GRASS CEILING

D3.5

Synthesis report of the living lab with guidelines and lessons learned about supporting women innovators

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No.101083408

Deliverable D3.5

Title: Synthesis report of the Living lab with guidelines and lessons learned about supporting women innovators

Due date: November 2025

Submission date: 27 November 2025

Approved by Leader of Work Package: Leana Reinl (SETU)

Type: See List of deliverables in Annex 1 (part A) of Grant Agreement

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Dissemination Level		
☒	**PU:**	Public
☐	**CO:**	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)

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Executive Summary

This deliverable (D3.5) presents a synthesis of the lessons learned from the nine GRASS CEILING Living Labs and provides evidence-based guidelines for supporting rural women innovators. The report focuses on the perspectives of the Living Lab co-leads (academic and practitioner partners) who facilitated the Living Labs across nine European countries between 2023 and 2025. It complements the GRASS CEILING case studies, which present the experiences of the women innovators themselves, by concentrating on the Living Lab methodology, implementation processes, and the support mechanisms that enabled innovation and capability development. This report outlines innovation tools and templates to support women innovators developed in liaison with WP6. It highlights approaches to Living Lab delivery which promoted stakeholder engagement to inform the cross-country policy report of gender norms in driving or inhibiting women-led innovation in farming and rural areas, in liaison with WP5.

The report adopts a participatory action research (PAR) approach, characterised by iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection and adaptation. The findings draw on six co-lead review meetings conducted between 2023 and 2025, a cross-country co-lead focus group held in the final year of the project, co-lead reflections on their roles, and reflections from the WP3 Living Lab leaders. This multi-source qualitative approach enabled the identification of common themes, challenges, effective practices and context-specific adaptations across the nine Living Labs.

The findings demonstrate that supporting rural women innovators requires approaches that are relational, flexible and grounded in practice. Effective Living Labs were characterised by strong co-lead partnerships combining academic and practitioner expertise, diverse groups of women innovators, and the active involvement of stakeholders at different stages of the innovation process. The findings also highlight the importance of creating safe and trusting environments that enable women to share experiences, reflect on their innovation journeys and build confidence alongside innovation capabilities. Women innovators demonstrated a strong preference for collaborative and practice-based learning, storytelling and peer exchange. Flexible approaches to innovation tools and activities were effective, rather than rigid processes or formalised tasks.

Several important lessons emerged from the Living Lab experience. First, the co-lead role is complex and requires not only innovation and facilitation skills, but also empathy, adaptability and the ability to respond to emerging participant needs. Second, stakeholder engagement is most effective when tailored to the innovator's stage of development and when specific expertise is introduced at relevant moments in the innovation journey. Third, Living Labs benefit from customisation: adapting tools, language, meeting formats and mentoring approaches to local contexts and participant needs enhanced engagement and outcomes. Fourth, the three-year duration of the Living Labs proved valuable in accommodating different innovation rhythms, enabling iterative learning, and fostering confidence, social capital and innovation capacity among participants. Finally, the findings reveal a continuing gap between existing innovation support policies and the realities of rural women's

innovation experiences, suggesting the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive support systems.

Based on these insights, the report recommends that future innovation support initiatives adopt longer-term, participatory and gender-responsive approaches that recognise women innovators as co-creators rather than beneficiaries of support. Policy-makers and support practitioners should invest in skilled facilitation and mentoring, provide financial mechanisms that reduce barriers to participation, strengthen stakeholder ecosystems through targeted engagement, and promote flexible innovation support tools that are accessible and relevant to diverse rural contexts. Furthermore, innovation policies should place greater emphasis on confidence building, visibility, voice and network development as important dimensions of innovation success alongside more traditional economic and technological outcomes.

Overall, the GRASS CEILING Living Labs demonstrate that participatory, place-based and relational approaches can strengthen the innovation capabilities, confidence and influence of rural women innovators, while generating valuable insights for the design of future innovation ecosystems and policies that are more inclusive, equitable and responsive to women's lived realities.

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Section 1 – Introduction

Deliverable D3.5 provides a synthesis report of the Living labs' insights from the perspective of the co-leads of each of the 9 labs. It offers key guidelines and outlines lessons learned about supporting rural women innovators in the context of the GRASS CEILING Living labs. Lessons learned from the women innovators' perspectives, will be presented in the case studies, which have greater focus on the process and less on the Living lab methodology; both reports are, hence, complementary.

Through an iterative learning and adaption cycle, co-leads shared their individual Living lab experiences, insights and outputs. This allowed the co-leads to discuss and capture cross-lab insights throughout the operationalisation of the nine Living labs (2023-2025). This report synthesises the lessons learned by the co-leads, with data drawn from six co-lead review meetings, a focus group with the co-leads in Year 3 of the GRASS CEILING project, and WP3 team's notes and reflections.

Drawing on the lessons learned through the GRASS CEILING Living lab programme, and on the identified success criteria based on co-lead reflections (annex 2), key guidelines and lessons learned are offered, a framework for supporting rural women innovators in a Living lab environment (figure 1) is proposed, and a number of recommendations are outlined.

Section 2 – Key lessons learned about supporting women innovators

Living lab design, co-lead training and coordination were the responsibility of the Work Package (WP) 3 team. Over the three years of the Living lab delivery (2023-2025) and guided by a participatory action research (PAR) approach[1], a series of online review meetings (RM) were held with the co-leads representing each of the 9 GRASS CEILING Living labs. Co-lead reflections about supporting women innovators were captured, following the delivery of 9 Living lab meetings. These co-lead review meetings were held at approximately 4-month intervals (Table 1). These review meetings were recorded and shared with each Living lab team. Following each review meeting, the WP3 co-leads documented key reflections on lessons learned about supporting women innovators within their Living lab. In April 2025, a two-hour focus group (FG) with all Living lab co-leads sought to discuss 1) key challenges in supporting women innovators, 2) the delivery of the remaining Living lab meetings, and 3) criteria deemed important for successful Living labs in the context of the GRASS CEILING project. Draft guidelines for final year delivery were distributed prior to the online focus group. Seven of the nine Living labs were able to attend. The other two labs sent their responses in advance of the meeting, and their inputs were shared with attendees. The meeting was recorded on Microsoft (MS) Teams and shared on the project's SharePoint. Bubble Note Taker[2] transcribed the meeting notes. Table 1 summarises the key data sources.

Data source	Type/ duration	Timeline
Six recorded co-lead review meetings (RM)	Online, 1 hour each	Jul 2023- Jan 2025
Six WP3 lead reflections	Online, 0.5 hour each	Jul 2023- Jul 2025
Co-lead focus group (FG)	Online, 2 hours	Apr 2025
WP3 team review of data and key reflections	Online, 2 hours	Jul 2025
Co-lead reflection on the co-lead roles (practitioner and academic partner)	Template/ document	Sept 2025

Code: RM: review meeting, FG: focus group

Table 1. D3.5 key data sources

[1] Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative research approach where communities [rural women innovators and relevant stakeholders], co-leads and researchers partner to address social issues by co-producing knowledge through a cyclical process of planning, action, reflection, and evaluation. Rooted in principles of equity and empowerment, PAR shifts power to participants, ensuring that those affected by the Grass Ceiling programme are equal partners in defining innovation problems, gathering data, and implementing solutions, with the ultimate goal of fostering social change and increasing community control over their lives (see: De Oliveira, 2023; Keahey, 2021; Kindon et al., 2007; McIntyre, 2007 for further details).

[2] Bubble Note Taker is an AI-powered tool that automatically records, transcribes, and summarizes virtual meetings from platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet. See: https://www.usebubbles.com/ for details.

