GRANULAR

PRACTICE ABSTRACT

What makes data usable in a rural place?

Lessons from sixteen Multi-Actor Labs

Rural actors often cannot get hold of the data they need, or cannot use it once they have it.

GRANULAR put a direct question to its Multi-Actor Labs, the Living Labs and Replication Labs running the project locally: **what would make data genuinely usable in a rural place?**

Despite differing in history, membership and priorities, the Labs converged on three ways of working.

They began with desk research on existing databases and secondary data, to establish what already existed and where the gaps were.

They worked with research partners to refine what they actually needed and to build a shared vocabulary and went into the ground using workshops, interviews, focus groups and surveys, presenting results through several supports as word clouds, tables and maps rather than raw figures.

The Labs were clear that they struggled when working alone, and that support from research partners made the difference, provided those partners' objectives were aligned with their own.

They also flagged a mismatch that is easy to overlook: research timetables and practitioners' agendas run at different speeds, and that gap causes frustration.

⬢ **Recommendations**: plan engagement for the long term, with explicit objectives and timelines; involve end users as co-designers rather than as consultees; invest in trust and soft skills before data collection begins, trust is what lets people take ownership of data; combine quantitative and qualitative evidence and bring local knowledge into interpreting it; think on the design collection so data can be aggregated or disaggregated later, in order to reach different decision-makers or territorial actors; identify the right support for transferring the knowledge and close with an event that hands the data, maps and findings back to the territory.

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



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Methodological context and rationale

Rural actors struggle to **access and use data for understanding rural dynamics** and to effectively take decisions. Through the GRANULAR Multi-Actor Labs (MALs) the following question was addressed: *in what way data can be meaningful and easy to be used in local rural contexts?*

The MALs pointed out their **needs not only for access data**, but also **for developing actors' capacity**, attending **trainings**, and **learning from other Labs**.

In addition, it is necessary to be able to **present data in an accessible way for local stakeholders**, supported by project tool (e.g. story map), "visually" appealing and accessible, and collect feedback from practitioners.

Concepts, data and tools developed during the project can be supportive in contextualising rural challenges, but they must be **readapted for the context** and try to show their tangible opportunities. The timeliness of the research outcomes, particularly the **gaps between the research timetable and the practitioners' agenda**, was highlighted by partners as a critical issue that needs to be addressed.

Continued involvement of MALs and sustained collaborations, guided by clear objectives and timelines, are essential to avoid frustration. Consequently, this process requires **time**, **commitment** and **cooperation**.

Description of the method

In terms of data, indicators, and tools, MALs highlighted the need to **generate dynamic data to identify territorial trends at appropriate scales**, and their drivers both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

Given the exploratory nature of the process through which MALs and partners identified data needs, and engaged into: (i) discussions on **data needs** and their integration in the project activities, and (ii) **knowledge exchanges about methodologies**, **tools**, and **already existing data sources**.

Despite their heterogeneity, in terms of history, actors, organisation and priorities, MALs developed individual strategies for organising data collection, analysis and representations. These strategies can be grouped in three main, and in some cases simultaneous, actions:

- **Desk research** with a preliminary research/analysis on existing databases, secondary data and the identification of data gaps;
- **Interaction with partners** across the convergence and refinement of data needs and methods, while building a common language;
- **Field activities** with the involvement of territorial actors through workshops, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, surveys and mixed-methods approaches, supported by a variety of data representations (e.g., word cloud, tables, reports).

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Testing and application in Multi-Actor Labs

Overall, MALs experienced greater difficulties when carrying out activities independently. Instead, the **tools** they received, the **teamwork** and **assistance from academic collaborators**, along with the alignment of their objectives with those of the MALs, proved to be extremely beneficial. Indeed, MALs identified effective **triangulation between research needs and local actors** as a key principle of the effort, pointing out the benefits of such an approach.

Collaboration is important for obtaining **feedback on activities implemented locally**, **accessing new data sources and methodological approaches**, and **supporting decisions** on how to conclude specific work streams and advance subsequent activities.



MALs highlighted the relevance of **engaging parliaments and municipal authorities** to better capture the dynamics in rural areas, identify new data and evidence to inform policy development, and address potential issues related to representation in decision-making processes.

Prioritising the development of soft skills, before the data collection activities, can enhances **community resilience and cohesion**, leading to more effective outcomes in the use of data and tools for policymaking. The **process of building trust** is closely related to local stakeholders' capacity to access, understand, and make use of data (data appropriation), as well as to their opportunities to participate in European networks and collaborative initiatives.

Cooperation with academic partners was perceived simultaneously as a challenge and a solution. On the one hand, engagement with the scientific community was sometimes regarded as a source of complexity and rigidity by certain categories of stakeholders participating in the MALs. On the other hand, stronger collaboration and exchange of knowledge, ideas, and expertise were considered essential for fostering innovation and identifying effective solutions to emerging challenges.



Trust and soft skills have to precede data collection rather than follow it, is itself a reusable design rule for anyone setting up a Multi-Actor Lab.

Lessons learned and practical recommendations

Informed decision-making relies on **availability and access to the right mix of both qualitative and quantitative data**. It is also crucial to ensure that the **data is reliable, credible, and sufficiently robust** to support informed and evidence-based decision-making. This can be achieved by **including local knowledge in data interpretation**, and in **training stakeholders on how to identify robust data**.

Practical recommendations

- **Ensure stakeholders' engagement** for the long run throughout any multi-actor program.
- **Consider all skills** that could be helpful to **keep stakeholders motivated and actively engaged**.
- **Include end-users as co-designers** to ensure their involvement, thus **building capacities.**
- **Combine the different types of data, maps and results in a closing event** to foster the data appropriation process and identifying how much this process reflects the experiences of territorial actors, what recommendations MALs or researchers can draw from this to generate input into territorial strategies and policies.

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Scalability and replicability

Reliability and integrity of the data is critical for ensuring the credibility of information. In this context, the integration between science and society, within an effective science-society interface, is needed to make research more applicable and beneficial.



Data transparency and accessibility are recommended to **enhance trust and usability**, by working with **reproducible tools and approaches supported by capacity building activities**. At the same time, bottom-up data transparency is suggested to involve grassroots-level contributions for more comprehensive insights, in a mixed-methods approach.

MALs observed that data collected at the local level may not always be directly comparable or relevant to higher-level policy processes, leading to **potential misalignment of needs**. To address this risk, the data collection and analysis methodologies must be **designed accounting for scalability since its inception**, thus allowing for aggregation or disaggregation of information as needed.

This would facilitate the **integration of local insights into broader policy debates** while **ensuring that local specificities are not lost in the process.**

Further information:

- GRANULAR project www.ruralgranular.eu
- The Deliverable D6.2 “Guidelines and training materials for data collection” is available in https://zenodo.org/records/18984171

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