre and impact how they design and pursue their innovation journey. It is also pertinent to acknowledge **different types of innovation and entrepreneurship** practices, including social innovations and small-scale, locally oriented businesses, which are not seeking to maximise individual profits but aim to make vital contributions to the local economy, the local community, and environmental wellbeing.

More specifically, the GRASS CEILING Living Labs have taught us that **(A)KIS should offer an integrated innovation support system** that combines access to technical expertise with personalised mentoring, tailored training, and networking opportunities for women at every stage of their innovation project. It is, moreover, important to promote **women's visibility as innovators**, rural and social entrepreneurs, farmers, and forest owners.

In addition, it is of utmost importance for banks and other funding institutions to improve women innovators' **access to funding** and economic support and ease the bureaucratic requirements. Also, in this regard, women experience difficulties as gender-specific norms undermine their respect as innovators and entrepreneurs when it comes to bank credit, subsidies, and other forms of support. It is important to stress here that women innovators expressed a need for funding that aligns with the different stages of their projects, from micro-funding to larger loans.

The women also stressed the importance of maintaining **rural services** for their success. Although living in different rural regions, all women reported difficulty in balancing work and family, due to the lack of childcare, schools, hospitals, education, mail services, and transport. In addition to better maternity and paternity leave regulations, farm women underlined the need for farm relief services that could offer on-farm and home-based support during maternity leave and during summer periods when schools and kindergartens close, while farming activities reach their peak.

Finally, it is essential that **rural and agricultural policies**, e.g. the national strategic plan, better address gender issues, to support innovation in farming and rural communities, with equal rights and opportunities for women. This also requires improving women's representation and participation in rural and agricultural decision-making.

The national reports do not refer to the need to develop tailor-made instruments or policies for specific regions or farming systems. Based on the experiences of women innovators presented above, we can underline the need for accessible services, and in particular, childcare and innovation advice and training in the more remote areas (island and mountainous regions); moreover, it is important to enhance the visibility and recognition of women innovators in all rural enterprises and

farming systems. It is pertinent to respond to the specific needs of women innovators. It is also high time to let go of the traditional definition of what constitutes a valuable innovation and a successful innovator. Women innovators represent the **new generation of farmers and rural entrepreneurs**. Their socio-ecological innovations sustain rural futures by combining individual and collective interests. They build businesses that generate individual income while offering employment and services that enhance rural communities' resilience. In a similar vein, farm women develop new business activities, production methods, and value chains aligned with what society wants and what nature needs.

Annex 1. National report template

WP2 task 2.3. Case studies, updated template, 29.1.2025

The case studies of women innovator participants in the Living Labs (LLs) (M6-36); task leader: WU; Project Partners: all Living Lab Project Partners

Based on your valuable comments and suggestions, we updated the template; we decided to include information resulting from a focus group (see separate template) but NOT to add a survey. The report, as such, has also been simplified, and instructions improved.

Objectives of task 2.3

To generate an understanding of what drives and inhibits women from developing innovative initiatives

a. Collect & analyse co-created insights of women innovators during the LLS about their experiences & development
b. Collect & analyse how participating in the nine LL meetings supports women in developing their innovation journeys (including innovator identity and self-identified innovation goals)
c. Collect & analyse co-created insights about the interaction between women innovators and AKIS & relevant support organisations in support of the innovators' journeys
d. Checking for the specificity of women innovators' needs in diverse regions and diverse farming system

Information used

The case studies are based foremostly on what you, as (co)lead and observer, have learned by participating in the Living Labs and the mentoring talks. Please share with us what you have witnessed and your interpretation and reflection. You may use notes from the mentoring talks, the Living Lab diary, material produced as part of Living Lab exercises, and the focus group to reflect on the Living Lab experiences collectively. The analysis focuses on how women's innovation process unfolded during their participation in the Living Labs and what mattered for the women in your Living Lab, giving their background and context. This may not be the same for all women; please explain correspondences and differences and what you think explains them. You will be asked to explain the specificity of your Living Lab at the start of the report so we can consider that when comparing cases.

Report structure

The report will be structured in four sections, which collect information regarding (I) the context, (II) the organisation of the Living Labs, (III) the learning process, and (IV) conclusions. We set some deadlines for draft reports of the different sections to ensure we assemble the necessary information during the last year of the project [see dates next to the sections]. We will organise meetings in spring and summer to discuss progress and findings.

