GRANULAR

Living Labs in rural areas: HOW TO?

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

27 November 2023

"Living Labs are open innovation ecosystems in real-life environments based on a systematic user co-creation approach that integrates research and innovation activities in communities, placing citizens at the center of innovation" European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL).

On 27 November 2023, AEIDL organised the first GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer activity on **"Living Labs in Rural Areas: How to?".** This online event gathered 93 participants from different countries. The main objective of this knowledge transfer activity was to exchange practices and experiences on setting up, running, monitoring and evaluating Living Labs in rural areas.

Serafin Pazos Vidal, European Association in Local Innovation (AEIDL), opened this webinar by reminding that Living Labs are commonplace in research activities. They allow to co-create, pilot and test solutions in real-life conditions, helping to tackle relevant societal challenges across different territories.

A number of Living Labs at different maturity levels were presented during this webinar. The first one to kick-off was the GRANULAR Living Labs, introduced by Tristan Berchoux, GRANULAR project coordinator, and Marco Ricci, facilitator of the Italian Living Lab in GRANULAR.

Then, three additional experiences from other EU-funded projects were brought into the discussions. Namely, these were the RUSTIK Living Labs in Austria, the SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms and the ROBUST Living Labs. Speakers particularly emphasised success factors and challenges encountered along their journey, as well as key lessons learnt.

Giulia Campodonico, European Network of Living Labs, provided an overview on their services to support Living Labs' development and sustainability, such as their thematic working groups and a commercial platform for the economic independence of Living Labs' activities, beyond public funds.

Carla Lostrangio, European Association for Innovation in Local Innovation, closed the webinar by inviting participants to join the second Knowledge Transfer webinar (foreseen in early 2024) and join the GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer community.

ORGANISER: aeidl

27 NOVEMBER 2023

ONLINE

93 PARTICIPANTS

18 COUNTRIES

PRESENTATIONS AND RECORDINGS **HERE**

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UK Research and Innovation

GRANULAR: Better Data for Better Rural Policies and the Role of Living Labs

Tristan Berchoux

GRANULAR Coordinator

Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Montpellier

Tristan Berchoux, Associate Professor at Rural Geography at the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies CIHEAM Montpellier and GRANULAR Coordinator introduced the GRANULAR project to the audience.

GRANULAR, whose motto is **"Better Knowledge for Better Rural Policies"**, is an EU-funded research and innovation project (2022-2025) aiming at generating new datasets, tools and methods to better understand rural areas. A particular emphasis is given on enhancing the granularity of rural data at a very local level and creating relevant indicators to inform policymakers on best actions to drive rural transitions.

Web scraping, citizen science, crowdsourcing are earth observation are some of the data collection methods that will be used by GRANULAR. Produced knowledge will also help **rural proofing** and **evidence-based policy recommendations.**

Figure 1, Image Caption 'GRANULAR Living Labs'

Thus far, GRANULAR has reviewed the **existing literature and territorial typologies across Europe** - including rural typologies- as well as available r**ural data sources and methods.** Furthermore, in 2023, it published the **GRANULAR Rural Diversity Compass:** a conceptual framework to understand rural diversity and functionalities.

In the project, Living Labs will have a crucial role in co-designing, testing and validating data, indicators and tools generated by scientific partners. Overall, GRANULAR has set up **7 rural Living Labs** across Europe and, starting from 2025, **9 Replication Labs** will be established to assess the replicability of GRANULAR approach in different rural areas.

The GRANULAR Living Labs follows **a four-step approach,** which comprises:

- *A Start-up phase*, entailing the set-up of the overall framework and establishment of the Living Lab;
- *A Co-design phase*, including the identification of priorities and the Living Lab's action plan, a review of existing data and methods, and capacity building activities.
- *An implementation phase*, focusing on collecting and generating data, indicators and tools to support the Living Lab activities;
- *A synthesis phase*, involving a validation of collective knowledge in real policy conditions, an evaluation of what works and what don't, and drafting of policy recommendations for future actions.

The GRANULAR Living Labs are currently at the **co-design phase.** In the upcoming months, partners will collect data and address their capacity building needs at Living Labs' level.

