

Strengthening Organic Seed Systems

*a Living Lab approach to
collaboration across the value
chain and within society*



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Introduction

Market- and society-supported organic and agroecology-oriented seed systems

LiveSeeding implements a Living Lab approach as a multi-stakeholder research framework for co-creation and impact. Living Labs are an effective innovation niche capable of contributing to the integration of organic and agroecology-oriented seed systems as a necessary step for food system transformation.

This booklet aims to promote organic farming from “seed to plate” and facilitate wider adoption and replicability. It offers insights and guidance on how collaboration between actors from research, practice, markets, institutions, and civil society can forge a common path towards promoting organic breeding and the organic sector. It serves both as a practical guide and a source of inspiration to navigate the complexities of the Living Lab approach and its application to the seed domain, as well as support on how Living Labs can forge and strengthen links with citizens and policy makers.

You will find key recommendations for successfully implementing Living Labs as networks of actors collaborating within a decentralized action-research approach in the context of including cultivated biodiversity in the value chain from seed to plate.



What is a Living Lab?

Agroecology-oriented Living Labs link farmers, researchers, and the actors in the agri-food sector in co-learning, co-design, monitoring, and evaluation of agroecological practices. They facilitate the testing of innovative solutions in real-life conditions, aimed at promoting agroecological principles in communities and food systems at different levels

More info on Living Labs in general: enoll.org/living-labs

How do Living Labs help to promote resilient seed systems?

In the context of organic seed systems, Living Labs can act as innovation hubs that promote the development and scaling of organic seeds and plant breeding, supporting the transition towards agroecology-oriented local food systems.

LiveSeeding Living Labs: local hubs for promoting Cultivated Diversity

The elements and recommendations presented in this booklet draw inspiration from the shared journey of the 17 LiveSeeding Living Labs across Europe to co-design solutions and become active agents of change in the integration of organic breeding in the organic value chain. Within the LiveSeeding project, these Living Labs operate as practical arenas where project strategies and tasks are implemented in real-life conditions. These Living Labs engage a wide range of actors, from farmers and seed companies to processors, policymakers and citizens, in support of organic plant breeding. They work on different types of varieties and innovations, including organic heterogeneous material (OHM), organic varieties (OV) and landraces, integrating participatory breeding methods and on-farm experimentation, as well as engaging in the development of new markets and organic food value chains.

Note: In this booklet, the term “Living Lab” refers to Living Labs that work to promote organic breeding and the organic sector.

The dimensions and actors of a Living Lab

Living Labs are real-life settings, where networks of diverse stakeholders sharing a common goal engage in transdisciplinary and participatory research approaches and co-creation processes to explore innovative solutions, testing these innovations directly in real-world contexts.

To ensure the effectiveness of these 'structures', it is essential that the following three elements are considered:

1. Inclusivity and transdisciplinarity: all actors should be able to access the process and participate actively. This inclusive approach allows for the integration of scientific and frugal knowledge, practical skills, and local experience, thereby promoting innovation;

2. Participation: appropriate, decentralised and inclusive participation of all members is essential. These approaches ensure fairness and create equal opportunities for contribution, regardless of participants' roles or backgrounds;

3. Power balance: a well-functioning co-development process requires that all voices are heard and respected. Ensuring a balanced distribution of power among participants enables the development of solutions that genuinely respond to concrete needs and specific local contexts.

When these elements are well represented, participants are more likely to take ownership of the process, thereby strengthening commitment and supporting the long-term sustainability of the outcomes.