2.1 LIVING LAB ROLES

Drawing on the co-creation ethos at the heart of the participatory action research method, project coordinators mandated the appointment of both academic and practitioner co-lead(s) to each Living lab. This approach sought to ensure that the insights relating to both the innovation process and the Living lab findings would inform practice when engaging with female rural innovators. Each Living lab selected a practitioner partner to contribute to and engage with the Living labs and the emergent requirements of the rural women innovators.

2.1.1 Co-lead role

The co-lead team in each lab consisted of a practitioner and an academic partner. This co-lead team had a pivotal role in the delivery of Living labs. They were responsible for recruiting rural women innovators and for identifying and engaging stakeholders in the Living lab and in meetings. Their goal was to support and better understand rural women led innovation. In each country, the co-lead team coordinated nine Living lab meetings over three years of the project. While they followed a baseline lab structure and business model innovation process (Living lab Guidelines: Annex 1), they were actively encouraged to adapt their lab approach to reflect their innovator and stakeholder participant needs, and their lab and country contexts. Co-leads were responsible for coordinating lab meetings, activities and discussions, many of which were directly related to other GRASS CEILING work packages. They led and/or co-delivered training and activities with their women innovators. This included identifying learning and knowledge requirements and adapting the baseline approach in response to these emergent needs.

2.1.2 Characteristics of effective co-leads

The co-lead to innovator relationship was core to the success of the GRASS CEILING Living labs, several characteristics of effective co-leads have been gleaned from the data:

- 'Having previously **established relationships** with women innovators (Sweden; Norway; Netherlands), *'gave us credibility'* (Norway).
- Capacity to adapt to the needs of the women innovators, *'We have taken on tasks with short notice, in positive spirit; a larger team may have had more issues'* (Croatia).

As the first line contact, co-leads need to be a trusted intermediary between the women innovators and all other project and Living lab stakeholders. This role requires specific skills and attitudes, as highlighted below in the co-lead reflections,

- [The role required] prioritising the goals and learning experiences of the women and adjusting the Living lab … to reflect organic needs. [The role requires] agility (Sweden).
- I would like to emphasise the mix of human and professional skills that are required in this role … of course you have to learn the tools … to be able to accommodate and sustain this process, the human touch has to be fully integrated… it is a demanding role …but rewarding … now that we are experiencing it I realise that … otherwise you become less credible (Italy).
- This was a facilitation role, not an academic one … no academic hierarchies

(Netherlands).

- Having insight into the workings of European-funded projects and innovation/ Living labs.
- A caring attitude in understanding their journeys, to understand when to call them, to choose the right words … there is a lot going on underneath (Italy).
- The stakeholder meeting with the bank … it was emotionally difficult (foreclosure of one woman's business) (Netherlands).

Co-leads with limited innovation or lab facilitation experience and/or less insight into the way European-funded projects are run struggled,

- Some facilitators had difficulty contextualising the innovation training (Scotland).
- In hindsight, co-leads, including ourselves, would have benefited from a deeper explanation of how EU projects are run (WP3).

Complementary experience and skills enriched the design and implementation of the Living labs,

- **They know the history** (of rural development, women's entrepreneurship and gender equality) … **an educated leader** (Sweden).
- Many **academic co-leads had valuable regional research experience** (WP3 Lead).

Embedded co-lead experience highlighted context-specific challenges,

- **Understanding the co-lead roles and dividing tasks was necessary but difficult** (Sweden; Norway; Ireland).
- To realise an open and safe environment … where the possibility was there to discuss everything with each other … and the co-leads could mention that they sometimes struggled as well (Netherlands).

The capacity to be led as well as to lead in this co-creation model was key,

- Academic and practitioner collaboration ensured that **academic methodologies were grounded in real needs** (Spain; Ireland).
- This **allowed us to experiment with different approaches and perspectives** (Lithuania; Croatia).
- The **shared knowledge and skills** gained from my co-lead (Scotland practitioner lead).
- We learned a lot together (Lithuania).

Different levels of practitioner co-lead engagement were reported. Of note,

- **Full practitioner engagement** enriched lab discussions with insightful views, ensured critical support in organisation and logistics tasks, regularly updated stakeholder/partner boards, progressed lab activities, and established links with other projects and initiatives.
- **Partial engagement** resulted in an unbalanced workload for the academic co-leads and had a negative impact on cooperation and the coordination of the Living labs, it also confused the women innovators.

There were co-lead member changes in several Living labs over the duration of the project for various reasons; both academic co-leads (Sweden; Scotland; Ireland) and practitioner co-leads (Italy,

Ireland; Lithuania). This created some challenges in continuity,

- It was challenging to ensure continuity of lab activities and the transfer of knowledge about the innovators and their journeys (Norway).

Ultimately, the goal is for co-leads to 'step into the shadows' (WP3 lead, Ireland), so that the women direct their own innovation journeys.

Lessons learned: Leading a Living lab is a complex role that requires leadership, empathy, facilitation and coordination skills.

2.1.3 Stakeholder roles

As per the Living lab guidelines, the co-leads were encouraged to identify (up to 10i) multi-actor stakeholders to support Living lab objectives, and to expose women innovators to relevant experts and support organisations. They received the following guidelines,

- Stakeholders should represent relevant companies, public authorities, policymakers, education research institutions and / or citizens' organisations.
- Stakeholders can be national, regional, local actors.
- Stakeholders should provide a diverse and complimentary range of relevant skills and experience, for example,
    i. Subject specialists (e.g., specialists in biodiversity, farming/ multi-functional farms/ food innovation, etc.).
    ii. Government and/or policy stakeholders.
    iii. Functional business and innovation expertise (e.g., specialists in finance/funding, management, marketing, IT, business model innovation, innovation, etc.).

The co-leads engaged a broad range of stakeholders, resulting in strong engagement with the innovators' stakeholder eco-systems,

- Extensive practitioner networks were immensely valuable to the Living labs (e.g. for guest speakers, contributors to workshops and focus groups (Sweden).
- Stakeholder engagement was particularly strong in Spain, which established its own framework. 'Establishing the Living lab in that kind of territory [the bio district] proved stimulating … they are testing not only the innovation but their collaboration over time. In this context, an agricultural innovation 'Shark Tank' was a possibility. We are going to design proposals for improving support policies and the women will have to defend this proposal before a jury of other women' (Spain).
- In Sweden, Regional Science Park ran 'training and workshops for developing creative thinking for ideas, they invited innovators to join Science Park, some of them had this support previously and encouraged others to take part' (Sweden).

Stakeholder engagement was particularly helpful at different junctures of the innovation journey,

- Stakeholders were very valuable supporting the women to advance the innovation process, particular in Year 2 of the project and helping them in the 'reframe' and

the 'idea generation' process (Italy).

- In meeting 4 stage (Ideate). 'Idea generation was informed and inspired in real time through stakeholder insights about strategy' (Ireland, Spain).

However, stakeholder engagement was resource intensive at times,

- Orchestrating stakeholder participation on behalf of the Living labs was resource intensive (WP3 Lead).

Lessons learned: Connecting women innovators with specific specialists at various stages of the innovation process provided more tangible stakeholder engagement value.

Notably, tools such as the stakeholder mapping checklist[3] and the innovator stakeholder mapping tool[4], each of which can be adapted to rural women innovator context(s).

- Use of this tool to identify the most relevant stakeholders for each innovator can help enhance stakeholder relevance. This tool can be used either in-person - using post it notes and/or whiteboards to scope out relevant stakeholders - or in a virtual environment using collaborative whiteboard tools such as MIRO or equivalent (WP3 Lead).

