Promoting Innovation Through Living Labs

Interreg Baltic Sea Region

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Living Labs have emerged as powerful collaborative innovation structures that facilitate open innovation through stakeholder engagement, knowledge sharing, and co-creation. The Distance LAB project demonstrates how Living Labs can unite local innovation ecosystems into an International Multidisciplinary Living Lab Network (IMLLN) across the Baltic Sea Region.

These user-centered ecosystems enable testing and validation of services and solutions in real-life conditions, creating a bridge between research and practical implementation. By bringing together public agencies, companies, universities, and users in public-private-people partnerships, Living Labs foster innovation through collaboration.

by Zane Zeibote, Dāvis Vītols

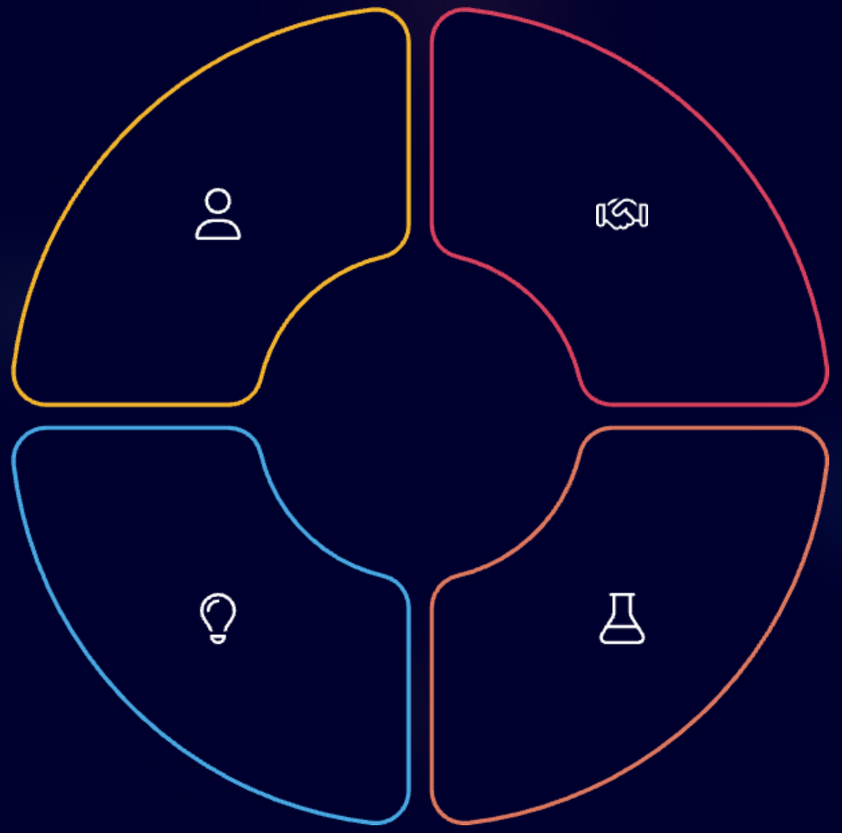
Understanding the Living Lab Concept

Living Labs became prominent after the creation of the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) in 2006. According to ENoLL, Living Labs are user-centered, open innovation ecosystems that integrate research and innovation processes in real-life communities and settings.

They encompass diverse contexts, from local innovation activities started by citizens to development activities involving multiple stakeholders in developed societies. Living Labs can be driven by different actors—users, providers, enablers, and utilizers—affecting the focus and duration of collaborative innovation efforts.

User-Centered

Focuses on real user needs and experiences in authentic environments



Collaborative

Brings together diverse stakeholders in public-private-people partnerships

Innovative

Creates space for co-creation and open innovation processes

Experimental

Tests and validates solutions in real-life conditions

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Advantages and Challenges of Living Labs

Living Labs offer significant advantages for innovation but also present challenges that must be addressed. Understanding these factors is crucial for organizations developing and implementing Living Lab approaches.