In LiveSeeding, the 17 Living Labs engaged in workshops and cross-fertilisation activities. As a result, seven dimensions have been identified as critical for the effective development of Living Labs promoting organic seed systems and for ensuring their sustainability (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Seven dimensions identified as critical for the effective development of Living Labs promoting organic seed systems (Source: LiveSeeding)

Actors involved in LiveSeeding Living Labs



Core actors: at the centre of the Living Lab

These actors drive innovation and experimentation

- Farmers
- Organic breeders
- Farmer-breeders
- Organic seed companies
- Advisors
- Researchers



Value chain actors: to be better integrated

They connect production to markets and support product development

- Large-scale farms
- Food processing industries
- Small-scale food processors
- Retailers and supermarkets
- Traders / intermediaries
- Public and private catering
- Chefs and high-end gastronomy



Policy and society: to be actively involved

They create enabling conditions and demand and policy framework supporting organic breeding

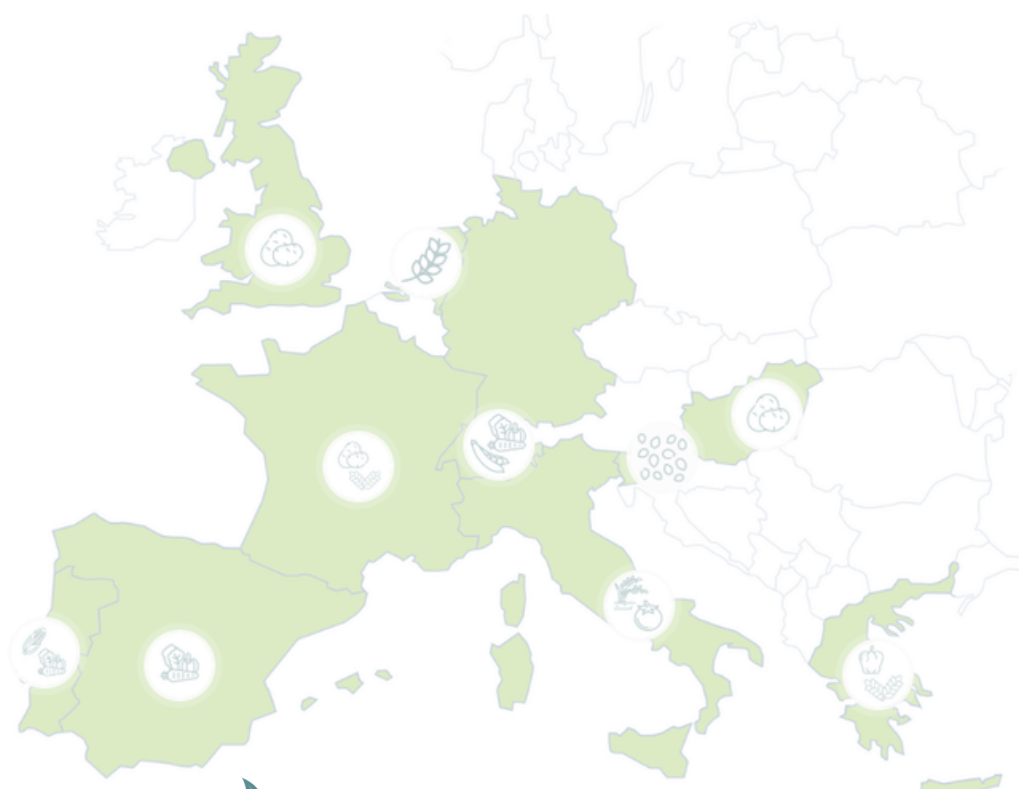
- NGOs
- Citizens / consumers
- Policy makers



Basic principles of Organic Plant Breeding

Organic plant breeding requires that every stage of the breeding process—from crossing and selection to maintenance and multiplication of plant reproductive material—is carried out under certified organic conditions. Furthermore, all applied techniques in organic breeding must be disclosed and comply with the IFOAM Position paper on Compatibility of Breeding Techniques in Organic Systems (2017) specifically excluding Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO), New Genomic Techniques (NGTs), or genetic engineering techniques transmitting isolated DNA, RNA, or proteins into the plant genome. It also prohibits cell fusion, artificially induced mutations and in-vitro culture – apart from meristem culture - or any other gene technological intervention below the cell level.