Lesson learned: Use of stakeholder mapping tools can help women innovators identify the most relevant stakeholders for their context.

In other Living labs, it was more difficult to build a mutual relationship with stakeholders,

- One thing that was difficult, how to motivate stakeholders to come and participate in the lab meetings (Croatia).
- They [the women] are clearly confident about what they are doing, their prospects, but in the relationship with the stakeholders, it's not a question of personal confidence. Is that perhaps what the stakeholders are offering is not perceived as relevant? (Italy).
- We did not really engage so much as expected with some stakeholders because we had a meeting at the beginning, but we clearly felt that these stakeholders could not be part of really of our women's journey because of their innovation stage (Italy).

In some cases, engagement was curtailed by budgetary constraints,

- Several Living labs reported having budgetary challenges with trying to engage some subject matter experts to deliver training and workshops in their Living labs (Norway, Scotland, Croatia).

Lessons learned: Barriers to stakeholder engagement include a lack of motivation, perceived

[3] Stakeholder mapping checklist - https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/evaluation/publications/tool-14-stakeholder-mapping-checklist_en.html

[4] Innovator stakeholder ecosystem mapping tool - https://urbact.eu/toolbox-home/implementing/stakeholders-ecosystem-map

relevance to innovators and/or their innovation stage, and budgetary constraints.

Notably, there was some reticence when seeking to engage with male stakeholders,

- While many men supported the Living labs, actively identifying other women to participate, there was an observed reluctance on the part of many male champions to step in/ intrude upon what may have been perceived as a women's space (Ireland).
- … something we have to think about more …. to have men especially (Croatia).

Lessons learned: Male contributors may need to be encouraged if reluctant to step in due to fear of intruding in what is perceived as a women's space.

When considering stakeholder development programmes that could be relevant to the female innovators, responses suggest that some barriers remain,

- The kind of innovations they are developing is of a certain scale that they are not interesting to the normal women's entrepreneurial programmes. We realise that our Living lab members … do not feel they belong to those programmes. Perhaps they are not right. Perhaps they are wrong. Some could actually apply … but their impression is that these programmes are not relevant for their experience at the stage of development they are in right now (Italy).
- Stakeholders, especially those who were keen to support the women innovators, encouraged them to find ways to 'work around', fitting criteria to enable them to access support (Ireland).

Lessons learned: There is evidence of a disconnection between policy development, innovation support services, and rural women's development needs.

2.2 OPERATIONALISING THE LIVING LABS

Several tasks, significant in the operationalisation of the Living labs, are discussed next. Lessons are drawn firstly about recruiting and on-boarding rural women innovators.

2.2.1 Recruiting and on-boarding rural women innovators

Recruiting and on-boarding rural women innovators was the first significant task of the co-leads. Most co-leads reported that recruitment required carefully considered communication with prospective rural women innovators to encourage participation, as *'It was important that we could sell the idea* [of the project and the lab] *and the value of participation'* (Lithuania). A variety of recruitment approaches were adopted, and each lab developed recruitment criteria. These led to a diverse set of participants in each Living lab. This diversity raised several value propositions that were highlighted across the Living labs:

Proposition 1: Having diverse sectors and stages of business and innovation experience proved valuable in terms of inspiring and mentoring fellow innovators, enriching lab discussions and innovation training activities (Lithuania, Italy; Ireland; Spain; Scotland).

Proposition 2: Different ages and/or life stages added value as innovators shared their experiences of childcare, parental leave, carers leave, pension provision, divorce, etc. and the impact of these dynamics on their business development and innovation decisions (ALL).

Lesson learned: Optimised recruitment of women innovators includes ensuring a diverse mix of sectors, stage of business, a variety of ages and life stage innovators.

Women Innovators received a fixed sum for the services they provided within the Living labs, as outlined in the project's Grant Agreement. This fixed payment served two purposes. First, it recognised the cost and workload implications associated with committing time to attend the Living labs in person. Second, it acknowledged the potential need for temporary support or replacement within their business during their absence. The fixed compensation therefore formally recognised the innovators' role as active contributors and co-creators within the programme.

Co-leads observed that future recruitment processes could benefit from clearer communication about the availability of fixed compensation. Making this information more visible at an earlier stage would help ensure that participants are fully aware that their contribution to the GRASS CEILING programme is recognised and remunerated as part of their service provision (Norway).

Proposition 3: A per diem payment helped to overcome potential barriers to participation, however, recognition of their lab contribution should be reinforced at recruitment stage.

Lesson learned: Financial support (per diem payment) overcomes barriers of participant and recognises female innovators' contribution as programme co-creators.

2.2.2 Choosing meeting locations and deciding meeting formats

Hosting meetings in the women innovators' place of work assisted in increasing the depth of understanding of each innovator and their business context. This ensured deeper tacit knowledge of each other's innovation experience,

- You don't only get to hear the stories, but see the places, where they live and where they work (Italy).
- When I choose the place for the women, I make it so that there is more value added for the women, to see something, to meet someone (Lithuania).

Visiting each other's innovator environments offered a sense of immersion that could not be emulated in the Living labs held in the co-lead environment,

- We rented a place by the river; we feel like the social aspect of the lab is important … making it something nice for the women to attend feels important to us… brings me to the question where you have your labs? The budget is a restriction. (Norway).
- They get to showcase what they do and how they do it, talk about their products, the challenges they face and how they overcome them (Ireland).
- We went to the Islands; we were awestruck to be by the sea (Croatia).

Proposition 4: Hosting meetings in women innovators workplaces enhances

understanding of each other's work environment.

Lesson learned: In-person meetings at women innovator workplaces provide greater understanding of women innovator's situation and innovation focus.

There was an evident value in varying the Living lab location. **Hosting meetings in stakeholder institutions** provided for greater accessibility and enhanced the potential for collaboration. It also offered access to policy makers and support organisations and helped the women to access influential stakeholders:

- [They got to meet] the main agricultural bank, [the] Ministry of Agriculture. It allowed the women to get close to stakeholders of significance, if only for a few moments (Netherlands).
- We had our meeting at the headquarters of one of the cooperatives that one of the women are involved in- makes for a good atmosphere for our work (Italy).

Proposition 5: Hosting meetings in stakeholder venues enhances understanding of stakeholder purpose, activities, and potential benefits to the women innovators.

Lesson learned: In-person meetings at stakeholder environments provide greater understanding of stakeholder activities and potential benefits to the women.

An approach that included **virtual [online] meetings** enhanced the ability to invite physically distant stakeholders that might otherwise not have time to travel and attend meetings in person.

- The women in Scotland croft across the entire Highland area including the Islands, chose a place that was central in Ullapool, the ferry terminal is there so makes it easy for some of the more remote women (Scotland).
- We gathered key policy makers and stakeholder organisations that support business innovation online; the online approach helped ensure the right people were in the [virtual] room (Ireland).

Proposition 6: Hosting virtual meetings offers exposure to a wider set of stakeholders.

Lesson learned: Virtual meetings offer exposure to a wider set of stakeholders.

A noted barrier for some women innovators was that 'logging in from a device at home' meant that they had the distraction of work and other responsibilities and they reported that this made it more difficult to maintain attention, especially for a full day meeting (WP3 Lead). Others found that,

- Their connectivity [online/ internet] was a challenge, 'especially for remote locations' (Norway, Scotland).
- In some cases, you could tell there was a lot going on in the background [for the women innovators]. It has to have been distracting (Ireland).