Key Advantages

- High potential for innovation through multidisciplinary approaches
- Systematic learning and replication of innovations
- More sustainable solutions through stakeholder integration
- Reduced risk of policy and business failure
- Better match with local contexts and creativity potentials

Notable Challenges

- Not a direct path to short-term solutions
- Requires significant investment in coordination and management
- Experimentation inevitably involves failures
- Successful stakeholder participation requires expertise
- May require abandoning established organizational cultures

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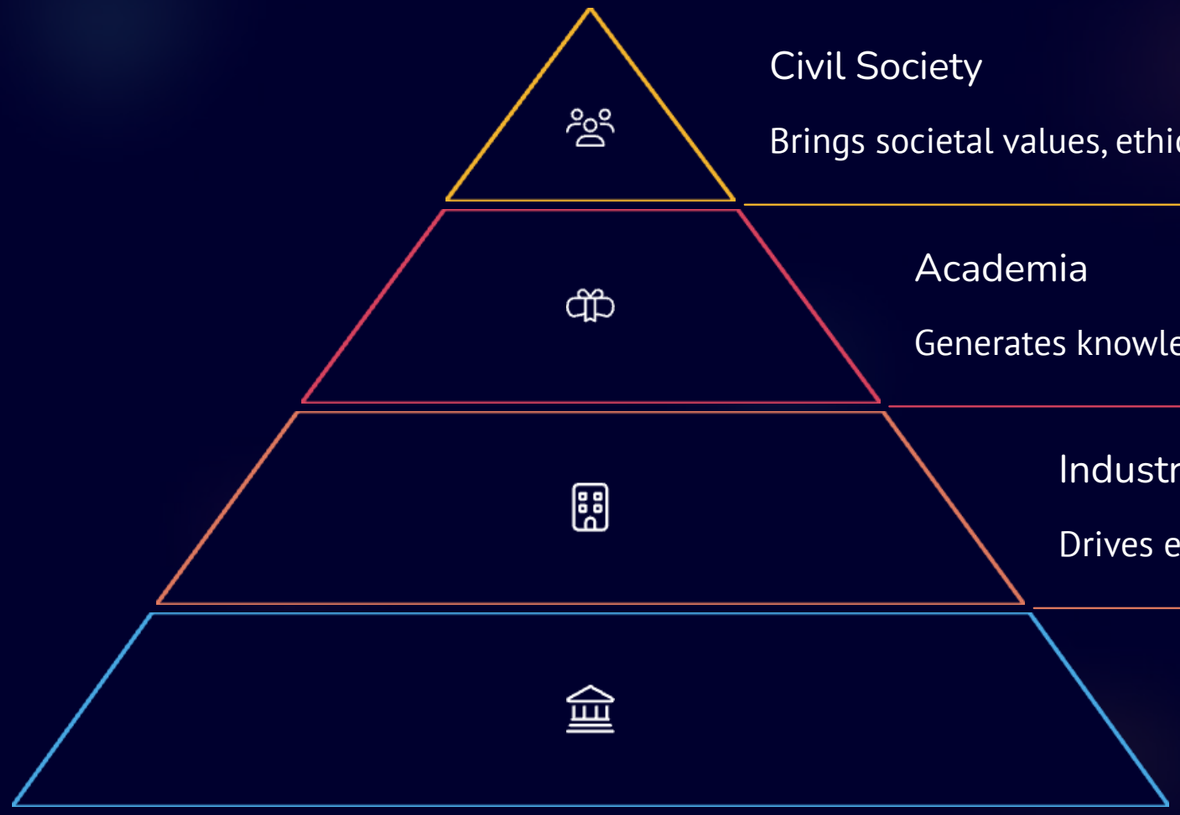
The Quadruple Helix Model

Stakeholders are an instrumental part of Living Labs, and their early involvement is crucial for success. The Quadruple Helix Model is one of the most common approaches for organizing stakeholders with complementary knowledge and experience.

This model brings together four key sectors: government (public sector), industry (private sector), academia (knowledge sector), and civil society (social sector). Each plays a vital role in creating a balanced ecosystem for innovation.



Civil Society

Brings societal values, ethics, and social needs

Academia

Generates knowledge, conducts research, educates

Industry

Drives economic growth, creates jobs and services

Government

Creates policies, regulations, provides resources

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Co-Creation in Living Labs

Co-creation has become widely presented in political and public management research agendas for about a decade, approximately the same period as the Living Lab concept has emerged. It brings together different expertise and involves stakeholders in the innovation process.

The concept of co-creation has evolved from increasing the efficiency of governments to a broader understanding of stakeholders' roles in bringing different forms of expertise together. Living Labs bring stakeholder engagement through co-creation closer to reality.