Total length: +/- 10 pages, excluding tables

D2.3 –Synthesis report presenting the experiences of rural women innovators across Living Labs

Section 1: Context *[draft to be submitted end of March 2025] [word count 250]*

This section is meant to briefly depict the context in which the women innovators live and work and the composition of the Living Labs (LLs)

1. **The case-study country:** just the name
2. **The region:** What are the specific characteristics of the region where the women innovators live and work? Is it coastal, mountainous, islands, urban-adjacent, or remote region? How is the accessibility of relevant infrastructure (e.g. child care, schools, internet …)?
3. **Composition of the LL:** Please explain the particularity of your Living Lab. Who are the women participating in your Living Lab regarding age, child caring responsibilities, stage of innovation/entrepreneurship when starting, and socio-economic profile (if relevant and known)? Is there anything else we need to know to understand the context in which the participation in the Living Lab occurred? Please also fill in table 1

LL participants	Age	Engaged in agriculture	Child care responsibility Yes/no	Innovation project	Stage of Innovation at start: initial/advanced/very advanced	Paid employment outside the family farm
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						

Table 1: Living Lab composition

Section 2: Organization of the LLs *[draft to be submitted end of March 2025] [word count 500 words – tables are fine!]*

This section briefly describes how the Living Labs and mentoring talks were organised in your country/region, and how the organisation mattered in your view.

4. Functioning from recruitment to completion, based on your perspective as (co)lead? *[information and interpretation based on Living Lab diary/participation observation]*

Please list in Table 2 all Living Lab meetings, with date, duration, location, programme, and stakeholder participants. [add table 2]

LL meeting	Duration (full/half day)	Location: In person/online	If in personal: formal/informal location	Programme: Refer to design method stage & add extra activities	List stakeholders present
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					

Table 2: Living Lab meetings

a. How did you programme the Living Lab meetings? Did you follow the programme developed and offered by WP3? Which extra or alternative elements did you include? [please refer to table 2 and explain]

b. Which events went well or not so well? Please refer to table 2 and explain

c. Do you think the (in)formality of the location and/or timing of the meetings influenced the outcome? And if so, how?

d. How did you organise the mentoring talks? Did you follow the instructions by WP3, or did you make any changes

e. Are you satisfied with how the mentoring talks went? Could you explain what their value was and what you learned from them?

f. Did women exit the Living Lab or pause their participation, and if so, for which reasons (personal, time pressures, etc.)?

Section 3: The process of developing the innovations *[draft to be submitted in June; [final version including the last Living Lab end of September]*

This section analyses women innovators' processes while participating in the LLs. Please note the difference between question 5, which looks into your observations as (co)lead, and questions 6 and 7, which are based on the focus group results.

5. **Changes noted throughout the Living Labs, from the perspective as (co)lead:**

[*information & interpretation based on Living Lab diary/participant observation, mentor talks*] [word count 1500]

a. How did the innovation projects develop, and how did that differ between the participants?

- What were important steps taken, and what supported these steps?
- Which intended and unintended benefits arose related to the Living Lab participation?
- What were the important hurdles, and what caused these hurdles?
- What do you think was particular about your Living Lab?

b. What was, in your view, the outcome of the stakeholder interactions – for the women and/or the stakeholders? Did it bring new information, change attitudes, or accessibility?

c. How important was it in your view that the women met other women innovators and that the Living Labs were for women only?

6. **Learning process** [information source: focus group]

Please report on the discussion resulting from the questions in the focus group template, and the insights you gained – both new insights and confirmation of observations are relevant.

Include tables based on Post-its, etc., if available.

a. How did the women collectively reflect on their learning process and the Living Lab methodology (based on the focus group discussion) [word count: 1000]

b. How did the women reflect on the results of meeting and interacting with the invited stakeholders?

Section 4: Conclusions

Please briefly summarise <u>your main insights</u> based on the findings presented above and the context of your Living Lab regarding the following questions: [word count 1000]

a. What are the needs of women for support in developing their ideas and strengthening the impact of their innovations?

b. What do you think about the Living Lab as a tool to support women innovators? What would you maintain and/or change in the methodology?

c. What is needed from the stakeholders and innovation support system?

d. To what extent does the region and/or farming system in which the women operate impact their needs for support?