

# GRANULAR

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER ACCELERATOR

## Living Lab: Driving Change in Rural Areas

HIGHLIGHTS REPORT

18 March 2025

### Introduction

On 18 March 2025, the [European Association for Innovation in Local Development \(AEIDL\)](#) organised the [GRANULAR webinar on Living Labs: Driving Change in Rural Areas](#). Organised in the framework of GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer Accelerator (KTA), the goal of the webinar was disseminate the tools developed by the [GRANULAR Living Labs](#), based on the project's Practice Abstracts, providing practical recommendations and insights to rural practitioners.

The event also seek to showcase the role of Living Labs (LLs) from GRANULAR and beyond in driving transformative change in rural areas. By showcasing these advancements, the event will highlight the take-away messages and good practices derived from the activities of LLs regarding the use of novel data methods to guide policy, fostering a collaborative environment for continued innovation and development.

As Serafin Pazos-Vidal (AE(DL) highlighted in his welcoming words, the event build upon the first GRANULAR KTA webinar "[Living Labs in Rural Areas: HOW TO?](#)" (November 2023), this session presented the initial results and practical recommendations derived from the ongoing activities of GRANULAR LLs, emphasising the use of novel data methods to guide policy and promote continued innovation. Furthermore the information coming from the EU institutions is that the living lab methodology will be even more prominent in Horizon Europe projects in the future, hence the merit of actual and prospective partners involved in living labs in honing their definition, implementation and output utilisation. Today's meeting already provides actual lessons learned throughout the first two years of GRANULAR existence.

ORGANISER:



18 MARCH 2025



ONLINE



98 PARTICIPANTS

(research, public authorities, advisors, business, producers, NGOs, civil society, EU institutions, etc.)



PRESENTATIONS AND RECORDINGS [HERE](#).

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# The Role of Living Labs in EU Research



**Benjamin Van Doorslaer**  
**DG AGRI, European Commission**



**Benjamin Van Doorslaer**, Research Programme Officer at DG AGRI, presented the role of Living Labs in EU research, focusing particularly on their relevance within the Soil Mission. He began by prompting the audience to consider the history of the Living Lab concept, revealing that the term “living laboratory” was first used as early as 1749. However, he emphasised the significant evolution of the concept over time, noting the existence of numerous contemporary definitions.

Despite varying interpretations, Mr. Van Doorslaer identified **common characteristics of contemporary Living Labs**:

- **Real-life ecosystems and experiments.**
- **User-centred research and open innovation**, taking into account the end-users' challenges.
- A **co-creation approach from the very start**, involving multiple stakeholders from diverse, transdisciplinary backgrounds.

He stressed the crucial role of Living Labs in **bridging the gap between cutting-edge research and societal progress**. He noted the increasing integration of the Living Lab concept in various research projects funded under **Horizon Europe** and other programmes, even without formal requirements. Imone Sasso from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) presented an analysis of the distribution of startups across European territories. He emphasised the crucial role of innovation and entrepreneurship in addressing demographic and economic challenges in rural areas.

Mr. Van Doorslaer then focused on the **EU Mission “Soil Deal for Europe”**, established in 2021. He explained that these missions link EU research and innovation to major societal needs with high visibility and impact, relevant to a significant portion of European citizens. The Soil Deal for Europe comprises four building blocks, one of the most

important being **Living Labs and Lighthouses**. These are considered the **main vehicles for addressing the diversity of conditions** (climatic, social, etc.) and for generating locally adapted solutions.

Beyond the missions, the concept of Living Labs is also increasingly utilised within co-funded research and innovation partnerships, such as those focused on agroecology and food systems and water for all. This growing presence underscores the **importance of Living Labs in the EU research area**.

Mr. Van Doorslaer outlined several key reasons for the increasing popularity of Living Labs:

- They offer a **real-life environment for co-creating solutions** with the full involvement of end-users throughout the innovation process.
- Living Labs help to **de-risk innovation**, making end products and services more suitable for markets and end-users by involving them from the outset.
- They provide **valuable insights into the adoption process and the long-term sustainability of innovations**.
- Living Labs facilitate the **rapid iteration of experiments and prototyping**, leading to faster innovation cycles.
- By bringing together diverse stakeholders, Living Labs drive **societal impacts** more effectively than other methodologies.

In conclusion, Mr. Van Doorslaer asserted that Living Labs are an **integral part of the EU strategy for fostering open innovation and enhancing the societal relevance and impact of research activities**. They help ensure the EU remains at the forefront of innovation by integrating research with real-world applications and societal needs.

