GRANULAR

PRACTICE ABSTRACT

Coordinating a multi-country rural project

What kept sixteen Labs engaged for four years

Running a **participatory project** across many rural territories is above all a **coordination** problem. GRANULAR worked with seven Living Labs and nine Replication Labs across Europe, differing in discipline, language and capacity, and had to keep them engaged for four years. This is what worked.

Coordination was deliberately flexible rather than fixed. Most contact was online, especially early on, when individual and collective meetings helped facilitators name local needs.

Over time, **direct channels** between Labs and work packages were built through regular meetings, monthly updates and shared repositories.

Meetings were tightly structured and used interactive tools such as Miro, Slido and Mentimeter, so that planning, feedback and knowledge exchange stayed visible to everyone. Two things mattered more than any tool:

- **Combining formats**: collective sessions to build common understanding, one-to-one meetings for tailored support, and thematic meetings that brought together Labs working on the same subject, which let Replication Labs pick up methods directly from Living Labs.
- **Meeting in person**, and doing so inside events that already existed, such as general assemblies, cross-visits and methodological workshops.

⬢ **Recommendations**: clarify roles, expectations and procedures at the beginning, because procedural transparency is what makes collaboration possible; plan the calendar to avoid overlapping; integrate the activities during the events; budget is needed for continuous capacity building, especially on data collection methods; and check that the partners with the smallest budgets can actually afford to take part.

Authors: F. Stortini, B. Marovelli, M. Moretti (UNIPI)

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Methodological context and rationale

Creating and maintaining a collaborative environment was not an easy task, especially as activities were developed across different rural contexts and implementation phases involving seven Living Labs and nine Replication Labs.

GRANULAR was perceived as a complex project due to its **multilevel interactions** (within and between Labs, and between Labs and project partners), the different disciplines, background and skills, its iterative character, and the challenges of generating new evidence for policy-making based on data.

Making sense of and pursuing seemingly distant objectives, such as supporting digital, economic, and ecological transitions in rural areas through integrated place-based evidence and multi-actor processes, requires **time to build cross coordination and collaboration.**

Supporting the understanding of the project and contextualising its objectives at the territorial level was not automatic but required an **exploratory process aimed at building trust and strengthening relationships.**

This **participatory approach** helped move from abstract assumptions and technical aspects toward **concrete territorial actions**, while creating **spaces for knowledge exchange, capacity sharing, and peer-to-peer collaboration**.

Remote coordination provided **flexibility to address local challenges**, including stakeholder engagement, and data collection at territorial level. It also contributed to establish a **common project framework** for identifying, generalising, and, where possible, validating results across partners.

In-person activities involving project partners, Lab's facilitators, and territorial actors were recognised as essential for **creating synergies and mutual-understanding**, integrating activities, and making project objectives more tangible at territorial leve

However, important constraints emerged related to the **need for capacity-building activities**, especially in data collection methodologies, and the **limited financial resources available** to the Replication Labs. What had to be coordinated was not administration but evidence production: sixteen Labs collecting data by different methods, in different languages and legal contexts, whose results still had to be comparable enough to build a shared picture of rural diversity.

Description of the method

- During the project, GRANULAR Living Labs worked and interacted with partners to ensure **engagement** and **continuous exchange** of information on project activities. The approach adopted was **flexible** and consisted of multiple processes to **support interactions and stakeholder engagement**. While grounded in key project activities and tasks, it evolved to foster shared understanding among partners and introduce organisational improvements that enhanced coordination and collaboration.

- Most interactions with the Labs were conducted **online**, particularly during the early stages of the project, when individual and collective meetings helped facilitators identify local needs and priorities. The **flexibility of the coordination approach** allowed partners and Labs to be involved in promoting knowledge sharing, and supporting capacity-building activities (e.g. communication and data collection).

