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MEMBER

Valle Varaita Living Lab

Living Lab Valle Varaita Living Lab | Italy

Based on the Manifest for Agroecology and Food Sovereignty of the Val Varaita:

"We are residents, farmers, traders, educators, volunteers, restaurateurs who deal with agriculture and food supply chains in Valle Varaita.

Through the Agroecological Living Laboratory, we combine our skills, paths and visions to share, implement and support agroecological principles in our territory.

(..)

We believe that working in synergy within the agroecological paradigm can help our communities in the valley to: support those who deal with agriculture in internal mountain areas, improve agri-food chains, attract more sustainable tourism, preserve and improve bio-cultural diversity, deal with climate change, make our businesses, associations and realities more environmentally, economically and socially sustainable."

For us an Agroecology LL is:

Transdisciplinary approaches which involve farmers, scientists and other interested partners in the co-design, monitoring and evaluation of new and existing agricultural practices and technologies on working landscapes to

improve their effectiveness and early adoption.”

Aim

According to the Val Varaita Agroecological Manifesto, the main objectives of the LL are the following:

- To improve land access for youth and create food district in the valley;
- To enhance tourism in low season (and not only 3 months in summer) and develop relational economics.

Background information

The regional Italian living lab (LL) has been organised within AE4EU project by the researchers of the agroecology group of the University of Gastronomic Science (UNISG, Italy), in collaboration with the Limone Lunare association and the producers of the valley where the LL is settled: it is a Monviso valley, the Val Varaita, in the Province of Cuneo, Region of Piedmont.

In this context and in link with agroecology the main goals of this living laboratory are: (I) the creation of a LL model that can be replicated in other Italian and European valleys; (II) the recognition and valorization of the biocultural diversity of mountain areas, and (III) the fertile territory of Val Varaita with movement of (young) people re-populating the valley through sustainable agriculture and related activities.

Need in enhancing the local territorial development and in enabling local food sovereignty are the main stakeholders' motivations to participate in the Italian LL.

The stakeholders (farmers, food producers, CSA) already involved into previous research projects were invited to participate in the LL.

The stakeholder's engagement into the living lab activities included the following activities:

- A preliminary meeting with producers and food processors rooted in the territory;
- A meeting with the representatives of local authorities;

- Research carried out by UNISG Agroecology group that provided materials and contacts for the LL.

Need in enhancing the local territorial development and in enabling local food sovereignty are the main stakeholders' motivations to participate in the Italian LL. The preliminary meeting with the producers – 20.05.2021 was organised with representatives of CSA (CRESCO), of a collective garden (Milpa), producers of local beer (Antagonisti), and the UNISG researchers (Agroecology group of UNISG). The meeting allowed to define the list of potential LL participants and potential themes of the LL.

After the first preliminary meeting, potential participants of the LL were asked to rank several themes/objectives through a disseminated online questionnaire. Based on the results of the questionnaire, four themes/objectives were selected for further discussion:

- Creation of food district in the valley;
- Relational Economics;
- Tourism in Low season;
- Food Sovereignty and land access

Then was organised a first meeting with the representatives of local authorities – 20.10.2021, participated 6 out of 11 representatives of municipalities of the Mountain Union³. We presented them the project, the methodology and the ALL initiatives. They showed their interest and willingness to participate.

Funding structure

The EU Project Ae4EU <https://www.ae4eu.eu/learning-exchange/livinglabs/>

Activities

The LL activities include three WSs organised by UNISG within the frame of AE4EU project and several preparatory meetings in order to enhance a dialogue between the LL participants and to elaborate requests/suggestions to the regional policy makers. Internal communication within the LL participants is organised through a created communication channel (group in WA).

The main objective of the workshops was to strengthen the network among

producers, policymakers and researchers, thereby identifying the needs for agroecological innovation and developing action strategies, while the most relevant result of the workshops was the creation of the living lab Manifesto.

It is relevant to highlight that the activity of the third workshop based on 2 main questions of discussion - Which aspects need research activity? Which policies can be useful to realise these themes? - revealed that participants had no clear understanding of practical benefits of research. Therefore, participants' responses were limited, and more suggestions of the stakeholders were expressed for policy rather than for research needs. Suggestions for future research and for policies were context-specific and differed depending on each theme discussed. All suggestions for future policies could be divided into two main groups: (i) general, or suggestions to increased efficiency of the policies: coordination, dissemination activities, organisation, participation; (ii) thematic, or suggestions related to specific issues (themes) that should be addressed: for example, soil fertilisation without manure, or subsidies for more efficient practices.

Methods, stakeholder engagements and tools

The **1st LL Workshop** was held in the municipality of Venasca on November 26 2021 with 30 participants including farmers, food producers, citizens and advisors (Fig. 1). In order to facilitate a dialogue with LL participants during the LL workshop, a methodology and facilitation process employed maieutics method and action learning. The methodology was developed in collaboration with the association Il Limone Lunare, based in Genova, that develops creativity for social inclusion. The workshop's objective was to strengthen the network among producers, policymakers and researchers, thereby identifying the needs for agroecological innovation and developing action strategies.

The **2nd LL workshop** was organised in the Province of Cuneo (Piedmont, Italy) on July 8, 2022 as one of the activities of the Micro festival "Rediscovering our lost lands". Combination of both these events allowed 40 participants in the workshop. The Workshop included following activities; a short presentation of the project AE4EU, a brief discussion with the representative of the local authorities, collective reading of Manifesto, brief maieutic activities, collective signature of Manifesto and further discussions.