Virtual meetings required additional design considerations, effective online digital tools such as Miro[5] were very useful for innovation training, helped to formulate their thinking and enhanced the

[5] Miro is an online digital whiteboard and collaborative innovation workspace where teams can brainstorm, plan, design, and manage projects virtually. It provides an infinite canvas for real-time collaboration on various ideas using tools like sticky notes, drawing, text,

benefits of collaborative activity. Miro also gave the innovators an artefact for future practical use, especially when copied and distributed after the virtual meeting.

- They [women innovators] enjoyed the sharing activities when online (Croatia).
- They got more from things they could apply in practice (Netherlands).

Proposition 7: Introduction of virtual visualisation tools enhances women innovator engagement and transfer to practice.

Lesson learned: Innovator engagement through visualisation tools and outcomes from virtual meetings enhanced retention of knowledge gained and improved transfer to practice.

2.2.3 Living lab customisation

The Living lab methodology (D3.1) offered a customisable baseline for lab delivery which included innovation training and lab management training and guidance. This was a new concept to most participants and to many co-leads. Understandably, there was initial trepidation around the process, and how it would work in practice, especially for co-leads with limited innovation and /or lab facilitation experience:

- I'm a little worried that the process is not deep enough. It's difficult to see if the women are getting something out of it (Netherlands).
- Although I explained the process to the women innovators, they asked many questions about 'how it was going to work?' (Ireland).
- Good to have other experts who … can go deeper … my knowledge is not that deep, I have no practice, I try to find agriculture specific examples and tools (Lithuania)
- I have a teaching background; I am used to students leaving a session and being able to use the tools in practice (Croatia).

Proposition 8: Co-leads need time and scope to ask questions about the approach and methodology.

Lesson Learned: While Living lab adaption was strongly encouraged, many co-leads found the 'unknown' requirements that would emerge from the collective insights in each Living lab setting challenging.

The Living lab methodology and guidelines had greater scaffolding for co-leads in Year 1, including training about the innovation process and guidance around the adaption of Living lab activities and structures based on collective insights as each Living lab progressed. As co-lead confidence grew, the meetings required increased adaption of the Living lab format from meetings 3 – 9, as evidenced in the co-lead reflections. This resulted in significant customisation in each lab environment,

- We are not strictly following the innovation process; we are listening in to what the women need (Norway).
- We needed to discuss what was going to work for us (Scotland).

Proposition 9: As confidence in the process grows, adaption to specific needs increase.

images, and pre-built templates. Miro allows teams to work across different locations and time zones, making it ideal for remote work, workshops, and complex projects, and integrates with popular tools like Jira and Slack.

Lessons Learned: Living lab adaption is dependent on growing confidence and identification of specific needs, so takes time to evolve.

In the early stages of the project, several co-leads asked why it would take three years to work through the innovation process. However, on reflection, it was acknowledged that the benefit lay in the innovation process as a 'journey, not a destination' (WP3 Lead). As articulated by co-leads,

- Experienced colleagues working on living Labs … said, [are] you sure you are going to take two to three years to do that? We normally do it in six months. Come on! I understand why they keep it concentrated in six months and it makes sense to do it, but **it really made sense to have three-years for the Living lab with women** … the journey that we took through the Living lab actually touched a more fundamental issue, that is the possibility of women to **take their future in hand**, which eventually **leads to confidence**, but before becoming more confident, you have to feel, that the **shared space** … and the actual physical space that the project helped them to stop for some time …. take decisions … a fundamental initial stage that you have to go through before any kind of further decision, and I think that was the **really very important value of the process** and thank God we did not take only six months because to do that **we really needed time** (Italy).
- I am not a trainer, and so for me this is difficult … I suppose it will become clearer as we progress with the lab meetings (Netherlands).

Thus, the programme duration allowed participants the time to gain confidence as innovators, and ultimately, direct their own future.

Proposition 10: A three-year innovation cycle 'journey' supports innovator development.

Lesson learned: A three-year timeline 'accommodated the different rhythms' of the innovators and supported iterative collaborative learning and adaption cycles.

2.2.4 Optimised approaches to sharing resources in- and across- Living labs

Numerous tools, templates and innovation process supports were offered through the shared resource platform. However, several co-leads noted that technical terminology was not always accessible,

- It's a struggle with wording of tools … I had to eliminate jargon (Netherlands).

There were additional challenges for non-English as a first language,

- The tools needed to be translated (Croatia).

Sharing was encouraged among the innovators and co-leads

- As one example, in a review meeting, calls from co-leads for context specific agricultural / rural examples resulted in a valuable shared resource from the Swedish co-leads https://ruraltrends.eu/

However, there were challenges around sharing resources, particularly on the online platform,

- While we sought to capture and share resources via the project's SharePoint: It is really challenging to share resources, people did not add the instructions for use,

so if you were not familiar with them, you wouldn't use them (Scotland).

Proposition 11: Sharing knowledge on online platforms alone does not optimise sharing habits.

Lesson learned: Sharing knowledge on online platforms alone does not optimise sharing habits.

Customisation of these tools, templates and supports was encouraged, and co-leads sought ways to accommodate the optimised approach for each lab,

- It is our role to translate the words just call it something else, it something that they naturally do, it helps give them confidence (Scotland).
- We modified and sent the templates in advance so the women could become familiar with them (Lithuania).
- A 'keep it simple' approach is working, [using] a small number of easy to use tools for each step (Italy).

Proposition 12: Tools should be customisable to individual Living lab needs, presented in an accessible language and format.

Lesson learned: Tools, templates and process support should be customisable to individual Living lab needs, presented in an accessible language and format.

2.2.5 Sharing Living lab experiences

The three-year innovation cycle facilitated in- and cross-lab learning and adaption, particularly as customisation occurred across the labs in the latter years of the programme,

- Templates, sharing practice (Lithuania; Netherlands) and exchanging experiences with other co-leads (the co-lead review meetings) helped.

Co-leads believed that sharing experiences was a key benefit of Living lab participation and that it enhanced the effectiveness of the innovation process learning,

- Good to hear what others are experiencing and planning (Lithuania).
- I'm picking up ideas from what the others have said (Norway; Scotland).

Sharing ideas with others, and testing concepts within and between labs was also encouraged,

- I never felt left alone. I really appreciated the opportunity for collaborative reflection. Mentor discussions facilitated a deeper relationship (Netherlands).
- Some of the testing activities will take place in April …. Easter vacations… a good opportunity for these women to test their ideas … linked to [a] public event with children (Italy).

Proposition 13: Sharing knowledge, ideas, and experiences builds co-lead insight.

Lesson learned: A three-year timeline facilitated cross-lab learning and tacit knowledge sharing about effective lab management, challenges and learning.

2.2.6 Mentoring and coaching within and between Living lab sessions

Multi-faceted mentoring approaches were adopted within and across the Living labs, including identifying those with specific skills and peer-to-peer mentors,

- One of our stakeholders is a professional, public, tax-funded organisation which supports business-owners and innovators to develop their ideas, **we will collaborate with them and seek to match women with existing business mentors**. We believe the women will benefit much more from this than from us as co-leads mentoring them, even though **we expect to sit-in on some of their sessions** if possible (Sweden).

Peer-to-peer mentoring and coaching occurred within and between the Living lab sessions,

- They are coaching each other. They are very open, and it's very valuable to have that discussion, so we didn't stop it (Italy).
- There's a lot of pressure on the co-leads to have the meetings go perfect, part of this is intuitive, we have built effective relationships now with and between the women in the labs, and once they are engaged in knowledge exchange, learning and coaching each other, we can stand back a little more (WP3 team reflections).

