



Policy brief

# The benefits of a European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures

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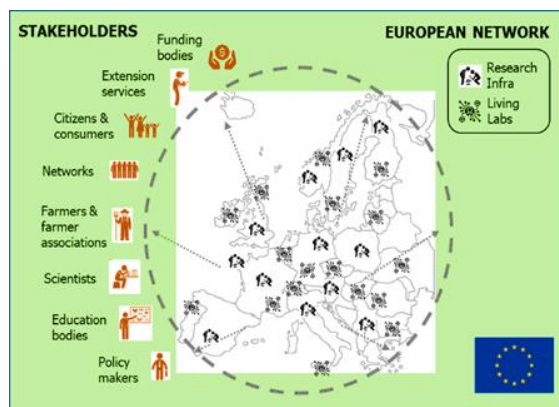
**Key messages**

**The main benefits** of a European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures:

- Strengthened networking and collaboration, enhanced portfolios of research and innovation activities
- Exchange and diffusion of knowledge resulting in further improvements in the governance of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures
- Promotion of value chain solutions for accelerating transitions to agroecology

Research policies and funding requirements need to accommodate an adaptive governance, roles and responsibilities of different types of actors and dynamic action plans of the network

Close collaboration with other networks in agriculture and rural development will enhance synergies in increasing knowledge about research and innovations for agroecology transitions.



Source: ALL-Ready Project

## Challenges of Living Labs and Research Infrastructures

Research Infrastructures have key roles in transitions to agroecology. They enlarge the diversity of actors involved in the transition process, empower relevant actors through co-creation and intensive knowledge exchange,

make scientific knowledge on agroecology available, and so contribute to a better understanding of the key aspects related to transitions to agroecology.

But Living Labs and Research Infrastructures face a variety of challenges related to the operationalisation and the management of their research and innovation activities. Key challenges relate to access to (long-term) funding, overcoming barriers of adoption and maintaining innovations, stakeholder engagement and the application of the living lab methodology, as well as data ownership and management. Particular challenges highlighted for research infrastructures relate to the interdisciplinary and long-term nature of experiments as well as to transboundary data management across research infrastructures in different countries.

The complexity of the challenges in transitions of farming and food systems to agroecology requires concerted and integrated efforts of science, practice and society, and policy at European scale. The European Network for Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures can provide coordinated, large-scale support for agroecology transitions.

## Benefits of the European Network

The future European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures will be a major component of the Horizon Europe Partnership for Agroecology with the aim to support inclusive place-based innovation that accelerates the transition to agroecology at the local, regional and national levels across Europe. Representatives of living labs, research infrastructures and funding organisations shared common views on key benefits they expect from participating and funding a European Network of Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures (Schwarz et al., 2022). A key benefit of the European Network lies in **strengthening networking and collaboration** that promotes co-creation of knowledge and engagement of stakeholders in transitions to agroecology. A further important role was also seen in **raising awareness** about sustainable farming and food systems for wider society (e.g. social aspects of access to healthy food), which has the potential to increase motivation of wider food systems actors to engage in living labs.

Large scale diffusion of agroecological innovations requires actions across the value chain including processing and retail. A European Network would be able **to reach the entire value chain**, from input suppliers to consumers, promoting value chain solutions (e.g. improving quality standards and improving access to markets).

Stakeholders expect the European Network to work in close collaboration with EIP-AGRI (and its operational groups), which is now part of the EU CAP Network. This will enable to create **synergies** and to increase knowledge about results and **solutions developed on farms and business incubators**. Close collaboration with other Horizon Europe Partnerships and Missions will further enhance synergies, e.g. with the living labs and lighthouses of the Soil Mission Europe.

## Funding considerations

Funding organisations agreed that the need for long-term funding of living labs needs to be better considered. This can be addressed by **combining public and private funding** and improving coherence between different funds. However, funding organisations indicated cases of reduced willingness of private funders to invest in agroecology transitions in post-pandemic times. This needs to be addressed through outreach activities of the European Network.

It is important to agree on an overarching **long-term strategy** for funding the European Network. A long-term funding strategy will also avoid, or at least minimise, financing projects with similar aims and research questions. The European Network can foster **partnerships of funding organisations** in regions with similar contexts and challenges to jointly invest in the development of agroecological projects in their territories.

Funding of transdisciplinary networks and their long-term implementation and management requires **flexibility** to adjust funding contracts and means accepting changes in network governance. The availability of long-term funding can be negatively impacted by

changing higher-level political objectives and **uncertainty** about budget availability. Political support and **long-term commitment** of public authorities is therefore crucial.

Recommendations to mitigate funding uncertainty include outreach activities to national ministries and generating own revenue streams to be less dependent on public funding. Acceptance of private funding should be properly evaluated by a committee to address potential ethical concerns.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, Agroecology Living Labs and Research Infrastructures face significant challenges, particularly in terms of funding constraints, which the European Network can help address. The network has the potential to support inclusive place-based innovation that accelerates the transition to agroecology at the local, regional, national and European levels. Its main benefits lie in strengthening collaboration, raising awareness, addressing funding gaps and promoting value chain solutions.

The interplay of public and private funding sources fosters synergies, enriching knowledge creation. Reaching the full potential of the Network requires a long-term strategy and implementation plan for its governance, funding and activities.

### Policy recommendations to harness the benefits of a European Network

- Provide clear guidelines on funding schemes (highlighting synergies and complementarities between different policy and funding programmes) to align participants and bolster involvement.
- Design research policies and flexible funding mechanisms that accommodate adaptive governance, roles and responsibilities of different types of actors and dynamic action plans of the network.
- Support the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework that ensures transparency and provides sound evidence on the impacts of the European Network as a basis for future funding decisions
- 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. through the EU CAP Network and Soil Mission Europe.

## References

Schwarz, G., Hobeika, M., Stojacic, I., Gödel, B., Perez, RC. (2022) Report on the added value of the European Network. Deliverable Report 4.1. All-Ready project. 28 p, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7447971>

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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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