Thus far, **key challenges** encountered have been the management of expectations between researchers and practitioners, and the generalization of Living Labs' findings into a wider set of findings that can be beneficial for European rural areas at large. To conclude, Tristan Berchoux highlighted that we need better evidence to move away from simplistic and not-objective understanding of rural areas, and GRANULAR can contribute to this scope.

GRANULAR Living Lab in Italy

Marco Ricci

Val di Cecina Rural District/ GreenGea snc

Marco Ricci, main facilitator of the Italian Living Lab in GRANULAR, provided an overview of the state-of-art as well as the current challenges and achievements of this Living Lab, which was established in late 2022.

Located in central Italy, the territory of this Living Lab is stretches from a more hilly and wooded hinterland until the coast. Lack of mobility and logistic services and good presence of organic products characterize this rural area.

The Living Lab is embedded in the Rural District of Val di Cecina, a territorial governance system recognized by the Italian law and funded in 2019 by a consortium of 12 municipalities, trade associations and national parks.

The main objective of this Living Lab is to develop datasets to improve rural functionalities and improve the governance of the Rural District, both together with local actors. In particular, the Val di Cecina Living Lab picked up three thematic priorities: encouraging the sustainability along the **agri-food value chains;** focusing on the provision of **ecosystem services,** with an emphasis on water resources; and improving the multifunctionality of tourism.

Figure 2, Image Caption 'Val di Cecina Living Lab, Italy'

Key success factors

The establishment of this Living Lab has been made easier by an established network of actors and governance framework.

The actors in the Rural District are quite varied, which helps to guarantee a multi-actor approach.

Key challenges

Cooperation and engagement of local stakeholders has been, thus far, one of the main challenges for this Living Lab due to the diversity of expectations and needs. Encouraging stakeholders to complete their tasks and helping everyone understand their duties and competencies has proven to be another significant problem.

In order to address current issues, the Living Lab chose to form more active coordination groups, schedule more meetings tailored to the requirements of various stakeholder groups, and form working groups focused on several themes.

Key learnings

The first year of operations demonstrated that the three theme areas' combined amount of top-down, insufficient data is lacking. The primary additional benefit of Living Lab's engagement is the creation of datasets that may inform evidence-based policies and data tailored to local requirements. In order to determine the true nodal points and criticalities of this terrain from the perspectives of local actors, this Living Lab is currently forming working groups.

RUSTIK Living Lab in Austria

Daria Ernst

Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics, Rural and Mountain Research

Daria Ernst, Research Associate at the Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics, Rural and Mountain Research (BAB), presented the **RUSTIK Living Lab in Austria.** The overarching goal of the **RUSTIK project** is to enable rural communities' actors and policy makers to design better strategies, initiatives and policies fostering sustainability transitions of rural areas. To this end, approximately one year ago, the RUSTIK project set up 14 Living Labs in 12 European countries.

The Nockregion-Oberkärnten region, where the RUSTIK Living Lab in Austria is situated, is the southernmost province of the country. This region includes 17 municipalities and has a population of 52,000 residents. Between 2011 and 2021, the population decline was equivalent to 3.5% and outmigrant was particularly strong between young and female residents.

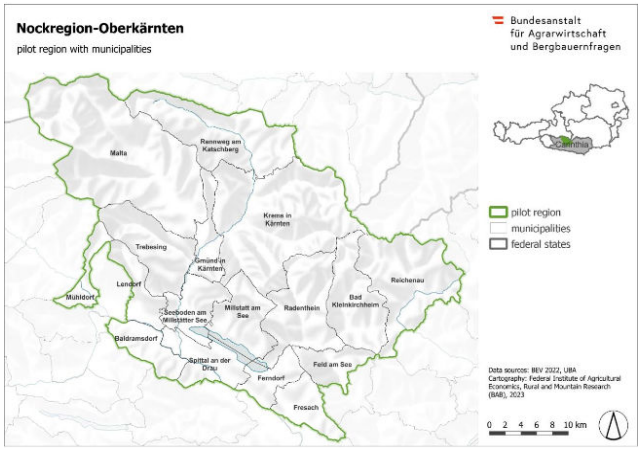

Figure 3, Image Caption 'RUSTIK Living Lab in the Nockregion-Oberkärnten, Austria'

The Regional Agency "Spittal-MillstätterseeLieser-MaltaNockberge" is a key partner of this Living Lab. This Agency steers the strategic development of the region, based on their **regional strategy** "Becoming the best working and living region", and it ensures the continuity of regional development actions. Recently, the Agency has also launched a Competence Centre that will serve as an anchor and contact point for key regional actors.