One-to–one sessions with co-leads were offered to each innovator, which proved valuable,

- With the networking and the tools and especially the one-to-ones and business advice that [the academic co-lead] was able to give them. They had the confidence to really change what they originally came with and expand that, and that's quite amazing because some of them have changed in quite radical ways (Scotland – practitioner co-lead).

An action template was provided for each innovator to support mentoring. Key aspects included 1) initial and emergent participant goals, 2) actions agreed upon, 3) barriers/challenges to progress, and 4) training / networking requirements. This template offered a useful catalyst in ensuring co-lead guidance and support when needed. It also offered a basis from which to customise the template to meet rural innovator needs and wants,

- We adapted the templates, but they gave us something to work from (Croatia).
- All women have a personalised action plan for their business that we pick up each time we meet for a 1:1 (Scotland).

Interestingly, the Scottish Living lab reported that 'They're [women innovators] coaching other women outside the lab in those techniques now, despite the fact … [they] don't think you'll ever need an 'empathy map', and then they come back … and say, oh, I used that [empathy map tool] you gave us and I got some really helpful feedback'.

> **Proposition 14:** Templates offer a catalyst for customisation depending on female innovator needs.

Lesson learned: Action templates are an organic tool, and customisation should be encouraged.

Many co-leads expressed concerns about their ability and experience to perform this activity, while comfort in the mentor role depended somewhat on the co-lead experience,

- I have a **background in business mentoring**, and the sessions provided participants with bespoke business support … We have had women **share very personal things**

that are impacting their businesses … a barrier if they didn't want to discuss in the lab (Scotland).

- There were many **side conversations with innovators** around aspects of their innovation journey that they were **uncomfortable with sharing in an open forum** (Netherlands).

Proposition 15: Co-lead mentoring experience is a factor in one-to-one mentoring activities.

Lesson learned: Co-lead mentoring depended on co-lead experience and on different lab and stakeholder needs.

In some cases, the female innovators, particularly those with experience, already had access to mentorship from stakeholders,

- Following an introductory one-to-one meeting, I realised that **some of the women were already receiving various forms of mentorship from local and regional stakeholders** (Ireland).
- **We didn't have the time** [in the Living lab meetings] to explore needs … the mentoring talks will help; we can identify stakeholders of value (Croatia).

This approach offered additional time to tease out individual development needs.

Proposition 16: Identifying appropriate mentors requires engagement with stakeholders to ensure an optimised match between mentor and women innovator development needs.

Collectively, these mentoring touchpoints,

- … provide opportunities for the women to check in with each other and the co-leads on an individual level, and on a more frequent and consistent basis than with any other stakeholder group (WP3 lead).

Proposition 17: Mentor-mentee matching is important for mentoring success.

Lesson learned: Careful consideration is needed to select the appropriate stakeholder/ mentor(s) to guide mentoring on a case-by-case basis.

2.2.7 Deciding what to showcase and how best to do it

The GRASS CEILING project's Annual Showcase Events were designed to allow comparative learning across the Consortium and highlight barriers and drivers of change in different socio-political and cultural environments. The coordinators of other relevant projects were also invited to these events. The Showcase events coincide with the annual meeting of the GRASS CEILING Consortium.

Each showcase included a Living lab component, and one woman innovator from each country attended. The co-leads felt that the Living lab component of the annual Showcase should provide a welcoming, non-formal space for the women to meet one another and members of the Consortium.

In Showcase 1, 2023, innovators were asked to create posters that detailed the innovators' businesses and achievements, along with socio-economic outcomes, many of which were associated with established innovations. This created debate and some apprehension among the co-leads who were concerned that *'one size cannot fit all'* (Netherlands) and that *'taking this approach could exclude* [the] *earlier stage innovator'* (Spain). It was felt that this approach might create a barrier to

participation in the Showcase and negatively impact the confidence of some of the innovators to showcase their innovator journeys.

In response to these concerns, a new approach was adopted for Showcase 2 in 2024. Here, innovator journeys were captured using the PechaKucha[6] method. Innovators were asked to present their innovator journey in story form, exhibiting pictures/collage that they could then talk through in their presentation at the showcase. All 9 innovators, one representing each participant country, sat together in a panel format, facilitated by the WP3 team. The women innovators visibly engaged with each other's stories in a collegial way, facilitating their preference for informal verbal sharing. Feedback from co-leads was positive, suggesting this format more closely fitted the women innovators' preferences. Based on the findings, sharing their journeys and innovation projects through oral and visual methods alleviated barriers and supported them to relay their stories in their own words.

> **Proposition 18:** Collegial, non-formal approaches are more conducive to optimised female innovator knowledge sharing.

Lessons learned: Symposiums should provide a collegial, non-formal space for the women to share their journeys and innovation projects through oral and visual methods.

2.3 INNOVATOR JOURNEYS

The Living labs offered an opportunity for innovators to consciously consider their innovation journey. Within each Living lab, progress through iterative innovation cycles offered insight into the women's decision cycles (e.g., deciding on an innovation focus) and how they shared their experiences. This section also reflects on the co-leads observations of how the women innovators engaged with the GRASS CEILING process between Living labs and how learning was embedded in practice.

2.3.1 Deciding on an innovation focus

The innovators in most Living labs requested that they work on their own innovation ideas, or innovations close to their own practice/ interests. Most co-leads reported that it was challenging to decide on an innovation focus in the initial meetings, e.g. agreeing to work on a relevant example as a group innovation to learn the process versus working on individual innovations.

Different Living labs took different approaches, and several strategies proved successful,

- Most co-leads varied the facilitation methods (e.g., round tables, work groups, etc.) depending on the innovation focus and stakeholder expertise at the meeting (Lithuania).

Others focussed on only one of the female innovator projects at each meeting,

- The women showed significant interest in others' ideas, offering support and making suggestions as to how they could progress. They were less inclined to speak about their own ideas, suggesting a preference for collaborative engagement with

[6] PechaKucha, developed in Japan, emphasises visual communication with images over text, encouraging presenters to tell a story and be more engaging.

the innovation process (Ireland).

Some of the women innovators needed more time than others to agree on and make progress with an innovation idea,

- Some were able to progress very smoothly and very rapidly on some steps, while others still need some more time (Italy).

Several Living labs clustered 2-3 projects and worked in small groups. In these cases, participants negotiated the meeting format and agreed on approaches to the innovation process. Each Living lab leveraged real-life experience.

- All of the workshops are situated in real life because that is what the women want. We had a presentation on research – different approaches/strategies to agri[cultural] development and making use of social and welfare systems … this information influenced the ideas selected (Netherlands).

Sharing stories and experiences remained at the heart of the process, and stakeholder presentations took place within and across Living labs,

- … to hear about initiatives, best practices and to propose areas of improvement (Spain).

Proposition 19: Women innovators prefer to work together on real-life innovation projects.

Lesson learned: Women innovators prefer to work together on an innovation idea that is rooted in practice.

2.3.2 Optimising female innovator progress between meetings

In the Living labs, the women innovators were provided with numerous 'task templates' and were introduced to online platforms that provided access to resources to help complete these tasks between Living lab sessions. Overall, the co-leads found that many of the recommended independent tasks given to individuals between lab meetings were not formally completed. As highlighted above, using online platforms to hold a repository of resources proved less useful than anticipated. Reinforcing the finding that rural women innovators both share and learn collaboratively, these insights help articulate the lessons learned in context. The women innovators displayed a strong preference for oral learning through storytelling and for organic planning over formal written plans and reflections. It transpired that the rural women innovators found it easier to complete the Living lab innovation process tasks in and outside of the lab meetings with other women and facilitators as '*bouncing boards*' (Ireland), and at on-site events such as community markets (Croatia, Italy, Scotland),

- Women actively supported focused idea generation for their fellow lab innovators, this was felt to be useful (Croatia).
- It was natural for them to organise the testing, grouping some elements, and I wouldn't have said that was so natural at the beginning, and not because they were not in good relations, but it's not so easy. Even logistically. They are confident not only individually as innovators, but they are confident in establishing good relations, which is part of the success of their business (Italy).

