

Title: The process of territorial data construction to support rural transitions: the case of Val di Cecina and Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée Rural Living Labs

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Abstract

The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas recognises the centrality of engaging territories and local actors to address rural transitions. At the same time, the European Commission places data at the centre of its growth and policymaking. This paper aims to explore the processes and dynamics in the real-world context through two Living Labs: the Rural District of Val di Cecina (Italy) and the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée (France), both activated under the Horizon Europe GRANULAR project. The ambition of GRANULAR is to help understand the characteristics, dynamics and drivers of rural areas through innovative data and indicators. In this context, the role of Living Labs shifts from the traditional field of product innovation to a more general idea of territorial agencies, for organizing policies and promoting participatory governance. The two Rural Living Labs show engagement issues and specificities related to their novel role. They deal with large rural areas and focus not on isolated interventions but on the broader management of the territory. This adds significant complexity, as they address a wide range of issues, including tourism flows, mobility and food systems, while involving diverse local actors. Building on previous research across seven RLLs, the objective of the paper is to analyse how these Rural Living Labs operationalise broad European ambitions at the micro-territorial level. The study adopts a comparative explorative case study design that combines in-depth qualitative analysis of internal documents, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The preliminary evidence, emerging primarily from participatory observation of the functioning of the two cases, traces the different efforts to build an operational network, capable of coordinating relations, guaranteeing effective internal and external interactions and with the ability to structure an appropriate path of research activities.

Keywords: Rural Living Labs – Adaptive mediating networks – Territorial data – Participatory governance

Long abstract

The Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (COM (2021) 345 final) recognises the centrality of engaging territories and local actors to address rural challenges through active participation and collaboration. At the same time, the (European Commission, [2024](#)) puts data at the centre of its growth and policymaking. Akimowicz et al. (2023) note that the continued decentralization of state engagement has weakened state capacities to support rural development, mainly due to insufficient field knowledge of rural needs and contexts.

However, rural communities demand innovative forms of knowledge to effectively capture their complexity and support decision making aimed at tailored solutions. The widely acknowledged recognition that rural actors need to be involved in rural development and consequently in the decision-making process also applies to the creation and use of data for policy. However, how these principles can be practically embedded in territorial processes and aligned with the broader European vision remains uncertain.

The GRANULAR project (Giving Rural Actors Novel data and re-Useable tools to Lead public Action in Rural areas) is a four-year project launched in 2022 under the Horizon Europe program. It aims to capture the diversity of rural areas and improve the understanding of their characteristics, dynamics and drivers such as climate change, demographic trends, wellbeing and accessibility to primary services. The project introduces a structured approach to the local data and policy cycle, emphasizing the importance of data in supporting effective decision-making. To pursue this goal, GRANULAR activated seven Rural Living Labs (hereafter RLLs) across Europe that collaborate with scientific partners to ensure the relevance and applicability of the tools developed.

Within this project, the authors of this paper have a privilege observation point as coordinators of the RLLs, allowing longitudinal insight into their organisational evolution, internal dynamics, and interaction with policy frameworks. Building on previous research conducted within the project, we observe that, throughout these processes, the RLLs focus on building relationships, encouraging mutual understanding, and acquire new knowledge around their needs. They act within a participatory governance framework, which becomes effective only when sustained by targeted capacity-building initiatives and collaborative data practices that democratize the process and foster shared ownership of outcomes. In this regard, the role of Living Labs extends beyond the traditional field of product innovation and evolves into “adaptive mediating networks” (Stortini et al., 2026) that generate knowledge, facilitate interactions around data, and manage stakeholder relations in their rural contexts. These RLLs represent and include a variety of needs, priorities, and actors stemmed from different backgrounds and geographical contexts. As participatory governance spaces, they require flexibility in the process and sufficient time to build trust and transparency.

In our previous work (Stortini et al., 2026), analysing the seven RLLs during the first two years of the project, we identified the four interrelated domains that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the RLLs role in rural policy development: 1. establishing priorities and involving stakeholders, 2. translating concepts and bridging knowledge boundaries, 3. building data capacity and trust, and 4. time as a transversal parameter. These domains also allowed us to capture their flexibility when they operate along data, project structures, and rural transformation.

