



Policy brief

Supporting the sustainable long-term implementation of a European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures

Gerald Schwarz, Isidora Stojacic, Antonia Riedel, May Hobeika, Sylvie Fosselle, Jo Bijttebier, Bastian Gödel, Dolinda Cavallo, Isabelle Couture, Daniel Monteleone, Lisa Haller

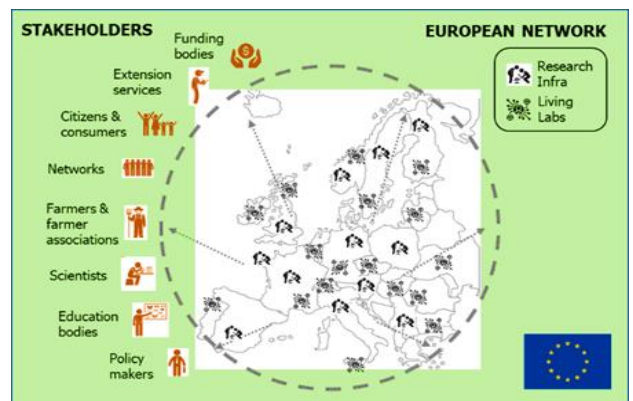
Key messages

Key factors for a successful implementation of a European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures include:

- Enabling adaptive governance that responds to changes in size and experiences of its members will utilise the benefits from the diversity of the network composition.
- Generating evidence on the benefits of developing and participating in the European Network to foster buy-in and commitment from funding organisations and LLs and RIs.

Research policies and funding requirements need to recognize the long-term nature of network implementation and required continuity in political and financial investment that go beyond standard R&I project cycles.

Funding of such a transdisciplinary network and its long-term implementation and management needs to embrace changing roles and responsibilities of different types of actors and dynamic action plans of the network.



Source: ALL-Ready Project



Source: FiBL, Lisa Haller

European Network of Agroecology LLs and RIs

The pivotal role of agroecology in supporting key European policies, such as the Green Deal, is widely recognised by the European Institutions. The Horizon Europe Partnership AGROECOLOGY is an important investment in promoting research and innovation on transitions to agroecology in the next 7 – 10 years. The future European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures will be a major component of the Partnership with the aim to support inclusive place-based innovation that accelerates the transition to agroecology at the local, regional and national levels across Europe.

The main benefits of the Network lie in strengthening collaboration, raising awareness, addressing funding gaps and promoting value chain solutions. Reaching the full potential of the European Network requires a long-term strategy and a common understanding of key factors impacting on its successful implementation and evolution over time (including the governance of the network and its funding, thematic priorities, communication and dissemination activities, IPR and data management, and policy requirements and dialogue).

Key factors for successful implementation

The European Network will include a diverse range of LLs and RIs with experiences differing in terms of organizations, objectives, approaches, thematic expertise and the level of expertise in running an initiative. While this diversity increases the complexity of managing the Network, it is important to fully embrace the benefits from the diversity of its composition, profiting from a wide range of different experiences and expertise valuing place-based innovation and research and transdisciplinarity, and offering a space for open dialogue between stakeholders and between disciplines.

Enabling adaptive governance that responds to changes in size and experiences of its members will utilise the benefits from, and values of, the

diversity of its composition. The heterogeneous nature of the network requires the allocation of adequate resources for network management and coordination.

Allowing for consolidation processes and activities is a key factor of success for the long-term implementation of a heterogeneous network. Time is needed to develop relationships enabling trusted open exchange, to establish, review and adapt governance processes, as well as objectives, values and activities of the network, and to develop and evolve network infrastructure.

The complexity and diversity are success factors for the European Network of Agroecology LLs and RIs, but they also make its implementation challenging. Related key issues are the coordination and integration of activities, high number of transaction and risk of meeting fatigue, and the utilisation of additional benefits such as enhanced network resiliency.

Generating evidence on the benefits of developing and participating in the European Network fosters buy-in and commitment from funding organisations and LLs and RIs. This requires the development of tools or approaches to monitor and evaluate the performance of the network in a transparent and sound manner.

A further key factor in facilitating knowledge exchange, data sharing and integration of scientific methods and results between living labs and research infrastructures is the development of guidelines and protocols to support data harmonization and mobilisation.

Several risks for the successful implementation of the European Network need to be addressed. Network and stakeholder fatigue is the most important risks to consider. One reason is the high number of existing networks that compete for the engagement of stakeholders in the agricultural and rural development arena in Europe. The experiences with the pilot network highlight the importance of the right facilitation approaches, engagement tools and techniques to keep stakeholders involved in, and excited about, the European Network and of consistent and frequent website continuation.

Research policies and funding requirements need to recognize the long-term nature of network implementation and required continuity in political and financial investment that go beyond standard R&I project cycles.

Conclusion

The complexity of the challenges to be addressed in farming and food systems in transitions to agroecology requires concerted and integrated efforts of science, practice and society, and policy at European scale, which cannot be achieved only with relatively short-term research projects, or by a single country on its own. The European Network for Agroecology LLs and RIs provides a coordinated, large-scale initiative that promotes knowledge transfer and capacity building on the development, uptake and upscaling of agroecology at different levels.

Reaching the full potential of the Network requires a long-term strategy and implementation plan for its governance, funding and activities, supported by long term political and financial investments at local, regional, national and European levels. While the Horizon Europe Partnership AGROECOLOGY with its 7-10 year time-frame is an important first step, further steps have to follow to ensure continuity in political and financial investments beyond the duration of the Partnership.

Funding of such a transdisciplinary network and its long-term implementation and management requires flexibility to adjust funding contracts and means accepting changes in network governance. Research policies and flexible funding mechanisms need to accommodate adaptive governance and embrace changing roles and responsibilities of different types of actors and dynamic action plans of the European Network.

Policy recommendations to support the implementation of a European Network

- Recognize in research and funding policies the long-term nature of network implementation and required continuity in political and financial investment that go beyond standard R&I project cycles.
- Provide flexible funding mechanisms that accommodate adaptive governance, and changing roles and responsibilities of different types of actors and dynamic action plans of the Network.
- Ensure eligibility of management and coordination activities of the different types of actors engaged in the Network and ring-fence funding for these kinds of activities in funding programmes.
- Require in research and funding policies the generation of sound evidence of the performance and impact of the Network through transparent monitoring and evaluation of its processes and activities.
- Ensure common application of EU standards and requirements for data management and protection that facilitate transboundary data harmonisation and mobilisation.
- Promote science-policy-society dialogue in support of the establishment and implementation of evidence-based policies for agroecology transition and to increase the awareness of the added value of a European Network amongst private and public funders.
- Support close cooperation of the European Network with other networks in the agricultural and rural development arena in the EU, e.g. the EU CAP Network and Soil Mission Europe.

References

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About ALL-Ready: ALL-Ready is a Coordination and Support Action (CSA) funded by the European Commission (EC) with the aim of preparing a framework for a future European network of Living Labs (LL) and Research Infrastructures (IR) that will enable the transition towards agroecology throughout Europe. Based on the premise that agroecology can strengthen the sustainability and resilience of farming systems, the project will contribute to addressing the multiple challenges that they are facing today including climate change, loss of biodiversity, dwindling resources, degradation of soil and water quality.

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Authors: Gerald Schwarz, Isidora Stojacic, Antonia Riedel, May Hobeika, Sylvie Fosselle, Jo Bijttebier, Bastian Gödel, Dolinda Cavallo, Isabelle Couture, Daniel Monteleone, Lisa Haller

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