GRANULAR

PRACTICE ABSTRACT

Getting open data used in rural areas

Workshops that connect data producers with local users

Free, detailed datasets exist for most rural areas, but they are rarely used there. Local actors often do not know the data exists, or cannot process it.

GRANULAR tackled this through the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée Living Lab in France, by **bringing data producers and local users into the same room**.

The method has **four steps**:

- identify local data gaps and priority themes;
- bring in the relevant data producers;
- co-design the workshop with participants rather than for them;
- and collect feedback and further data requests

Two workshops tested it. One connected the local OpenStreetMap community, municipal GIS staff, a local planning association and researchers, to see **how citizen-generated spatial data could describe mobility and outdoor activity**. The other brought the French and Catalan statistical institutes, INSEE and IDESCAT, together with municipalities, employment agencies and journalists, with **hands-on exercises on population and tourism data**. Participants also handed the institutes a data wish list, making the exchange run both ways.

Because it ran across the France-Catalonia border, the approach was tested across two administrative systems, two languages and two data infrastructures. Participants reported greater confidence in finding and using open data for local planning.

⬢ **Recommendations**: hold workshops in person and close to users, because the relationships are the point; start from concrete local examples rather than generic demonstrations; design the content with participants, not for them; collect a data wish list and pass it back to the producers; and be realistic that this works only where the facilitator already has local legitimacy, which takes time to build.

Authors: Berchoux T., Kirsch A. (IAMM), Chasset L. (PPM)

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Methodological context and rationale

Rural areas are increasingly expected to **produce local evidence to support ecological, digital and social transitions**, from climate adaptation to land use monitoring and demographic planning. Yet many local actors lack the **awareness and skills to use existing open datasets**, including geospatial, citizen-generated and official statistical data — for place-based analysis. This capacity gap weakens the evidence base for tailored rural policy.

Despite the growing availability of free, granular datasets at appropriate spatial scales, they remain **underused at local level**. Not all stakeholders know these resources exist or are freely accessible, and fewer still have the technical skills to analyse them.

Promoting a **data culture within a territory** — through structured collaboration between data producers (mainly public authorities and researchers) and local users — enables the availability and reuse of this data. It empowers rural communities to engage in **data-driven initiatives**, produce **multi-dimensional territorial analyses**, and make more **informed decisions aligned with EU rural and cohesion policy frameworks**.

This capacity is a precondition for everything else GRANULAR set out to do: multi-dimensional characterisation of rural areas has no effect locally if the actors it describes cannot find, read or use the data it rests on.

Description of the method

Capacity-building activities at local level aim to **bridge the gap between data-driven local initiatives** — which seek to collect, use or process detailed territorial information — and **existing, accessible datasets or innovative methodologies** that local users may not yet know or be able to use.

The **Living Lab approach**, which brings together local stakeholders from scientific, political and civil society sectors, provides a **framework for peer learning**, **connecting data producers and users**, and organising **training sessions** designed with and for local practitioners. The process follows four broad steps:

1. **Needs assessment** — identify local data gaps and priority thematic areas (e.g. mobility, land cover, population dynamics)
2. **Partner mobilisation** — engage relevant data producers (national institutes, research organisations) and targeted local users
3. **Workshop design and delivery** — co-design training formats adapted to participants' skills and needs, covering both data discovery and practical processing
4. **Follow-up and feedback** — collect participant feedback and identify capacity needs or data requests

The data types covered span multiple rural dimensions:

- **OpenStreetMap (OSM)** — spatial/digital data on mobility infrastructure, land use, and outdoor activity patterns (digital transition)
- **Satellite imagery** — land cover and environmental monitoring (ecological transition)
- **INSEE / IDESCAT statistical data** — demographic, economic and social indicators (social transition)

Target users include mu**nicipal officers, local planning associations, economic chambers, journalists and civil society representatives**. National institutes and research organisations (RIATE-CNRS, INSEE, IDESCAT) act as data providers and trainers.

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Testing and application in Multi-Actor Labs

The Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée Living Lab (France) has implemented **two complementary types of capacity-building activity**, addressing both digital/spatial and statistical data literacy.