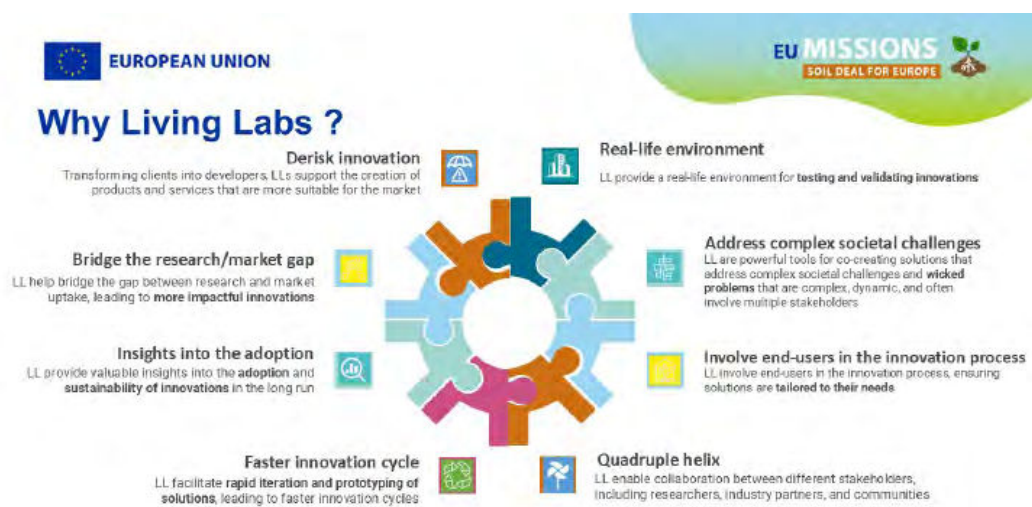


Figure 1. Why Living Labs?  
 Source: DG AGRI

Source: ENOLL

# Progress of GRANULAR Living Labs

## GRANULAR Living Lab in Poland



**Agnieszka Kurdyś-Kujawska**

Koszalin University of Technology & Polish Living Lab



Agnieszka Kurdyś-Kujawska, representing the Koszalin University of Technology, presented the progress of the West Pomerania Living Lab in northwestern Poland, one of seven Living Labs within the GRANULAR project.

The **vision of the West Pomerania Living Lab** is to achieve the sustainable development of rural areas by strengthening the entrepreneurship potential of the area, increasing the resilience of rural communities, ensuring the sustainable development of agri-food producers and creating platforms for the exchange of ideas.

This vision focuses on building local resources and capacities, aligning with current trends and challenges like climate change and the need for sustainable food production. The Living Lab comprises representatives from public authorities (especially from regional level), agricultural organisations, research institutions, businesses (particularly farmers), and NGOs and civic society.

Mrs. Kurdyś-Kujawska described the West Pomerania region, highlighting its dominance of large farms alongside smaller ones, its potential for short food supply chains and culinary tourism, leadership in renewable energy production, and the presence of peripheral areas dependent on agriculture. The **region faces challenges** such as an aging population, farm succession issues, and the legacy of state farms leading to employment, poverty, and social inclusion problems. Economic challenges include limited market access, high production costs, and price fluctuations, while the region is also vulnerable to external weather events like droughts and floods.

Considering these features and challenges, the Living Lab identified **two thematic priorities**:

- **Short supply chains:** Aiming to strengthen agri-food short supply chains, enhance developmental sustainability, and improve community well-being.
- **Land use system:** Focusing on promoting sustainable development throughout land use change and identifying the social, economic, and environmental determinants of such change.

Mrs. Kurdyś-Kujawska detailed the Living Lab's **data collection methods**, which involve:

- **Desk research of official statistics** (national and regional), data published by agricultural agencies and the Ministry of Rural Development, and non-public data obtained through specific requests.
- **Collection of data** from food producers, NGOs, society, and agricultural organisations **through focus groups, case studies, and survey research.**

The data collected for the **Short Supply Chains priority** helps in mapping agri-food supply chains at the local level, understanding distribution channels and commercial infrastructure, characterising innovation potential and food producer technology, and analysing legal and administrative regulations. For the **Land Use System priority**, data collection focuses on identifying practices for sustainable land management and livelihoods, understanding determinants of land use change, and exploring innovation appropriate to land use change and rural entrepreneurship.

Ms. Kurdyś-Kujawska presented **initial results**, including data on the number and regional diversification of agricultural holdings, farms selling their own produce, producers by form of business, structure of products and food production sold through marginal, local, and direct sales, and marketplaces for farmers. The Living Lab also collected data on the number of organic farmers and conducted case studies showcasing a local initiative contributing to social, economic, and environmental goals.