Proposition 20: Women innovators prefer to informally co-complete tasks with other innovators in and between Living lab sessions.

Lessons learned: The rural women innovators prefer informal co-creation approaches to innovation process engagement both in and out of the Living lab.

It was also evident that the women reflected on the process and how to progress their innovation intentions, even if they did not formally document it between Living lab sessions,

- … the feedback was that the women were 'really glad that you gave us homework but allowed us not to do it because we really do think about it between the meetings'. It [request to progress] does go in, and it does start a process' (Norway).
- The women evidently think about the tasks but don't necessarily document them. It's evident they've reflected on the tasks, as deeper discussions ensue as soon as you ask, 'how did you get on?' at the start of the Living lab session. They also ask about each other's progress without being prompted, suggesting they've thought about their own innovations, and those of their peers, between lab meetings (Ireland).

Proposition 21: Women innovators reflect on tasks, but do not necessarily document them.

Lessons learned: Time should be allocated at the start of each lab to let the women innovators reflect on and share their interim innovation experiences.

Some of the written tools were not used as initially intended e.g. some tools included templates that were not 'filled in', however, the elements within these templates acted as a basis for informed conversations that led to progress. Therefore, it was felt that forcing independent work between meetings could be counter-productive,

- '… pushing it [independent work] felt like it would be a hindrance to them [female innovators] coming and showing up for the lab (Norway).
- Good discussion [in the co-lead meeting] around 'homework' between the Living labs by several co-leads. The prevailing advice was **not** to call it 'homework', as it is perceived as pressure by the women. Women appreciated tasks/ goals to give them focus, but these needed to be flexible, as incomplete work was often due to other barriers outside the women's control. This approach helped ensure that innovators who had not completed the work were not prevented from attending the subsequent meeting and progressing (WP3 team reflections).

Proposition 22: Women innovators use templates as triggers of communication.

Lessons learned: Templates should be used as triggers of communication and innovator capability development, rather than as rigid paperwork that must be completed.

2.3.3 Facilitating deeper innovator insights

Living lab co-leads facilitated data collection for several GRASS CEILING Work Packages (e.g., WP2, 3 and 5) as part of the Living lab meetings. In the initial Living lab meetings, activities sought to facilitate preliminary discussions around important themes related to other work packages, for example, exploring female innovator identity, family dynamics and forecasting ideal future scenarios. These activities included drawing out individual identity, using research-informed

learning tools, reflections on self- and other- perceptions, and honest discussions around family and community responsibilities and the impact these had on innovator ambitions.

- These initial discussions led to stronger rapport among the women, as they 'got to know each other better (Ireland).

It was also felt that these initial discussions led to deeper insight when responding to those gathering case insight, as,

- … had these informal activities discussions been absent, the women innovators '*may not have yielded the depth that would be required for the case study data*' (WP2 Lead).

Proposition 23: Initial informal discussions helped deepen rapport among participants and led to deeper insight when responding to questions around their experience as innovators.

Lessons learned: Informal discussions help deepen rapport between women and lead to deeper insight.

Tools such as Lego serious play® (LSP) were used by trained LSP facilitators in these initial activities to help draw out participants' thoughts and reflections. LSP is a facilitated methodology that uses LEGO bricks to solve complex problems, foster creativity, and improve communication within groups. By building three-dimensional models of their ideas, participants were able to "think with their hands" to express their insights and build deeper understanding and commitment. These activities led to a better understanding of individual innovator identity and perceptions, helped enhance participant rapport with each other, and guided the path to more innovative solutions. While these tools were perceived as novel, many were sceptical as to the value of these tools. However, when used in activities to explore identity in initial meetings, they helped uncover deeper reflection and dynamics around personal identity, voice and influence, and family and caring responsibilities that impact rural women's decisions around business development and innovation.

Proposition 24: Tools that facilitate storytelling and help delve into deeper meaning around actions complement more traditional professional development approaches.

The Living lab experience also allowed participants the capacity to take time out, to reflect on their experiences, and

- … they [women innovators] really appreciated the time out, space for self and we, as facilitators, felt that too (Italy).

Notably, LSP and other tools led to 'storytelling' among the women, which offered deeper insights into their identity, perceptions, experiences and motivations. Co-leads reported on the women's inclination towards 'helping each other out [and] offering suggestions around other people's stories' (Ireland), suggesting a preference for oral and collaborative approaches to learning.

Proposition 25: Tools that facilitate reflection on one's identity move beyond the limits of words, to help surface feelings, emotions and perceptions.

Lesson Learned: Rural women innovators are storytellers and learn by telling their story and by helping others; they prefer oral learning approaches, with time to reflect built in.

These activities helped when the women were asked to participate in a focus group for WP2,

- It [a WP focus group session] felt like a bit more of a research thing, and they [the women innovators] are not really part of the research community. They discussed

> these elements [focus group topics] through their stories, so bringing them back to a research discussion was not needed/appropriate (Italy).

The reluctance to engage with 'research things' was understandable, as its relevance to their lives and work may not have been clear. However, when research questions were framed in practice and connected to the women's stories, there was greater engagement.

> **Proposition 26:** Where research questions are framed in practice and connected to and through the female innovator stories, the women engage at a deeper level, and the research data is richer and more insightful.

Lesson Learned: Research activities should be framed in practice and connected to the female innovators' stories.

Section 3 – Co-Lead Reflections and Recommendations

In summary, the lessons learned about supporting rural women innovators are as follows,

Living lab roles

Co-lead roles

- Leading a Living lab is a complex role that requires leadership, empathy, facilitation and coordination skills.

Stakeholder roles

- Connecting women innovators with specific specialists at various stages of the innovation process provided more tangible stakeholder engagement value.
- Use of stakeholder mapping tools can help women innovators identify the most relevant stakeholders for their context.
- Barriers to stakeholder engagement include a lack of motivation, relevance to innovators/ innovation stage, and budgetary constraints.
- Male contributors may need to be encouraged if reluctant to step in due to fear of intruding in what is perceived as a women's space.
- There is evidence of a disconnection between policy development, innovation support services, and rural women's development needs.

Operationalising the Living labs

Recruiting and on-boarding rural women innovators

- Optimised recruitment of women innovators includes ensuring a diverse mix of sectors, stage of business, a variety of ages and life stage innovators.
- Financial support (per diem payment) overcomes barriers of participant and recognises female innovators' contribution as programme co-creators.

Choosing meeting locations and deciding meeting formats

- In-person meetings at women innovator workplaces provide greater understanding of women innovator's situation and innovation focus.
- In-person meetings at stakeholder environments provide greater understanding of stakeholder activities and potential benefits to the women.
- Virtual meetings offer exposure to a wider set of stakeholders.
- Innovator engagement through visualisation tools and outcomes from virtual meetings enhanced retention of knowledge gained and improved transfer to practice.

Living lab customisation

- While Living lab adaption was strongly encouraged, many co-leads found the 'unknown' requirements that would emerge from the collective insights in each

Living lab setting challenging.