Il Limone Lunare, was responsible for the design of the Manifesto, for printing the distributed materials and for a contribution to the constructive dialogue between academia and the farmers. All the workshop participants have received copies of

Manifesto in order to read it together. As the main result of the Workshop, all participants signed the Manifesto (Annex 5).

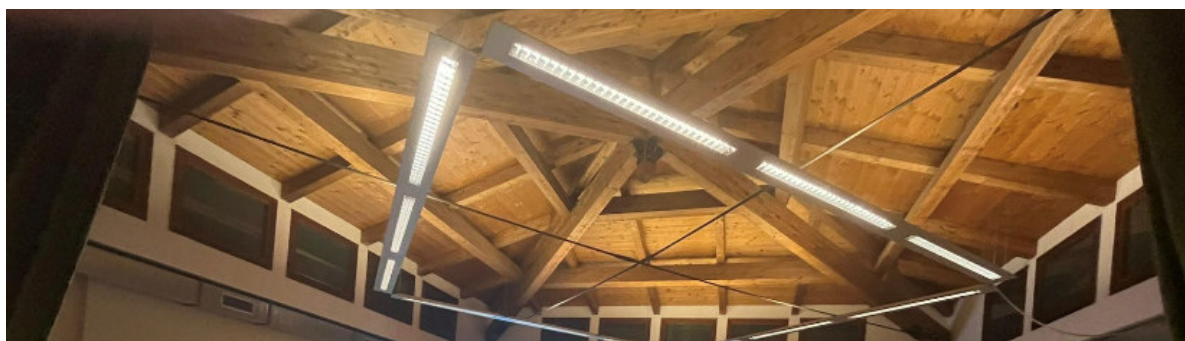
The next part of the workshop was a presentation of agroecology with further discussion on how to develop agroecological practices in the valley. One of the important actions of the living lab was the presentation of one of representatives of local authorities concerning opening a “front office” for further counselling activities and bureaucratic assistance to the producers to explore access to regional/EU funds.

The **3rd Workshop** was carried out at the end of November 2022 in Brossasco (province of Cuneo, Piedmont region, Italy). Due to appropriate communication - prepared and distributed flyers and posts in social media -, 48 people with different backgrounds (students, farmers, advisors, administrators and politicians) from nearby valleys have participated in the Workshop.

The main objective of the Workshop was dissemination of the LL experience, that is why the agenda of the Workshop included the following activities: introducing agroecology and its principles, the project activity and LL experience, 4 thematic tables (Soil health, Sustainable Tourism, Food sovereignty and land access, Relational Economics for food value chains and Bio-districts) with 2 questions for discussion (Which aspects need research activity? Which policies can be useful to realise these themes?) and networking activities. The workshop ended with aperitivo where food and drinks from local producers were provided, thereby allowing participants from different valleys to know each other.

The original text of Manifesto can be found here: <https://www.unisg.it/assets/Manifesto-LL-photo.pdf>

During the 3rd Workshop the participants read together the text of Manifesto; they were exposed with its digital version in order to create a similar document in the future living labs.





Education activity of the 3rd Workshop in the Italian living lab. Source: report of the 1st WS in Italian LL

Achievements

As mentioned above, the Manifesto was the main concrete outcome of the Italian LL. It was drafted by the UNISG researchers and it was signed by all members of the LL.

The Manifesto of the Italian living lab contains the common vision of the living lab, and two main objectives for future development: Relational economics and tourism in low seasons; and Food sovereignty and access to land.

According to the Manifesto, the following activities are necessary to reach the objectives of the LL:

- to create and maintain the relationships based on tangible and intangible values;
- to activate processes that can draw on existing good practices and create new ones;
- always to keep in mind the concreteness of the real life of those who participate, in order to formulate clear and shared objectives;
- to work with politicians at local and regional level to alleviate bureaucratic procedures.

The main tangible result of the project is the Establishment of a farmers markets **Farmers' and Artisans' Market of the Varaita Valley**. The Market is the inhabitants, farmers, artisans, traders, restaurateurs of the Valley who live it and make it alive: <https://www.instagram.com/mercatocontadinovallevaraita/>

Further information

Participants are very interested in future living lab activity and particularly in their further collaboration with the local authorities. Facilitation of the living lab will be funded by other international projects. Further activity of the living lab will include regular (monthly) meetings and use of digital tools including Agroecological Knowledge Exchange Hub.

An expected transformative changes of the Italian LL activity will be expressed in (i) the future collaboration with the authorities, that will allow to enhance access to funds allocated for territorial development, and to bridge decision making process with realities of the mountain rural areas; (ii) collaborative activity of the young farmers - participants of the LL, that provides strategic thinking of the long-term territorial development; (iii) disseminating of principles of agroecology and engaging more people interested in agroecology, that is a result of several education activities; (iv) provided informational support to all LL participants through a communication channel (WhatsApp group) and (v) better understanding of the farmers needs for the researchers.

As far as achieving the objectives mentioned in Manifesto requires a long time, activity of the Italian living lab will be continued after the projects' end. Participants are very interested in future living lab activity and particularly in further collaboration with the local authorities.

Further activity of the living lab will include regular (monthly) meetings and use of digital tools including the **Agroecology for Europe Hub** and shared space for exchange of information. We expect that facilitation of the living lab will be funded by other international projects. Currently the living lab meetings are focusing on the organisation of a local market for producers and artisans - participants are evaluating the actual feasibility of this project while they are discussing the action plan of the market.

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Contact

E-mail: p.migliorini@unisg.it



agroecology_ps@ilvo.vlaanderen.be

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