Several in-person and virtual meetings have been held throughout the first year of the RUSTIK Living Lab in order to establish the group, pinpoint needs and obstacles, and specify the main goal of the program's operations. The two most pertinent subjects among the players contacted have been identified as Quality of Life and a network of Small Rural Businesses.

The latter was chosen to fill a perceived void in the regional strategy—namely, the underrepresentation of small private actors—and was thought to best align with the Living Lab methodological approach. The Living Lab will identify quantitative and qualitative data gaps for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and seek to better understand challenges and needs of SME owners.

Key success factors

The involvement of the Regional Agency and its network of stakeholders – including of an existing Local Action Group -, united by a relationship of trust, has been a key component of this Living Lab's success. This helped to guarantee a quick start and to increase the value of pre-existing social capital.

Key challenges

The identification of themes that needed more attention that had not been previously addressed, along with striking a balance between completing project tasks and meeting more pressing needs from the region and its local actors.

Key learnings

Both quantitative and qualitative data can be used to help identify particular needs, barriers, and challenges as well as to show how the regional strategy is progressing and working.

SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms

Ellen Bulten

Wageningen University & Research

Ellen Bulten, Researcher at the Wageningen University & Research, shared the lessons learnt from the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the **41 Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs)** in the SHERPA project. Established in more than 20 EU countries for a four-year period (2019-2023), the SHERPA MAPs connected science, society and policy actors with the objective of contributing to the EU's policy and research agenda for rural areas. In particular, the SHERPA MAPs' results informed the **EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.**

The Wageningen University & Research developed a **methodological framework** to facilitate interactions at both individual MAP and cross-MAP levels. At the **individual MAP level,** a monitor and a facilitator assisted the entire process, which followed a cycle that started with gathering MAP actors, sparked discussion based on SHERPA Discussion Papers, combined local perspectives into MAP and SHERPA Position Papers, and was then shared at a higher level.

To guarantee **cross-MAPs learning**, several techniques, tools and methods were designed, as follows:

- **Cluster meetings,** online calls focused on shared issues discussed by several MAPs;
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Tool,** a document to keep track of the process of each individual MAP throughout;
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Calls,** bilaterally held between the Wageningen University & Research and MAP monitors and facilitator, to gather more in-depth understand of success factors and difficulties;
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Workshops,** for all MAPs in order to analyse and deepen lessons learned.

Key success factors

The creation of safe spaces, a common goal and trust are all key factors for building up an effective dialogue. To this end, a good level of soft and facilitation skills, included having qualified monitors and facilitators, are needed to prevent conflicts, manage different needs and steer the process.

Key challenges

Each Multi-Actor Platform should identify and clarify common objectives to guide their actions, but still leaving room for experimentation. While allowing this balance is not an easy task, a Dynamic Learning Agenda can be used to achieve it.

Key learnings

While this is not an easy task, it is imperative to maintain a balanced representation of various stakeholder groups with varying needs at the table, while avoiding fixed "quotas." Gaining an understanding of the advantages and added value produced for various actors can aid in the process's design and increase the involvement of various stakeholder groups.

Furthermore, SHERPA's experience underlines that the longevity of similar structures should be tackled early enough to ensure their sustainability and embeddedness in new or existing structures. The project issued a **report** on the sustainability of the MAPs.

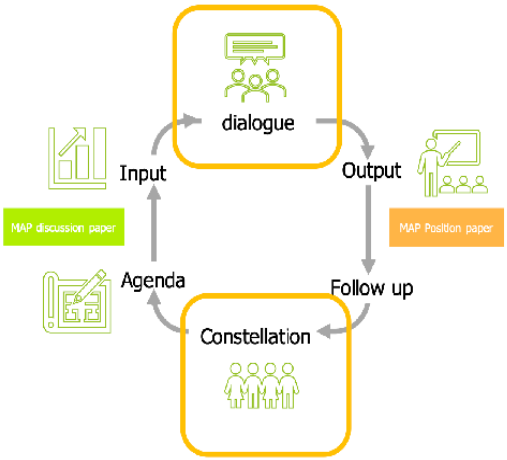

Figure 4, Image Caption 'Overview of the SHERPA dynamics'