- Living lab adaption is dependent on growing confidence and identification of specific needs, so takes time to evolve.
- A three-year timeline 'accommodated the different rhythms' of the innovators and supported iterative collaborative learning and adaption cycles.

Optimised approaches to sharing resources in- and across- Living labs

- Sharing knowledge on online platforms alone does not optimise sharing habits.
- Tools, templates and process support should be customisable to individual Living lab needs, presented in an accessible language and format.

Sharing Living lab experiences

- A three-year timeline facilitated cross-lab learning and tacit knowledge sharing about effective lab management, challenges and learning.

Mentoring innovators within and between Living lab sessions

- Action templates are an organic tool, and customisation should be encouraged.
- Co-lead mentoring depended on the co-leads' experience and on different lab and stakeholder needs and existing resources.
- Careful consideration is needed to select the appropriate stakeholder/ mentor to guide one-to-one mentoring on a case-by-case basis.

Optimised showcase approaches

- Symposia should provide a collegial, non-formal space for the women to share their journeys and innovation projects through oral and visual methods.

<u>Insights into innovator journeys</u>

- Women innovators prefer to work together on an innovation idea that is rooted in practice.
- The rural women innovators prefer informal co-creation approaches to the innovation process engagement both in and out of the Living lab.
- Time should be allocated at the start of each lab to let the women innovators reflect on and share their interim innovation experiences.
- Templates should be used as triggers of communication and innovator capability development, rather than as rigid paperwork that must be completed.
- Informal discussions help deepen rapport between women and lead to deeper insight.
- Rural women innovators are storytellers and learn by telling their story and by helping others; they prefer oral learning approaches, with time to reflect built in.
- Research activities should be framed in practice and connected to the female innovators' stories.

Drawing on the lessons learned through the GRASS CEILING Living lab programme, and on the identified success criteria based on co-lead reflections (annex 2), we propose a framework for supporting rural women innovators in a Living lab environment (figure 1).

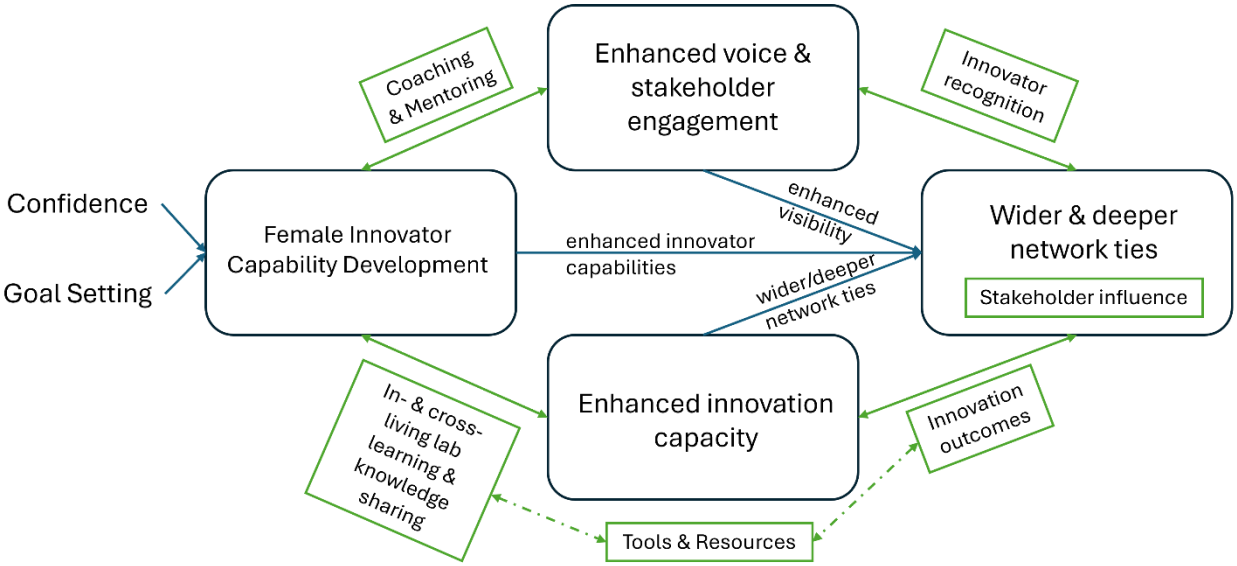

Fig. 1: Rural Female Innovator Living lab Support Framework

Figure 1 draws on the lessons learned above and is informed by the success criteria outlined in Annex 2. The Living lab approach is underpinned by the dual goals of innovation, goal setting, and building female innovator confidence (fig 1, left). A focus on the rural women innovators underpins the innovation process within and across the Living labs, to build female innovator innovation capacity.

The framework allows for in- and cross-Living lab learning and knowledge sharing (fig. 1, bottom left) underpinned by access to relevant innovation tools and resources (fig. 1, bottom centre). These insights help grow the female innovators' understanding of, and capabilities in, the innovation process and ultimately enhance their innovation capacity (fig. 1, bottom centre).

Through coaching and mentoring (top left green, annex 2), the co-leads facilitate exposure to and engagement with relevant stakeholders (top centre), thereby increasing rural women innovator visibility and voice among stakeholders. Greater recognition of the rural female innovators and their innovation achievements (top right) helps widen and deepen their network ties and enhances stakeholder influence (centre right).

Ultimately, enhanced visibility and innovation capacity ensure women innovators have wider and deeper network ties, growing their influence on policy and required change (fig. 1, right).

Annex 1 – Business model innovation: a co-discovery approach

Meeting 1: Introduction

Participant welcome, knowledge sharing and multi-actor stakeholder engagement. Following introductions and multi-actor expertise mapping exercise, women innovators and multi-actors will provide insights into the other work packages (WPs) – for example, in meeting 1, we will:

- explore perspectives on what and who an innovator is.
- brainstorm how data on women's work on farms and in rural development is gathered (WP1) – does this reflect reality? What additional data is needed?

Outcomes may inform the innovation process (meeting 2-9).

Meeting 2: Explore

Women innovators and multi-actors exchange knowledge, learning, ideas and best practice insights. They engage in training to identify problems/challenges and or opportunities. They conduct a stakeholder mapping exercise to include context-specific innovation practices and training requirements. They link identified training needs to multi-actor offerings and identify paths to training for women innovators. Following this, they establish participant-led goals for the living Lab. The aim is to understand how they will use the living Lab to progress their innovator goals.

Meeting 3: Reframe

Women innovators and multi-actors will engage in training in problem prioritization and produce an actionable problem statement (POV).

Meeting 4: Idea co-generation

Active engagement with the idea generation process, where innovators share stories and co-produce as many ideas as possible that could potentially resolve the problems/pursue the opportunities identified in meeting 3/interim period in their context.

Meeting 5: Idea screening- selection and planning

Multi-actors will work together to agree on the 'right' idea and co-produce a plan to generate ways to pursue this idea in each innovator's context. They will learn how to differentiate good ideas from Bad by assessing their Ideas against particular criteria (e.g. Audience, profitability, product/service value, scalability, branding etc.). Goals will be set in terms of analysing market demand (qualitative & quantitative research) and refining ideas into concepts (concept development).

Meeting 6: Prototype Phase

Women innovators and multi-actors will learn about prototyping and build a prototype (Minimum Viable Product). Establish the feasibility of the idea in practice: Work together to identify the skills

and resources needed to implement the idea in practice. Co-produce a skills and resource plan to help pursue innovation in the recruit's setting. Discuss how to measure impact and work together to produce an implementation plan.