Co-creation

Bring together new services and prepare them for application

Exploration

Engage all stakeholders, especially user communities, at the earlier stage

Experimentation

Test services to experience live scenarios with users

Evaluation

Assess new services and innovative concepts in real-life situations

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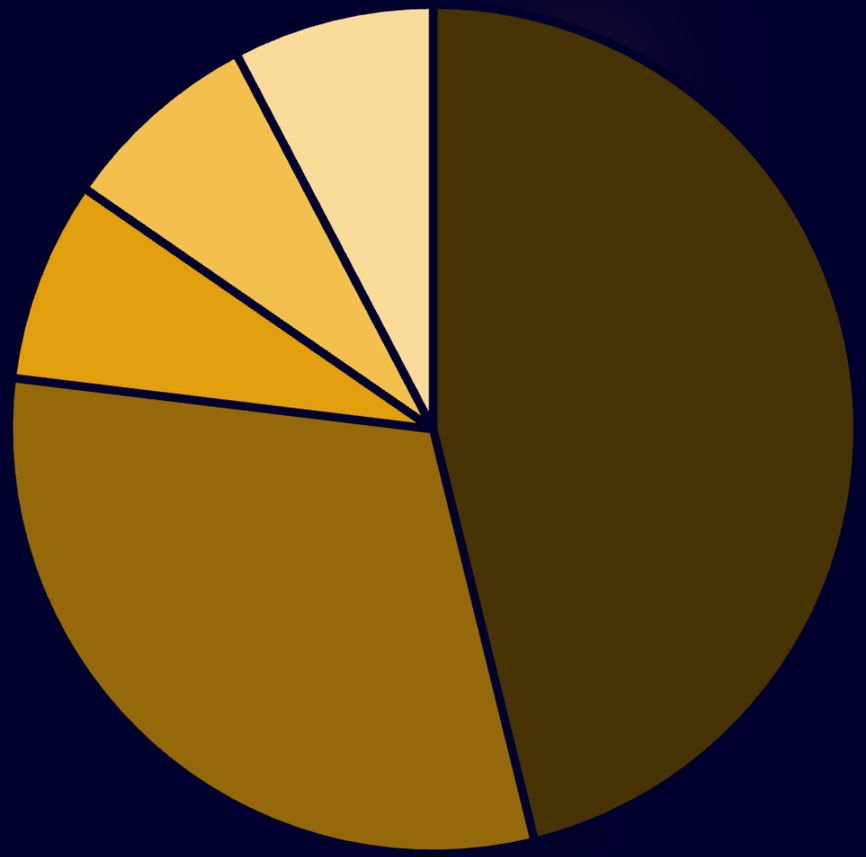
Distance LAB Living Labs Development

Seven Distance LAB project partners' Living Labs were in development in mid-2024, with plans to become operational and join the International Multidisciplinary Living Lab Network (IMLLN) by mid-2025.

According to a survey conducted among Distance LAB partners, most (87.5%) were in the process of developing their Living Labs, while 12.5% were planning to set up Living Labs soon. The development stages varied, with 46.15% in the Initiation phase, 30.77% in the Plan development phase, and others in Co-creative design, Implementation, and Dissemination phases.



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Success Factors for Living Labs

According to Distance LAB project partners, several key factors are required for Living Lab success. The most important is having stakeholders interested in participating (29.63%), followed by clear objectives and tasks (22.22%), and information exchange with other Living Labs (18.52%).

Partners unanimously agreed that value co-creation for all stakeholders (100%) is the most important principle of Living Labs, followed by early stakeholder engagement (75%). The most important components are methods and tools (87.50%), Living Lab context (75%), and Quadruple Helix actors (62.50%).

Critical Success Factors

- Interested stakeholders (29.63%)
- Clear objectives and tasks (22.22%)
- Information exchange (18.52%)
- Adequate resources (14.81%)

Key Principles

- Value co-creation (100%)
- Early stakeholder engagement (75%)
- Real-life experimentation (37.50%)
- Iterative feedback processes (37.50%)

Essential Components

- Methods and tools (87.50%)
- Living Lab context (75%)
- Quadruple Helix actors (62.50%)
- Innovation focus (37.50%)

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Future of Online Living Labs

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased the importance of remote work and services, a trend that continues to grow. Transferring local co-creation Living Lab service production models to online hubs will facilitate business development through international networking and collaboration.

According to the Distance LAB survey, half of the participants (50%) would agree to run Living Labs in online settings if all other participants agree. Others preferred a hybrid approach (37.50%) or would agree if the Living Lab leader/team is skillful enough (12.50%). Most partners (75%) hope to join the IMLLN with their Living Labs by mid-2025.

75%

IMLLN Participation

Partners planning to join by mid-2025

87.5%

Toolkit Priority

Value information and tools for developing Living Labs

62.5%

Strategic Partnerships

Seek connections with other Living Labs

The Distance LAB project will provide partners with the IMLLN platform, tools, and methods for running Living Labs online. This approach will extend links and cooperation networks to existing local and global clusters, networks, incubators, and centers of innovation and excellence.

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