ROBUST Living Lab's experience

Marina Knickel

Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research

Marina Knickel, Post-Doc at the Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research in Austria provided an overview of the methodology used to establish and run the Living Labs in the **ROBUST project.**

The goal of ROBUST, which concluded in 2021, was to stimulate rural-urban synergies. **A total of 11 Living Labs** were established in rural areas, each with distinct geographic, political, and socioeconomic dynamics, and **3 in-depth case studies** were conducted in Latvia, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

A **three-phase approach** has been used, starting with envisioning and moving through **experimentation** and **analysis**, and an additional cross-cutting phase of **self-evaluation, reflection, and monitoring.** The activities of each Living Lab were guided by a dynamic research and innovation agenda that was modified in response to evolving circumstances. **The Synthesis Report**, which offers a descriptive summary and organized analysis of the work completed within 11 Living Labs and 5 thematic Communities of Practice, is where the Living Labs' outputs are displayed.

Key success factors

Institutional support, capitalising on joint resources, aligning the project work with local dynamics, interests and priorities, have been the most relevant success factors for ROBUST Living Labs. However, these are strongly dependent on contextual element and generalization is not always possible.

Key challenges

The ROBUST experience shows that capacity building is a milestone to address difficulties. In their cases, this has served to help researchers to define their role in the Living Lab (e.g. researchers, facilitators, change makers), as well as to support risk-adverse Living Labs in carrying out experimentation. Furthermore, another major difficulty has been measuring the Living Labs' impacts, as not avoid frustration.

Key learnings

Planning research projects with Living Labs requires bringing in various stakeholders, defining their needs, and communicating objectives and functioning in a clear and understandable manner. It is important to carefully plan the preparatory project phase, tasks related to adaptive management, and reflexive activities. Understanding soft outcomes, aiming for impact, and taking the long view into account are additional essential components for the effective implementation of Living Labs in research projects.

Furthermore, one important finding from ROBUST is that, although it is often underestimated, mutual learning is essential to success. Creating a safe space and managing power dynamics through professional facilitation are preconditions to enable continuous and intentional mutual learning.

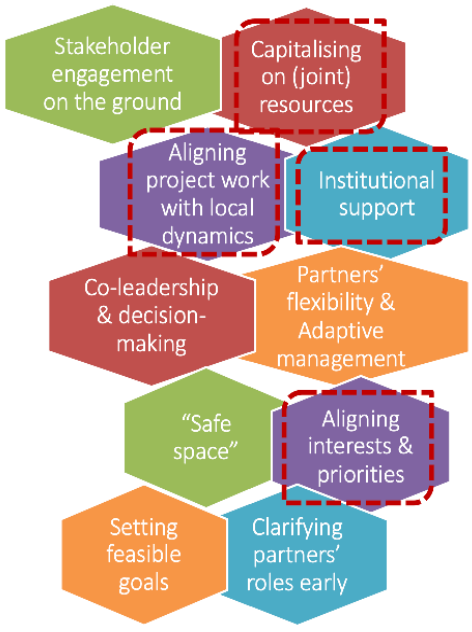

Figure 5, Image Caption 'Success Factors in ROBUST Living Labs'

Rural Living Labs. Beyond European projects: Tips and Tricks

Giulia Campodonico

European Network of Living Labs

Gilia Campodonico, Head of Projects at the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL), shared on lessons learnt from their network. Founded in 2006, ENoLL growing community counts today more than 160 members across 35 European and world countries. Its main goal is to raise awareness on the Living Labs' concept as well as to support their practical implementation, and to support an enabling EU legislative framework.

ENoLL works to empower Living Labs, offering a concrete path to growth. From certification of the 'Living Lab' label, to capacity building programmes, and defining Working Groups for knowledge transfer and peer-to-peer learnings.

In its network, ENoLL has a dedicated **Agri-Rural Working Group,** which involves 38 Rural Living Labs, out of which 34 works prominently on agri-food. This Working Group brings together different actor groups, including researchers, farmers, advisors, technological partners, suppliers, retailers, customers and experts.

