

HORIZON EUROPE PROJECT · 2023–2025

LIVING LAB CROATIA

Supporting Women Innovators in Rural Croatia

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GRASS CEILING

PROJECT OVERVIEW



GRASS CEILING empowers rural women to lead socio-ecological innovation in agriculture and rural communities across Europe.

3 year Horizon Europe project (2023–2025)

9 Living Labs in 9 countries

72 rural women innovators

Croatian LL co-leads: **Faculty of Agriculture, University of Zagreb** & **Croatian Chamber of Agriculture (HPK)**

Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Scotland, Spain, Sweden

Living Lab Croatia

WHO? 8 rural innovators + 2 co-leads an academic & practitioner + rural stakeholders

WHAT? 9 meetings during 3 years

HOW? Learning how to innovate + peer support + meeting rural stakeholders

WHY? To empower women to be recognised as local pioneers in socio-ecological innovation & to engage in policymaking

MEET THE INNOVATORS

Eight women innovators, aged 36–63, joined the Croatian LL in 2023



Birgit Boljun

ISTRIA · OLIVE FARMING

Turned an inherited olive grove into a certified organic business.

Innovation: olive oil.



Vesna Jakić

ISLAND OF CRES · TEXTILE CRAFT

Founded RUTA Wool & Design, reviving wool as a craft material.

Innovation: wool and felted textile design.



Jasminka Gršković

ISLAND OF KRK · CRAFT / WOOL

Invented lavender-scented sensory wool balls and teaches felting to children.

Innovation: woollen sensory balls, felting.



Tatjana Klepo

DALMATIA · OLIVE FARMING / SCIENCE

Protects old olive varieties and holds aromatic-plant workshops.

Innovation: aromatic-plant workshops.



Silvija Terlević

ISTRIA · LIVESTOCK

Breeds traditional Istrian cattle (Boškarin).

Innovation: horse-meat sausage.



Marijana Svetić

LIKA · FOOD / CRAFT PRODUCTION

Makes wooden lamps named after Nikola Tesla.

Innovation: wooden lamps.



Ana Kovačić

WIDER ZAGREB AREA · BERRY / FOOD

Grows berry fruits and holds farm workshops for children.

Innovation: farm workshops for children.



Ines Dundović

WIDER ZAGREB AREA · VEGETABLE FARMING

Grows organic vegetables, process veggies and runs several Veggie stores.

Innovation: farm excursions for schoolchildren.

METHODOLOGY: PARTICIPATORY, CO-LEARNING PROCESS

Living lab is way to do participatory and action research.

Each Living Lab was facilitated by an **academic + practitioner co-lead pair** (Croatian Chamber of Agriculture & Faculty of Agriculture, Zagreb), working alongside the women innovators rather than instructing them.

Nine Living Lab meetings (2023–2025) used **design thinking** as a shared innovation method — for exploring, testing and refining ideas together.

Five of nine meetings were hosted at innovators' own farms/workshops — some with overnight stays — building trust through hospitality and informal exchange between innovators, researchers and rural stakeholders.

Co-learning in practice

Innovation peer mentoring — three-year of one-to-one mentorship for women innovators

Dialogue with stakeholders (Ministry of Agriculture, decision makers, universities, researchers, regional development agencies) shaped the process together with participants.

Interactive workshops — e.g. imagining rural future

Discussions — e.g. to work together on policy gaps

Promotion of women innovators in local and social media

Extra training — eight "Educational Wednesday" sessions covered topics the women themselves requested: financial literacy, digital/social-media skills, burn-out prevention, agritourism.

A **per-diem payment** to women participants recognised their time as co-creators of knowledge

INNOVATIONS DEVELOPED BY THE CROATIAN INNOVATORS

PRODUCT & BRAND

Anti-stress wool balls scented with lavender, rosemary or laurel
"Nikola's Lamp" – table lamps from recycled oak beams, regional quality certified
Horse-meat sausages with a new origin-guarantee label
Traditional syrups and tinctures, modernised packaging

SERVICE & PROCESS

On-farm felting workshops paired with olive-oil tastings
Farm visits where schoolchildren prepare their own vegetable meals
Hiring retirees for manual craft/therapy work
New needle-felting machinery turning recycled wool into clothing/utility items

RADICAL / DISRUPTIVE

Organic wine production
"Buletin" – a wound-healing patch from a near-forgotten traditional natural recipe
Natural sunscreen oil for sensitive, fair skin

SOCIAL & NETWORK

The "Wool Road" project idea – linking LL members with other wool-based producers
Cooperation with the Women in Motion Association and Eco Women Entrepreneurs (EWE)
Co-created eco-packaging prototypes among LL members

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Roles & stakeholders

Leading a Living Lab demands leadership, empathy, facilitation and coordination skills in equal measure.
Connecting innovators with specialists at the right stage of their journey gives more tangible value than generic stakeholder events.

Running the Labs

In-person meetings at innovators' own workplaces build far deeper understanding than any other format.
A three-year timeline – not six months – was essential: it let women "take their future in hand" at their own pace.
Per-diem payment removes participation barriers and formally recognises women as co-creators.

How women innovate

Rural women innovators are **storytellers** : they learn by telling their own stories and hearing others', not by filling in forms.

Women innovators prefer to work on real-life projects rooted in their own practice, using written tasks as conversation triggers rather than paperwork.

There is a persistent disconnect between policy and support programmes and what rural women innovators actually need.

FROM LIVING LAB TO NATIONAL POLICY

Discussions within the Croatian Living Lab revealed that the national CAP Strategic Plan did not recognise women farmers as economically disadvantaged. LL participants pushed the Grass Ceiling team to propose higher support for women-managed farms to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries — citing Irish and Spanish precedent.

RESULT:

A proposal for 15% higher financial support for women-managed farms (29% of Croatian family farms) was approved by the European Commission — alongside a new national "Women in Rural Areas" working group under the CAP Network.

WHAT WOMEN AND STAKEHOLDERS NEED

What women innovators need

Emotional support and peer encouragement to reduce isolation
Horizontal (peer) and vertical (policymaker) networking, plus timely financial and digital training
Financial support to start or expand a business
Existential security first — without it, innovation is unaffordable

What the support system needs to change

Local government recognition of women as genuine partners, not an afterthought
Financial institutions and AKIS/advisory bodies offering flexibility and consistent information
Lobbying and risk-management training for rural women
Women's representation on rural and agricultural policy boards

"From individual farms to national policy — this is what happens when women innovators are given structure, flexibility, and a space to be heard."

GRASS CEILING

Gender Equality in Rural and Agricultural Innovation Systems

Horizon Europe, 2023–2025