She acknowledged the **limitations of different data collection methods**, such as the broad but often non-local and outdated nature of public statistics, the potential difficulty in organising large focus groups, and the time-consuming and potentially costly nature of case studies. Despite these challenges, the collected data is valuable for monitoring rural support policies and creating appropriate development strategies.



Figure 2. LL West Pomerania. Beneficial outcomes for practitioners.  
Source: Koszalin University of Technology

# GRANULAR Living Lab in the Netherlands



**Kimberly Wevers**  
P10 & Dutch Living Lab



**Kimberly Wevers**, representing P10 (the Dutch partnership for rural municipalities) and working at the municipality of Hof van Twente, presented the activities and progress of the [Dutch Living Lab](#) within the GRANULAR project. The Dutch LL is a partnership between P10 and Wageningen University's Rural Sociology Chair. P10 started with 10 municipalities but has grown to 33, representing diverse rural communities across the Netherlands facing similar challenges and opportunities. Hence, the LL benefits from the combination of P10's practical insights and Wageningen University's knowledge.

The core team of the LL holds monthly meetings and receives input from all P10 members through workshops and interviews with administrators and village representatives, aligning with the Living Lab's priorities. They also collaborate with National Rural Pact partners. Mrs. Wevers emphasised the **national level** as a unique feature of the LL, providing a broad range of partners across the Netherlands. She illustrated the diversity of the Dutch rural landscape with examples of tulip fields with migrant workers, the Zeeland peninsula with mobility challenges, the less inhabited north with gas extraction and minor earthquakes, and the eastern part with tourism and a shift in agriculture. She also noted that the Netherlands is a crowded country with villages and small farms often located close together.

The Dutch LL initially focused on **basic services**, recognising their importance for all rural communities (care, schools, transport). Their first step involved an **inventory of available data** on the distance to basic services in the Netherlands.

They then assessed how this data is used by municipalities and explored potential improvements in data collection through interviews with rural municipal administrators and village representatives. This data was compiled into a [report for P10 municipalities \(available in Dutch\)](#) highlighting basic service concerns, as these services are becoming less accessible in rural areas (e.g., loss of bus stops, centralisation of hospitals).

A key finding was that **statistically available data is not always easily connected to the reality in rural areas**, emphasising the need to combine and match formal data with informal data sourcing. For instance, a hospital being within a certain distance doesn't guarantee accessibility if transportation options are limited. Therefore, understanding the day-to-day struggles and opportunities experienced by people living outside main cities is crucial.

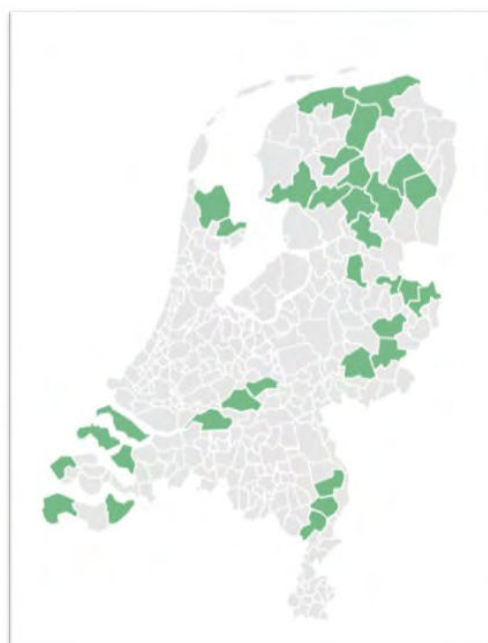


Figure 3. Network of P10 municipalities.  
Source: P10

The second priority of the Dutch Living Lab is **rural proofing**, specifically focusing on the national housing policy in the context of the Dutch housing crisis. Recognising the difficulty in finding affordable housing in both urban and rural areas, they aim to **improve the rural housing** policy to ensure it genuinely benefits rural areas while addressing the need for more housing. They plan to organise workshops with P10 municipalities to inventory promising housing-related rural proofing initiatives, allowing municipalities to learn from each other's good practices and identify factors that contribute to their success or create limitations.

## Panel discussion

### The role of data in driving innovation across Living Labs

With Kimberly Wevers, Marité Guevara & Andreu Blanch

P10 and Osona Living Lab from RUSTIK Project

The final segment of the webinar featured a panel discussion with Kimberly Wevers (P10), Marité Guevara, and Andreu Blanch ([Osona Living Lab, RUSTIK Project](#)).

Moderated by Serafin Pazos Vidal (AEIDL), the panel discussion explored how data-driven approaches support innovation within Living Labs and enhance rural development strategies. The session featured Kimberly Wevers from P10, as well as Marité Guevara and Andreu Blanch from the Osona Living Lab in RUSTIK Project, who shared insights on their methodologies, challenges, and the role of data in shaping rural policies.