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- Over time, direct communication channels between Labs and Work Packages were strengthened through regular meetings, monthly updates, and the shared repositories. Labs were engaged in a **continuous in-person reflexivity process**, encouraging Labs the **exchange of experiences and knowledge**, the **evaluation of progress**, and the **collective re-calibration of activities.**

Interactive tools, **thematic meetings**, **World Café sessions**, annual **knowledge exchange** events facilitated peer-to-peer learning, mutual support, and identification of context-specific solutions.

By integrating these activities into official in-person project events, such as General Assemblies, cross visits, and methodological workshops, the project enhanced collaboration, maximised participation, and supported a continuous **cycle of planning, consolidation, monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation** across diverse rural contexts (see Figure 1 below).

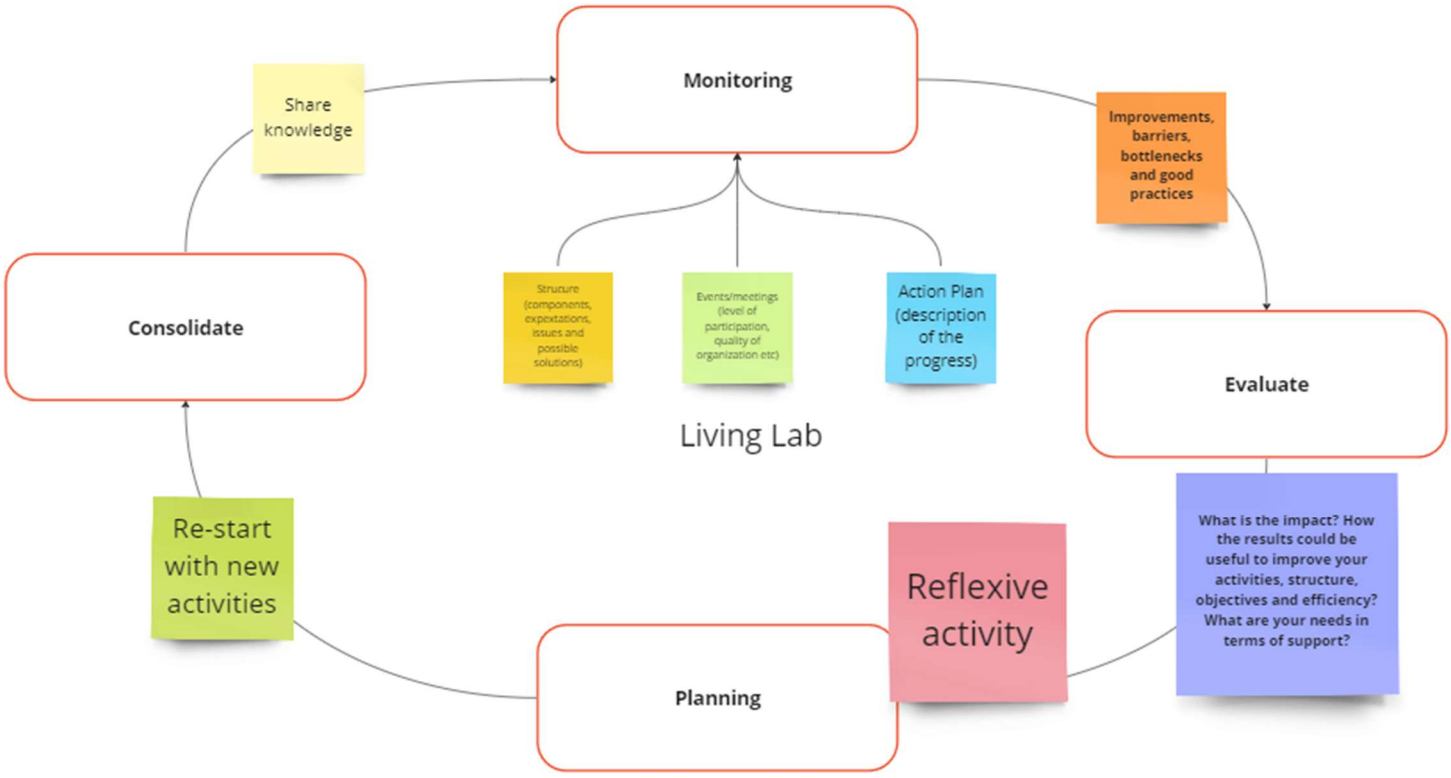


Figure 1: Planning, consolidation, monitoring and evaluation of the Living Labs' activities. Source: UNIPI.

