GRANULAR

PRACTICE ABSTRACT

Replication is adaptation, not copying

Transferring rural methods to data-scarce territories

GRANULAR's nine **Replication Labs** joined the project later than the rest, to test whether the data, tools and methods developed in the Living Labs would work somewhere new. Across Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania and Serbia they met the same wall, and it was not analysis but data. Unified, fine-grained local data was scarce, and reliable information on what residents and stakeholders think was largely missing.

Their answer was consistent. Each Lab began with desk research on official statistics, to find out what already existed and where the gaps were, then filled those gaps by treating local knowledge as data in its own right.

The Lithuanian Lab combined national statistics with interviews with municipalities, architects and service providers. The Greek Lab built detailed datasets on services and tourism and added the project's accessibility and mobility data. The Finnish Lab paired national statistics with a visitor survey, and the Romanian Lab combined official data with a Delphi exercise among producers.

Two findings stand out. The Labs made least progress when working alone, and tools, teamwork and support from project partners were decisive. And replication proved to be adaptation rather than copying, because every method had to be reworked for its new context.

⬢ **Recommendations**: start from your data needs rather than your data ambitions, and reuse existing sources before collecting anything new; triangulate official statistics with local knowledge, and invest in people's ability to interpret both; engage municipalities and local authorities early; and design data collection so it can be aggregated or disaggregated later, so local detail still reaches national and EU policy.

Authors: A. Pawłowska, P. Chmieliński, B. Wieliczko (ERDN); A. Kurdys-Kujawska (KUT)

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Methodological context and rationale

GRANULAR's nine Replication Labs, in Albania, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania and Serbia, joined the project at a later stage with the task of **replicating its approach in new territories**, **testing and adapting the data, tools and methods** first developed in the project's Living Labs. For most of them the binding difficulty is not analysis but data itself, since many territories lack unified, fine-grained local data and reliable information on residents' and stakeholders' views is often missing. Coming in later, and starting largely from scratch on data, the Labs met this challenge especially sharply.

The reflexive cluster therefore looked at their **experience with data**: how they worked out what they needed, where they found it, and what made it usable, around one practical question*, in what way can data be made meaningful and easy to use in local rural contexts where it is scarce or fragmented?*

Description of the method

Despite their heterogeneity in history, actors and priorities, the Labs developed comparable **strategies for organising data collection, analysis and representation**. These can be grouped into a few main, and often simultaneous, actions:

- **Desk research** on official statistics and secondary sources, with an explicit identification of data gaps; one Lab, for example, reviewed several national data sources before collecting anything of its own;
- **Interaction with partners** to refine data needs and methods and to build a common language, including collaboration with the project's data teams on satellite and social-media mobility data;
- **Field activities** engaging local actors through interviews, focus groups, surveys, a World Cafe and design-thinking workshops, supported by accessible data representations such as maps, tables and reports.

Throughout, the Labs treated **local knowledge as a data source** in its own right, combined qualitative and quantitative evidence, and adapted tools developed earlier in the project to the specifics of each new context.

What was tested, concretely, was the **transferability of the project's instruments**: the Action Plan template, the monitoring tool with its reflective fields, the thematic Practice Abstract templates, and data approaches first developed in the Living Labs, from visitor surveys to accessibility analysis.

Testing and application in Multi-Actor Labs

Applied across the nine Labs, the approach consistently **paired official statistics with local knowledge**.

The **Lithuanian Lab** combined national statistics with interviews and discussions with municipalities, architects and service providers; the **Greek Lab** built fine-grained datasets on services and tourism and added the project's accessibility and social-media mobility data; the **Finnish Lab** drew on national statistics alongside a visitor survey; the **Romanian Lab** combined official statistics with a producer Delphi.

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The Labs reported that they made least progress when working alone, and that t**ools, teamwork and support from project partners were decisive**, helping them **adapt approaches** developed earlier in the project to their own contexts.

A consistent pattern emerged across very different territories: the **same scarcity of unified local data** and the **same gap on stakeholders' views**, which made **triangulation with local knowledge, and the engagement of municipalities and authorities, central to producing usable evidence.**

Adaptation followed a consistent pattern across the nine Labs: each kept the structure of the instrument but rebuilt its evidence base, **replacing data assumed to exist with what was actually available locally**, and reading the results against the dimensions of the GRANULAR Rural Diversity Compass rather than against a single indicator.

Lessons learned and practical recommendations

In replication, **data rather than analysis is the binding constraint**: the recurring obstacle was a lack of unified, fine-grained local data and of stakeholders' views.

Data becomes usable through triangulation: combining official statistics with local knowledge, and building stakeholders' trust and capacity to use data themselves (data appropriation).

Informed decisions rely on the right mix of qualitative and quantitative data, and on its reliability, which including local knowledge in interpretation helps to secure.

Replication is adaptation, not copying: joining later and working in new territories, the Labs had to rework the project's methods, tools and data approaches to fit each context.

Recommendations

- **Start from data needs**, not data ambition, and **reuse existing secondary data** before collecting anything new.
- **Triangulate official data with local knowledge**, and invest in stakeholders' capacity and soft skills so they can access and interpret it.
- **Engage municipalities and local authorities early** to capture rural dynamics and to inform decisions.
- Include **local actors as co-designers** and share results back to them to consolidate data appropriation.

Scalability and replicability

The approach is transferable to other rural territories and projects, provided a few conditions are met.

Reliability and accessibility of data are essential, supported by **reproducible tools** and by **capacity building** so that local actors can use the data themselves.

Because data collected locally is not always comparable with higher-level policy processes, **methodologies must be designed for scalability from the outset**, allowing aggregation and disaggregation, so that local insight can feed broader policy debates while preserving local specificity.

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As later entrants adapting existing approaches, the Replication Labs also show that **transfer works best when methods are treated as a starting point to be reworked, not a template to be copied**.



These lessons feed the project's wider objectives directly: they establish the **conditions under which GRANULAR's data, tools and methods survive transfer into territories** with thinner data and smaller budgets, which is the test that matters for anything intended to outlive the project.

Further information:

- GRANULAR project: www.ruralgranular.eu & Digital Platform: https://platform.ruralgranular.eu/
- Universal Design for inclusive rural development, GRANULAR in the Ignalina region: https://www.ruralgranular.eu/news/universal-design-for-inclusive-rural-development-granular-in-ignalina-region-lithuania/
- Peer-reviewed article behind the Lithuanian Lab's work (Sustainability, 2025): https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/18/8311
- South Savo Visitor Survey 2025: https://www.ruralgranular.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/GRANULAR-South-Savo-Tourism-Survey-2025_v2.pdf
- GRANULAR Deliverable D6.2 Guidelines and training materials for data collection: https://zenodo.org/records/18984171

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