



Fostering stakeholder engagement and participation in Living Labs

Summary

Living Labs (LLs) play a key role in bringing together the various actors involved in value chains that valorize agrobiodiversity. Yet, keeping a diverse range of stakeholders engaged and interested over time is not easy. This abstract illustrates some of the tools and strategies used by the DIVINFOOD LLs to do so.

Sustaining stakeholder engagement is a challenge for Living Labs

In the context of facilitating a transition towards more sustainable food systems, where agrobiodiversity is supported, LLs play a key role in bringing together the various actors involved in value chains that valorize agrobiodiversity. The European Commission's research investment in multi-stakeholder groups signals just how important LLs are for EU-funded projects that aim to foster innovation through a multi-stakeholder co-creation process .

Yet, while the objective is clear, actually setting up vibrant and active LLs is not an easy feat. Even though a variety of different stakeholders are identified and invited to participate in a LL, based on the interest they may have in the topic and their perceived benefits, keeping stakeholders engaged over time is an effort that cannot be overlooked. The potential problem this Practice Abstract wishes to look into, and shed some light on, concerns stakeholders' engagement. How can stakeholders' engagement and participation be stimulated in an LL? How is stakeholder fatigue avoided? We draw on the experience of the 9 LLs of DIVINFOOD to illustrate how they managed to keep stakeholders engaged and the tools they used to foster participation and avoid fatigue.

Using engagement activities and communication tools

In DIVINFOOD, LLs used a series of **engagement activities** and a mix of **communication tools** to foster engagement and participation. First and foremost, engagement activities that work are those that are closely tied with **project commitments** (for instance, participatory ecosystems assessments, recipe development, and field trials). Engagement here was high simply because what attracted stakeholders to the project to begin with were the themes explored during these activities. Secondly, the LLs organized **large events** open to a wide audience, such as festivals or contests, where the showcasing of the project's work through public display such as cooking demos and tastings strengthens stakeholder motivations and commitment. Lastly there are **field visits** and/or **thematic workshops** or **training courses**. There are various elements in these activities that help keep engagement of stakeholders high, such as the knowledge that stakeholders acquire and the ties they consolidate, and in some cases build, when there are newcomers. The convivial character of some of these activities, where there are shared meals and joint activities undertaken, helps to create a greater sense of team and engagement.

LLs can use a **mix of communication tools** to foster communication. The preferred methods, if possible, are face-to-face meetings, but when stakeholders belonging to an LL are more spread out geographically, virtual tools are more useful. Instant messaging service or video conference platforms are useful tools to use as they are well known to most and easy to use.

A strategy often used to strike the right balance between engagement and **avoiding fatigue**, is that of calibrating the timing and participation of meetings to avoid redundancy and excessive frequency.

Meetings can be staggered based on who is to attend or based on the stage of value chain to work on.

For example, if farming and processing activities are less connected in a given moment, LLs can decide to hold separate meetings with these two types of actors to avoid one group losing interest, if the meeting focuses on the topic of most interest to the other.



Field visit in Hungary with living lab stakeholders.

Credits: OMKI



Introducing new NUC recipes to the public in France

Credits: Biocivam

Regular engagements fosters learning and co-creation

The main benefit of carrying out activities that keep engagement levels high within LLs is that it allows for a diverse range and mix of stakeholders to engage regularly over time. This contributes to the development of increasing levels of mutual understanding and trust, which in turn leads to better co-creation and co-learning within LLs (Massari et al, 2022). Limits can be contextual, such as a country or economic context that does not provide incentives for certain stakeholders to participate, or personal, such as stakeholder fatigue as mentioned above.

Further information

Further readings

- Deliverable 7.5 “Mid-term review of Living Lab functioning”, DIVINFOOD, 2024. Available at:
- Massari, S., Mattioni, D., Galli, F. (2022) *Framework for LL facilitation and Data Production*. Deliverable 5.1. DIVINFOOD H2020 project, September, 2022 [available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/8382431>]

Weblinks

- <https://enoll.org/>

About this practice abstract and DIVINFOOD

Publisher: University of Pisa

Authors: Dalia Mattioni and Francesca Galli

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DIVINFOOD - Co-constructing interactive short and mid-tier food chains to value agrobioDiversity IN healthy plant-based FOOD, is running from **March 2022 to Feb 2027**.

The overall goal of DIVINFOOD (a multi-actor, participatory project) is to facilitate the use and increase the value of Neglected and Underutilised Crops (NUCs) in food chains to foster healthier diets and more sustainable food systems.

Project website: www.divinfood.eu

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