Meeting 7: Test Phase A

Women innovators and multi-actors will learn about user testing tools and techniques and business model generation. They will establish experiments to test their business/product and user assumptions. Participants will discuss progress, share experiences, collaborate in seeking resolutions for challenges faced, and capture insights and link with WP2 re: insight-led case studies.

Meeting 8: Test Phase B. Capture learning, insights and impact

Women innovators and multi-actors will learn about user testing and feedback, product/service refinement and refining their business model based on validated learning. We will review each innovator's experience. We will discuss gender norms in policy and practice and the Lab members' roles as women innovator mentors in their setting. Co-develop a plan to produce tools to support women innovators in farming and rural areas (with WP6).

Meeting 9: Embed findings in innovator/multi-actor organisations

Women innovators will engage with the co-leads and multi-actors to help co-produce knowledge about the specific needs of women innovators and how multi-actors can best alter practices to better meet these needs. The insights will be included in the work of WP 1 (innovator insights), WP 2 (identified drivers and barriers of rural women innovation), and WP 6 (tools to support rural women innovation, national/ EU dissemination and communication of project outcomes). All WP leaders/ Lab co-leads need to discuss to ensure the data capture format is optimised for cross-lab data analysis.

The Grass Ceiling project BMI training was delivered by the RIKON research group, SETU (www.rikon.ie).

Annex 2 – Success Criteria

Each Living lab provided criteria they considered important for the success of the Living labs. These are consolidated below and informed the design of the Rural Female Innovator Living lab Support Framework (figure 1).

Confidence

- Greater confidence as an innovator
- Greater confidence as a small-scale innovator (without growth intention)
- Greater confidence as a businessperson

Visibility

- Increased visibility as a woman innovator
- Increased visibility as an innovator
- Increased visibility as a leader

Voice

- Increased voice as a woman innovator
- Increased voice as an innovator
- Increased voice as a leader

Innovator recognition

- Greater recognition from other stakeholders of their innovation/ innovativeness
- Greater self-awareness of the innovator role

Enhanced innovation capacity: tools and techniques

- The women use the innovation tools and techniques in their business
- The women use the innovation tools and techniques in their communities
- The women share the tools and techniques beyond the lab in their female networks
- The women share the tools and techniques beyond the lab in their own networks (non-gender specific)

Innovation outcomes

- Progressed an existing innovation
- Adapted an existing innovation
- Progressed a sustainable innovation
- Considered a new innovation

Learning and knowledge exchange

- Learning and knowledge exchange between the women in the labs
- Learning and knowledge exchange between the women and other stakeholders
- Resource sharing is evident between the women
- Resource sharing is evident between the stakeholders
- Learned something of value to their business and/or life
- Stakeholders better understand rural women innovators
- Stakeholders better understand rural women-led innovation

Stakeholder influence

- Increased awareness of key support stakeholders
- Enhanced networks of support stakeholders
- The women are actively engaging in stakeholder discussions in the lab
- The women are suggesting other stakeholders who can be involved in the lab
- The women are requesting direct communication with stakeholders as part of lab meetings

Enhanced social ties

- Strong social interactions between the women
- Trusting relationships built between the women
- Enhanced awareness of support stakeholders

Living lab tools and techniques

- Active brainstorming - they value what they learn from each other

Coaching/ Mentoring

- Giving advice
- Mentoring others
- Contributing to lab meeting elements.

Goal setting

- Initial personal goals were set
- Initial group (Lab) goals were set
- Goals were evaluated
- New goals were set

Lab leadership

- Considered collaboration beyond the project
- Articulated a desire to maintain contact
- Requested lead/ mentor support for a continued social network

- Sought information for funding to support a continued social network
- Lab descriptions, goals and lab names developed.
- Informal (non-project managed) communication channels created

Longer-term impact (post-project completion)

- Map changes to the innovators network
- Track individual innovation projects – if they transition from pilot phases to longer-term implementation
- Monitor ability to scale initiatives beyond the initial scope
- Monitor financial sustainability through diverse funding sources

Annex 3 – The co-lead relationship

Each Living lab provided a reflection about their academic and practitioner co-lead relationship in response to the three questions outlined below. A synthesis of their key insights are consolidated here in Annex 3.

What made the co-lead relationship effective?

- The majority of Living labs reported that having a **mutual interest** in the Grass Ceiling project's ambition helped co-leads to quickly establish a bond.
- **Trust** was important, **built on an equal relationship** where co-leads appreciated the value of approaching the Living lab as a facilitation role, rather than taking a solely academic or practice approach.
- **Agility** to adjust the Living lab approach and content to reflect the women innovators' organic innovation and learning needs.
- Extensive co-lead **networks** and access to stakeholder organizations.
- **Complimentary experience and skills** enriched the design and implementation of the Living labs,
    - *i.* **Embedded practitioners experience** highlighted context-specific criteria.
    - ***ii.*** **Academic co-leads had valuable regional research experience.**
    - *iii.* Academic methodologies grounded in rural innovator needs and contexts.
- **Strong engagement and collaboration between co-lead pairs.**
    - *i.* **Collaborative** co-lead reflection and development.
    - *ii.* **Sharing** knowledge, resources, tools and tasks.

What were the key challenges?

- Initial concerns about **possible divergence between academic and practical visions** for the project.
    - i. Understanding the academic aspects of the project for non-academics.
    - ii. Coordinating across work packages while maintaining coherence between theory-driven and practice-driven approaches.
    - iii. Differing level & depth of co-lead engagement in the project and its potential effect on workload.
- **Working dynamics and schedules** differed for the practitioner and academic co-leads (e.g. academic planning versus the operational pace of cooperatives).
- **Additional academic-co-lead support was essential** to help capture innovator and lab insights, support planning and logistics of meetings and to promote the Living labs.
- **Time management** of the Grass Ceiling project.
- Reaching to **fulfil non-project work tasks.**

i. Additional academic-co-lead support was essential to help capture innovator and lab insights,

ii. Support planning and logistics of meetings

iii. Promoting Living lab insights and outcomes created additional workload.

- **English language requirements** for some practitioner partners made reporting, contributing to deliverables and converting training materials for women innovators additionally challenging.
- **Geographically dispersed** Living labs had additional challenges.
- **Co-lead member changes** impact on project continuity.
- While several Living labs wish to continue working together after the project ceases, supporting the women to continue collaborating **beyond the life of the Grass Ceiling project** is a concern for many co-leads.

What may have helped to overcome these challenges?

- **Prioritising the women innovator goals and learning experiences.**
- Project introduction for **non-academic partners to explain how EU projects work** and are funded.
- Co-lead pair induction to include **mapping available expertise and resources**
- Co-lead agreement on how to build **trust and a sense of shared ownership** over the process.
- **Defined co-lead responsibilities**
- Map the **available assets and resources** within each co-lead organisation and within each Living lab context. This should be completed on the commencement of the project and revisited after each lab meeting.
- Having **a work plan and schedule of cross-work-package tasks is also key to the** commencement of the project.
- **A co-lead continuity plan** with a handover and knowledge transfer protocol when co-lead members move roles or cannot continue in the role due to life circumstances.
- **Access to expertise,** particularly in the areas of open innovation and women's empowerment.
- **Additional resource allocation for academic co-leads, including administration assistance** (e.g., to facilitate processing per diem payments, managing expenses, travel arrangements, all of which are time 'invisible' activities).
- **Central project support** for voluntary practitioner partners.
- **Co-lead training and support** in PR and communications
- Co-lead training and support in dealing with **personal challenges that impact women innovator journeys.**
- **A distributed co-lead model with a coordinating key contact,** so that practitioner representatives were engaged depending on expertise and the lab and innovator requirements.

References

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