Well-structured meetings, supported by interactive tools such as **Miro boards, Slido, and Mentimeter**, facilitated task planning, visualisation of activities, feedback collection, and knowledge exchange. Open discussions on ongoing activities (data collections) and future plans encouraged peer learning and the sharing of practical experiences between Labs and partners.

In addition, **thematic meetings** involving Labs interested on similar topics enabled deeper exchanges, and the **exploration of transferable practices**. These activities were particularly valuable for recognising the territorial differences and identifying context-specific solutions, especially for Replication Labs.

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Testing and application in Multi-Actor Labs

The approach was progressively refined throughout the project in response to the evolving requests and needs from Labs and the availability of project partners to be involved actively. Regular meetings, thematic sessions, and exchanges with Work Packages leaders ensured **transparency**, **facilitated knowledge sharing**, and supported the development of a **common understanding of the project objectives and methods**.

Given the diversity of rural contexts, thematic priorities, Labs' needs, and approaches adopted for data collection and analysis, a **tailored approach** was adopted. Individual meetings complemented collective sessions to address **specific local needs** and support facilitators in the implementation of activities.

In addition, dedicated meetings were organised to integrate Replication Labs in the general Labs meetings and organised **specific (thematic) meetings** with presentation of Living Labs and discussion with Replication Labs interested in "replicate" the activity and take contact with specific partners.

Participation to these meetings fostered a sense of **ownership and trust** among stakeholders, increasing the **likelihood of acceptance and successful implementation of initiatives**. Overall, the approach enhanced the **quality and legitimacy of outcomes** by integrating diverse perspectives and building stronger community buy-in.

The effects on outputs were concrete: methods developed in one Lab, among them visitor surveys, rural proofing exercises and data collection protocols, were taken up by others, which reduced duplicated effort and kept results comparable across territories. **Coordination is therefore not overhead but a condition for producing evidence that holds together at European level.**

Lessons learned and practical recommendations

- Regular feedback mechanisms, peer-to-peer exchange, and one-to-one meetings proved particularly valuable for **building trust**, provide **tailored support to facilitators**, and maintaining **stakeholder engagement.**
- Whenever possible, project activities should be **integrated into existing territorial events** and conducted **in person**, as face-to-face interactions facilitate relationship building, informal exchanges, and stronger stakeholder involvement.

The main benefits of the **participatory approach** include increased **stakeholder ownership**, **stronger collaboration**, improved **knowledge exchange**, and the **co-production of context-sensitive solutions**.

Several lessons emerged from the implementation of the approach such as:

- **Clarifying roles, expectations, and project procedures** from the first stages proved to be essential to support collaboration and guarantee procedural transparency.
- **Project activities should be carefully planned** to avoid overloading stakeholders with multiple tasks and meetings within short periods.
- **Participatory approaches require continuous capacity-building efforts**, the reciprocal learning process enhances the quality, relevance, and legitimacy of project outcomes.

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Scalability and replicability

The implementation of the method requires **significant time**, **facilitation skills**, and **resources** to support **coordination**, **capacity building**, and **long-term engagement**. It can be replicable and adaptable in other projects or wide collaborations depending on their contexts and missions.

Further information:

- GRANULAR project: www.ruralgranular.eu
- GRANULAR Multi-Actor Labs: https://www.ruralgranular.eu/living-labs/
- Webinar report – Living Lab: Driving Change in Rural Areas: https://zenodo.org/records/15131353

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CIHEAM MONTPELLIER · tetis · CIHEAM CHANIA · Nordregio · WAGENINGEN UNIVERSITY & RESEARCH · International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis IIASA www.iiasa.ac.at · PAGE

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