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Lessons Learnt from Living Labs in Agri-Food Research

Introduction

Living Labs (LL) are an approach in which stakeholders and researchers with different backgrounds collaborate on an equal footing to develop, test and implement solutions to problems. Implementation LL is increasingly being called for in research projects. Recent examples include the EU Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe' and the '"Agroecology Partnership' funded under the Horizon Europe work programme. We present lessons learnt from FiBL projects and derive recommendations for researchers and institutions.

Table 1: Compilation of challenges and mitigation measures LL

Topic	Challenge	Mitigation measures
Research questions	Research questions not relevant for the LL participants	Involve the potential LL in project development. Keep the research question open enough to allow adaptation.
	Problem too complex or too simple for an LL	Use a framework such as Cynefin: - Implement an LL for a complex situation. - Implement on-farm experimentation with peer-to-peer learning and demonstration for more simpler contexts.
	Unclear role of the LL	LL could be more technical or more social. Clarify your expectations during project development. Remember that all LL have social AND technical aspects
Selection of participant	Selection of participants	Select participants who agree that change is needed and who have influence in their institutions
Commitment of the participants	Participants do not join or contribute to the LL meetings	- Address the issue of commitment at the first meeting; - Offer cross-visits or field-visits - Take your time to work on joint goals - Listen carefully: participants' goals may differ from yours - Choose time slots that encourage attendance - Consider financial compensation for participating farmers
Missing trust and credibility among participants		Work with a facilitator who can use tools to - Ensure every voice is heard - Address power and dependencies - Work towards joint goals
Who is expected to change?	Project and LL time-lines do not match	Make clear that all participants contribute to change or to a solution.
Project management	The timeline of the project and the LL do not match	Discuss timelines at the start Make interim progress visible Think about funding beyond a project

Results

Based on the joint reflections, we present challenges and mitigation measures (Table 1). Here, we provide recommendations for implementing LL in the agri-food sector, specifically targeted at researchers and institutions involved.



Recommendations

LL are most valuable for complex, context-dependent problems without ready-made solutions. For well-defined technical questions, on-farm trials, demonstrations or peer-to-peer learning are often more efficient. Even where an LL fits, results take time: building trust, agreeing on goals and finding a shared way of working often take longer than project proposals foresee. Plan for this initiation phase and communicate it to funders from the outset. An LL's success depends less on the method than on a realistic prior assessment: does the problem need an LL, and does the timeframe allow for building relationships.

Methods

The close collaboration of researchers with stakeholders is a core element of FiBL's strategy to further develop organic farming. The FiBL on-farm network is a LL certified by ENoLL, the European Network of Living Labs and is part of the Agroecology Partnership Network. FiBL scientists currently use LL in different projects e.g. :

- Strip cropping – a farmer-driven innovation (arable farming)
- Rooting areas for pigs (livestock)
- Care for lambs from dairy sheep (livestock)

The authors reflected on the three projects in bilateral meetings s and validated the findings in a joint workshop. This work was inspired by previous experiences e.g. Oehen et al. 2024 and Vaarst et al. 2025.

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