This contribution originated from the need to deepen this analysis and to understand more precisely how RLLs operationalise broad European ambitions at the micro-territorial level. In this paper, we will focus on two RLLs: the Rural District of Val di Cecina (Italy) and the Pays Pyrénées Méditerranée (France), which represent two real rural world contexts differing in terms of institutional maturity and territorial consolidation. The Italian case is relatively recent, with its territorial action under development, while the French case is much well established in the territory and embedded within an active interaction with the French institutional system. Despite these differences, both aim to move beyond a sectoral approach and to address rural development in a broader, more integrated way. The case studies represent an opportunity to understand how the internal characteristics of Rural Living Labs, such composition and history shape their capacity to organise collective knowledge. This contribution therefore examines the evolution of the two RLLs considering newly collected materials, the progression of the project activities, and their adaptive organisational characteristics. Having been involved in the project, the two cases took on different configurations, both with respect to their “entities” and to each other, creating adaptive networks involving new actors depending on the priority to be pursued. Moreover, the pre-existence factors, such as the already consolidated strategies of programming and action in the area, seem to affect the trend of their activities and capacity to act during the Project.

Both cases face the challenge of operating within large rural territories, addressing multifaced issues and moving beyond isolated interventions toward broader management of the territory. This adds significant complexity in how to cope with challenges. The RLLs identified their priorities – including touristic flows and mobility and food systems – based on their territorial plans and supported by the Rural Diversity Compass (Oostindië et al 2024) converging in the pursuit of a more balanced territorial development.

Furthermore, our hypothesis is that, although both RLLs acted within the same European project, they exhibit different capacities that influence how the knowledge is produced, shared, and translated into action. These capacities relate not only to data but also on the ability to involve appropriate stakeholders, translate concepts, and bridge knowledge boundaries. The present work intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the conditions and factors that enable the generation of knowledge within the RLLs?
- How can this knowledge converge and contribute to data construction?
- How can data embody relations between actors, organizations, processes and methods?
- Who should be involved during this path, under which role and through which interaction processes?
- How implementation processes can be organized to ensure high coherence along knowledge generation, data construction, and decision?

Through these two real rural world case studies the paper contributes to enriching the academic debate on rural studies (Koopmans et al. 2018) and the debate on rural policies, which increasingly recognise Living Labs as spaces for co-design of place-tailored

policy interventions (Cascone et al., 2024). The two cases point out the factors that most significantly impact their existence. At the same time, they allow for the identification of the adaptive changes adopted to navigate complex territorial challenges, organise collective action around data, and attempt to generate knowledge with tangible policy relevance. Indeed, the cases demonstrated that starting from their official territorial structure (recognized as District and Pays), they can act as RLLs which enabled them to operate with a different organisational shape, developing activities through an adaptive and evolving trajectory that reshapes territorial governance practices.

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative explorative case study design to create the opportunity to generalise the results from localised territory to a broader context (Yin, 2003; Levitt, 2021). Building on previous research conducted across the seven RLLs, the study follows a sequential qualitative strategy. The first phase consists of an in-depth analysis of internal documents produced between October 2022 and February 2026, from the setting up and stakeholder engagement phases. The empirical material includes workshop and meeting notes, governance documents, monitoring tools, and periodic reports. These materials are analysed through a hybrid coding approach that combines deductive categories derived from previous research with inductive coding emerging from the data¹. In addition, the authors' positioning as coordinators of the RLLs provides access to day-to-day process, enabling participatory observation that also informs the research design.

The second phase involves semi-structured interviews with key actors from both RLLs. The interview protocol is informed by the preliminary results of the document analysis and aims to further explore decision-making processes and perceived policy impact. Interview data will be coded using the same analytical framework to ensure coherence across sources. Finally, the study relies on triangulation between documentary evidence, monitoring data, and interview material to strengthen interpretative validity.

(Tentative) Preliminary results

The preliminary evidence, emerging from the participatory observation of the functioning of the two RLLs, traces the different efforts to build an operational RLL, capable of coordinating relations, guaranteeing effective internal and external interactions and with the ability to structure an appropriate path of research activities.

The observations highlight the centrality of the territory not merely as a geographical setting in which RLL activities take place, but as a relational and institutional environment that actively shapes governance dynamics. The RLLs operate within pre-existing territorial configurations that influence their legitimacy, stakeholder mobilisation capacity, and interaction with public authorities. These preliminary findings suggest that there are differences in institutional resources and context, prior experience and territorial recognition, technical skills, and capacities that influence how knowledge is created and shared with the local community.

¹ At the time of this abstract submission, the authors are finalising this phase.

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