Round Table Dialogue on Living Labs in East Africa

Lessons from 1st session with Experts from WUR

What is a Living Lab? Which stakeholders should it include?

A Living Lab is a space where **people who would not usually meet** get together to create NEW innovations and approaches, fitting (challenges of) the future.

However, a Living Lab is also a space that highly builds on **pre-existing (social) structures**, where people meet because they share a mutual objective and where innovations build upon currently existing collaborations, knowledge or innovations. For this reason, one must be careful not to disrupt existing learning and innovation structures and networks as a result of new Living Labs interventions.

In general, success is made by **strengthening social structures**, not dominating nor disturbing their processes, but supporting and catalyzing them. Nevertheless, a drawback in these pre-existing structures can be that rules are already defined. A crucial point is not to change power structures abruptly. However, in a Living Lab setting, voices of different stakeholders must be balanced. That is not always when building on existing platforms, where different voices may be represented in unequal ways.

Solutions for these challenges can be identified in:

- **Innovation network**: Conducting an "innovation network analysis" helps in recognizing which members (or which other stakeholders) can influence processes in the Living Lab (e.g. through money, or education).
  This "innovation network analysis" can be done by consulting primarily the Living Lab members and the actors who have to be influenced, such as key decision makers, federal government, important private companies etc.
- **Platform characteristics**: Analyze the location of the platform, the influence it has on the surrounding network, and the degree of knowledge exchange it can provide.
- **Focus and objectives**: Get the focus and objectives of the Living Lab right, and subsequently examine who needs to be involved.

A Living Lab can be simply defined as life itself; a real-life setting. This means that it is there also without the need of underlying structure such as research and projects. It is about a community of people, committed and key stakeholders. It is a place where **researchers as well learn from it**! A big part of this learning is also guided by action combined with systematic monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

What are operational and structural needs of a Living Lab?

Here are some operational and structural items needed for living labs to be successful:

1 - Scientific procedure in Living Labs

A Living Lab must have a solid scientific base in order to be successful; for example, a clear objective, hypothesis and an experimental design are key. M&E, including systematic data collection, are key for managing a Living Lab, and for keeping track whether the objectives of the Living Lab are met.

The Living Lab also needs to have clear system boundaries. This to clearly identify the identity and function of the Living Lab itself, in relation to the world it is part of, and helps to identify the relationship between the Living Lab and the world it is part of. This science-based approach allows for a space for creation of knowledge through PhD research and other types or research activities.

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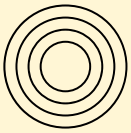
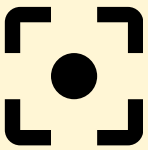
2- Fluidity and dynamic nature



Living Labs should allow for a dynamic group composition.

They have to be considered as a dynamic environment that changes according to the needs of the people that are part of it. Therefore, people are welcome to leave or enter during the different phases of the lifetime of the Living Lab.

In general: identification of influential stakeholders is important at the beginning; the content experts are important later on. Moreover, due to this dynamic nature, it is important to always remember that Living Labs do not have to be managed as a project, thus there is no need to set a working procedure or strict framework for activities.



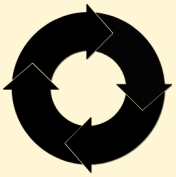
3- Focus

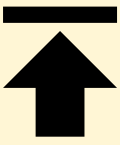
Living Labs need to have a focus, and quite a specific one (e.g. it should be more than achieving an SDG). This implies co-investment in knowledge and the need to take time, negotiate and agree on the focus with whoever is involved.

Consequently, roles, activities and timeline have to be jointly defined. It is normal not to have a clear focus at the beginning, also within the restricted group, but later on, focus of the Living Lab should be narrowed down. By structuring the focus of a Living Lab, it is possible to deviate from indecisiveness, one of the causes of failures in Living Labs.

4- Facilitation

A Facilitator is always needed to ensure success in the Living Lab. Within the REFOOTURE project, this role is supposed to be covered by the Innovation Leader.





5- Bottom-up approach

A bottom-up approach is essential to be relevant with solutions/innovations. Moreover, it helps to stick to on-the-ground reality.