**Marité Guevara** and **Andreu Blanch** introduced the work of the Osona Living Lab in Catalonia, Spain, which focuses on improving quality of life through innovative data collection. Their approach combines objective data (GIS mapping, sensors, official statistics) with subjective insights (community surveys, participatory workshops) to create a holistic understanding of rural challenges. They extracted the methodology for their quality-of-life index from the [ESPON framework](#) (European Spatial Planning Observation Network), and adapted it to a smaller scale. They stressed that engaging residents and policymakers early ensures data collection aligns with real needs and fosters trust.

**Kimberly Wevers** presented the [Dutch Living Lab, facilitated by P10](#), a national network of rural municipalities. She highlighted how their work leverages existing national datasets on rural services while integrating qualitative insights from local administrators and community representatives. She emphasised the importance of contextualising formal data, ensuring it reflects the lived experiences of rural communities, particularly regarding accessibility to essential services and rural housing.

A key part of the discussion centered on the scalability of Living Lab methodologies. While both the GRANULAR Dutch and Osona Living Labs use different approaches tailored to their regions, the panellists agreed on three core principles:

- Combining formal and informal data sources
- Engaging diverse stakeholders
- Aligning data insights with policy needs

Mrs Guevara noted that their [ESPON-inspired methodology](#) could be adapted to other small-scale rural settings, provided there is governance support for data collection and policymaking.

The session concluded with a brief discussion on the importance of embedding Living Labs into governance structures to maximise their long-term impact. The panellists emphasised that Living Labs should be seen as practical tools for shaping rural policies rather than standalone research projects.



# Discussion with the audience

## Moderated by Serafin Pazos-Vidal

Following the panel, Serafin Pazos-Vidal opened the floor to audience questions, which discussions on data inclusivity, cross-sector collaboration, and the sustainability of Living Labs beyond project funding.

One key question addressed the **challenge of ensuring data representativeness** and avoiding self-selection bias in community engagement. Kimberly Wevers explained that in the Netherlands, rural municipalities use well-established local networks to reach a diverse range of participants. Marité Guevara and Andreu Blanch noted that in Osona, digital literacy barriers made it difficult for some demographics (particularly older residents) to engage. To address this, they complemented digital surveys with face-to-face engagement through schools, community centers, and local businesses.

Another participant inquired about **cross-sectoral collaboration**, namely how Living Labs integrate multiple dimensions such as land use, mobility, and digital infrastructure. Mrs Guevara explained that the Osona Living Lab uses a multi-layered approach, combining existing European

methodologies with localised data collection. Additionally, Kimberly Wevers emphasised that in the Dutch context, collaboration between municipalities enables policymakers to align priorities and share best practices, ensuring that data-driven strategies are practical and effective.

A recurring concern was the **sustainability of Living Labs** after project funding ends. Mrs Wevers expressed confidence that the P10 network's existing structure allows for continued collaboration with research institutions. Meanwhile, the Osana coordinations highlighted the need for stronger governance backing, stressing the role of institutions like the Barcelona Provincial Council in providing long-term technical and financial support.

The discussion reinforced the importance of integrating Living Labs into policymaking processes to ensure long-term impact. The panellists encouraged participants to explore ways to embed data-driven innovation into their own rural contexts and continue collaborating within the [GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer Accelerator \(KTA\) community](#).

## Conclusion



### Merveille Ntabuhashe

European Association for Innovation of Local Development (AEIDL)

In conclusion, this webinar provided valuable insights into the **role of data in driving innovation across Living Labs and its potential to shape evidence-based rural policies**. Speakers highlighted the importance of integrating multiple data sources (including official datasets, participatory methods, and qualitative insights) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of rural dynamics. The discussion also emphasised the challenges of data accessibility and representativeness, with panellists advocating for inclusive engagement strategies to capture diverse rural perspectives.

A key takeaway was the need for **collaborative approaches** that bring together researchers, policymakers, and rural communities to enhance data literacy and ensure that data-driven insights translate into concrete

policy measures. Panellists stressed that Living Labs serve as more than just research initiatives, they are practical tools for co-creating solutions, improving local governance, and fostering rural resilience.

As **Merveille Ntabuhashe**, GRANULAR Project Manager at [AEIDL](#), noted in her concluding remarks, this webinar is part of the [GRANULAR Knowledge Transfer Accelerator \(KTA\)](#), which fosters collaboration and knowledge-sharing in rural development. Participants and interested actors are encouraged to stay engaged with the [KTA community](#) to continue the conversation and contribute to the evolving landscape of rural data innovation.