Digital and spatial data literacy: A workshop brought together Local OpenStreetMap Community members, GIS experts from municipalities, the local urbanism association AURCA and researchers from RIATE-CNRS.

The session explored how the OSM community and municipalities could collaborate to share geospatial knowledge with citizens and use available data to better understand mobility flows and outdoor activities. RIATE-CNRS presented applied examples of OSM use directly relevant to the territory. This addressed the digital transition dimension — building local capacity to use citizen-generated spatial data for planning.



Statistical data literacy: A cross-border workshop brought together INSEE (France) and IDESCAT (Catalonia) with local stakeholders including municipalities, economic and employment agencies, and journalists.

The institutes demonstrated how to access open data and exploit it for territorial analysis, with practical exercises on population characteristics and tourism. A quiz format encouraged active engagement. Data users were also able to discuss their working practices and submit a "data wish list" directly to producers.

French Living Lab workshop

The **cross-border France–Catalonia dimension** is a key feature: it tested the replicability of the approach across **different administrative systems, languages and institutional contexts** — directly relevant to different EU rural settings. Participant feedback indicated **improved confidence** in identifying and using open data sources for local planning purposes.

Lessons learned and practical recommendations

The Lab's role as a **trusted facilitator between data providers and local users** is what makes bespoke, targeted workshops possible.

This approach capitalises on the **complementary strengths of both parties**: data producers bring technical expertise and access to official datasets; local users bring contextual knowledge and practical planning needs. **Combining both produces more grounded and useful outputs than either party could achieve alone.**

Key practical recommendations for others wishing to replicate this approach:

- **Establish the Lab's visibility early** — trust takes time to build; proactive communication and consistent presence in the territory are essential
- **Co-design with users, not just for them** — involving local actors in workshop design increases relevance and uptake

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- **Organises in-person workshops and close to data users** — interpersonal relationships between data producers and users facilitate future collaborations
- **Start with concrete, local examples** — abstract data demonstrations are less effective than exercises applied directly to the local territory
- **Connect data requests back to producers** — the "data wish list" format is a simple but effective tool for improving data supply

A key limitation is that this approach depends on the Living Lab having already established **local legitimacy**. This cannot be assumed in new territories and requires **dedicated time and resources**. Replication in areas without an existing Lab structure would need a **phase of trust-building** before capacity activities can be effective.



At policy level, **improving local data literacy** directly strengthens the evid**ence base for rural proofing processes** and **territorial needs assessments** required under EU cohesion and rural development frameworks. Communities that can **use data independently** are **better positioned to engage with policy consultations** and advocate for **place-based solutions**.

Scalability and replicability

The capacity-building approach developed through the French Living Lab is designed to be scalable and context-adaptable. It does not depend on bespoke infrastructure or large budgets.

The core requirements for replication are:

- A **trusted local facilitator** (a Living Lab, local development agency, or equivalent)
- Access to at least one **national or regional data producer willing to engage** with local users
- A defined **community of local data users** with **identifiable needs**

Costs are relatively low: the main inputs are facilitator time, partner institute engagement and venue/logistics. Workshop formats can be adapted to **hybrid or fully digital delivery**, reducing barriers for geographically dispersed rural communities. The cross-border France–Catalonia experience demonstrates that the approach can bridge different administrative systems, languages and data infrastructures — an important condition for scaling across EU Member States and Associated Countries.

Further information:

- GRANULAR project: www.ruralgranular.eu
- Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée Living Lab website (in French):
  - ✓ Meeting with statistical offices : https://www.payspyreneesmediterranee.org/domaines/granular-le-laboratoire-vivant/les-actualites-granular/granular-comment-acceder-aux-donnees-de-l-insee-et-de-l-idescat-retour-sur-l-atelier-du-01-03-2024.html
  - ✓ Workshop bringing together OSM contributors, local authorities and researchers : https://www.payspyreneesmediterranee.org/domaines/granular-le-laboratoire-vivant/les-actualites-granular/granular-synergies-entre-openstreetmap-et-collectivites-retour-sur-la-rencontre-du-28-02-2024.html

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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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