What are the main social aspects in a Living Lab?

The social context of a living lab is very important in ensuring its success: **inclusiveness** is key. For example, the learning component of Living Labs is not just (theoretical) knowledge, but also wisdom and training.

These different knowledge systems have to be made equal through a support structure for all stakeholders involved, also the marginalized groups (depending on the context, these may be smallholder farmers, but also youth and women).

If inclusiveness is well embraced, and a pool of **trained facilitators** is created, specific **training and learning can be delivered to marginalized actors**. This enriches both “knowledge delivers” and “learners”.

It might be useful to have **champions** to support the social structure of the Living Lab. These can be “ambassadors” outside the Living Lab that actively support its development by promoting it. **Marketing** can also play an important role in ensuring a good social structure in a Living Lab.

Innovation in Living Labs

Within the REFOOTURE project, the identification of innovation cases/examples is a core activity. However, a question is: What is an innovation case? How is that defined? Here are some answers:

- **A Living Lab is an innovation in itself.** However, it could also be that sponsors and key users have the largest say to define what an innovation is. Generally, the definition of innovation is a result of a co-creation and co-learning process, thus it might not yet be possible to define it within an initial restricted group of stakeholders.

- An **example of successful innovation** within a Living Lab setting is the Agricultural Commodity Exchange for Africa in Malawi - A private-public initiative including not only legume and maize value chain actors, but also private and (more recently public) financial institutions to provide an appropriate warehouse receipt system to cash-constrained farmers.[1]

- Innovation in Living Labs always needs **collective experimentation**. That is development of a product, process or service as a group of stakeholders with various checking points for reflection and discussion along the way.

How to ensure durability in Living Labs?

To think about the **Exit strategy** in a Living Lab setting is important right from the beginning. This helps in being truly a transformative power in livelihoods and society in general. The exit strategy includes creating and handing over capacity to make sure that it continues after the set project-time. In order to build a solid exit strategy, it is useful to have **realistic expectations**.

The exit strategy puts in place mechanisms and structures (e.g. embedment into an organization) able to sustain the Living Lab in the future. Economically speaking, a Living Lab can become **self-sustainable**, and this self-sustainability could come from one actor, but usually it comes from a collaboration of different actors; for example, by bridging across innovation cases.

However, it is essential to be careful with external funding, as these might affect or even disrupt existing structures. In effect, once a few stakeholders control the money, the network dynamics starts to be centered in their hands. A way to resist this, is to build a solid structure right from the beginning, for example by investing in resources in the creation of new valuable networks.

Additionally, to extend the lifespan of a Living Lab it could be worth trying to gradually reduce the external funding as the Living Lab evolves in time and builds on its own income sources.

In the REFOOTURE project, the development of a business model could be an example of a good exit strategy, however, not entirely, as the nature of the mechanism should be not only private (as in the case of a business model). The mechanism should be broader, it should include also relationships and knowledge networks, especially among actors that previously did not share knowledge.

These mechanisms need **time** to be set up; time in which objectives of stakeholders have to be combined, e.g. action for development, research for scientists, assessment of needs (definition of a clear and realistic joint vision of success), identification of leadership roles, thus clarity on who is in the “driver’s seat”. Scientists are not responsible for this durability as such, as usually even if the knowledge is there after years, the funding ends and the commitment stops.

However, scientists have the responsibility to ask themselves the difficult questions such as “what is going wrong that the return in impact of many projects is not good enough?” Scientists have to embrace the overall complexity by adding an exit strategy to the project that helps to ensure durability and uptake.

This document is a result of the 1st session [2] of Roundtable Dialogue on Living Lab in East Africa within the process of co-learning and co-creation of the REFOOTURE project.

[1] Dentoni, D., and F. Krussmann (2015). Value network analysis of Malawian legume systems: implications for institutional entrepreneurship. Food Supply and Distribution System Dynamics, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organisation. Link here.

[2] Session of the 16th February 2021. Experts: Domenico Dentoni, Ivo Demmers, Marc Schut, Murat Sartas, Simon Oosting.