Giulia Campodonico stressed the importance of adapting the Living Lab framework to rural settings.

To this scope, **digitalisation** is key for ensuring access to societal services, and key element for the Rural Living Labs.

She also underlined a few barriers to rural development (e.g. lack of innovation culture, lack of digitalisation and infrastructures, disenabling framework conditions) can be addressed through Living Labs leveraging their **open innovation** potential. Two practical examples are the **Guadalinfo Living Lab** in Spain, which deployed ICT-tool to drive rural empowerment, and the **Dingle Peninsula** in Ireland, which combined agricultural, tourism and energy sectors to ensuring more long-term sustainable incomes in this rural area.

Recently, ENoLL launched Accelup, a platform to test prototypes, technologies, and products with certified Living Labs. This platform seeks to increase the **economic sustainability** of Living Labs beyond funds from European projects. It provides a collaboration and matchmaking place between innovators, accredited service providers and Living Labs.

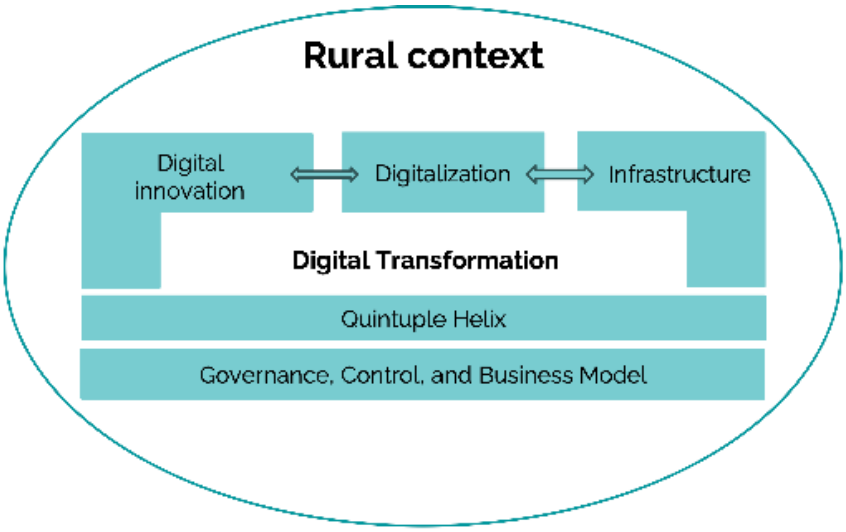

Figure 6, Image Caption 'Key components of Rural Living Labs'

GRANULAR KTA webinar: Conclusions & next steps

Carla Lostrangio

European Association for Innovation in Local Development (AEIDL)

Carla Lostrangio, Rural and Territorial Development Expert at AEIDL, provided her final remarks to this first GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer Activity. As she reminded, this webinar was organised in the framework of the **GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer Accelerator,** a virtual space designed to accelerate rural transitions through peer-to-peer learnings and sharing solutions.

Overall, 9 Knowledge Transfer activities will be organised and facilitated by AEIDL to trigger knowledge transfer at European level. The **second Knowledge Transfer webinar** will occur at the beginning of 2024 and will be announced on the **project's website.**

To conclude, a **Knowledge Transfer Community** will be launched on Telegram to connect together actors working on rural transitions.

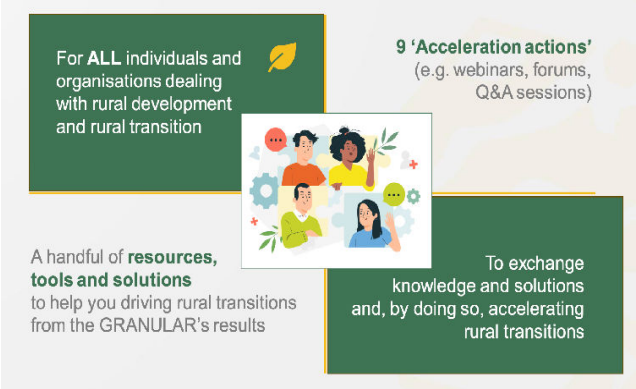

Figure 7, Image Caption 'The GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer Accelerator: what? why? for whom? how?'