More info: European Consortium for Organic Plant Breeding (ECO-PB) eco-pb.org



Recommendations and Experiences from LiveSeeding Living Labs

Governance – Priority to efficiency, effectiveness, fairness and sustainability

Governance is a key element for the success of Living Labs. It encompasses the processes, structures, and practices that ensure an organization or system is well managed, transparent, accountable, and inclusive, enabling the identification and achievement of collective objectives. Governance remains a major challenge, often due to unclear structures, low motivation and commitment of actors, and limited time and resources, which can hinder participation and long-term success.

Tips to Enhance Good Governance:

- ▣ **Support existing Living Labs:** build on existing Living Labs where they already operate, strengthening existing governance processes and structures while avoiding duplication and overlaps. This should not prevent the creation of new Living Labs in geographies or thematic areas where gaps exist. Project-related Living Labs should be designed and implemented in ways that ensure continuity beyond the duration of the project;
- ▣ **Adapt governance to the context:** Living Labs may have diverse structures and involve different activities and stakeholders. Choose top-down, bottom-up, or sociocratic approaches depending on the Lab's size and participants' needs;
- ▣ **Build trust and shared goals:** develop a long-term vision that recognises farmers' needs while also considering the interests, needs, and challenges of all actors;
- ▣ **Be aware of power dynamics:** facilitators should recognize potential imbalances, such as control over funding or technical expertise, and facilitate participation in a fair and inclusive way;
- ▣ **Define clear roles and responsibilities:** ensure all participants understand their role within the Living Lab. Clear roles help avoid confusion, streamline decision-making, and support effective collaboration;
- ▣ **Involve a diverse mix of actors:** bringing together different types of actors improves collaboration, helps everyone understand each other's roles, and highlights the value of working together;
- ▣ **Allocate dedicated resources:** governance requires time, human resources, and funding. Assign specific resources for coordination and long-term governance activities to ensure consistent participation.

Stakeholder Engagement & Commitment – Promote participation, engagement, and commitment to ensure long-term involvement

Living Labs empower communities coming together to drive positive change. Long-term engagement can be challenged by stakeholder fatigue and limited human, time, and financial resources. Participation suffers when challenges are not clearly defined, making collective goals unclear. Engagement is further weakened by unequal sharing of resources, which reduces trust and ownership among actors.

How to encourage active participation and commitment:

- ▣ **Make it fun:** organize events such as on-farm events, fairs, workshops, open labs, and field days to actively engage the community. These activities encourage the involvement of diverse actors, including citizens, allowing them to contribute to collaborative initiatives such as culinary breeding activities. They strengthen relationships, build trust, and foster long-term commitment;

- ✦ **Promote fair resource sharing:** ensure that both resources and power are distributed equitably among all participants. This strengthens engagement, builds trust, and fosters a strong sense of ownership within the Living Lab;
- ✦ **Encourage multi-stakeholder collaboration:** create open and meaningful spaces for dialogue where all voices are heard, respected, and integrated. Avoid a purely technocratic or academic-centric approach, and prioritize practical, inclusive, and participatory solutions that empower the community and enhance active involvement.



Culinary breeding

Culinary breeding is a collaborative approach that connects plant breeders, farmers, chefs, and consumers to develop new varieties with superior flavor and organoleptic qualities. This approach bridges the gap between breeding activity in the field and lab and the dining table, ensuring that new varieties are not only resilient and well-suited for organic and agroecology-oriented farming but also desirable to consumers and fostering healthy and diverse diets. Culinary breeding actively involves citizens through a variety of engaging, and often festive, events that can be very well integrated in the context of Living Lab networks. These gatherings create spaces for people to provide direct feedback on flavour, texture, and appearance, which can inform plant breeders' decisions (Figure 2).



SeedLinked: digital hub for collaborative varieties trials and taste evaluation, allowing users to track, rate, and compare crops to identify the best-adapted seeds for their specific local conditions.

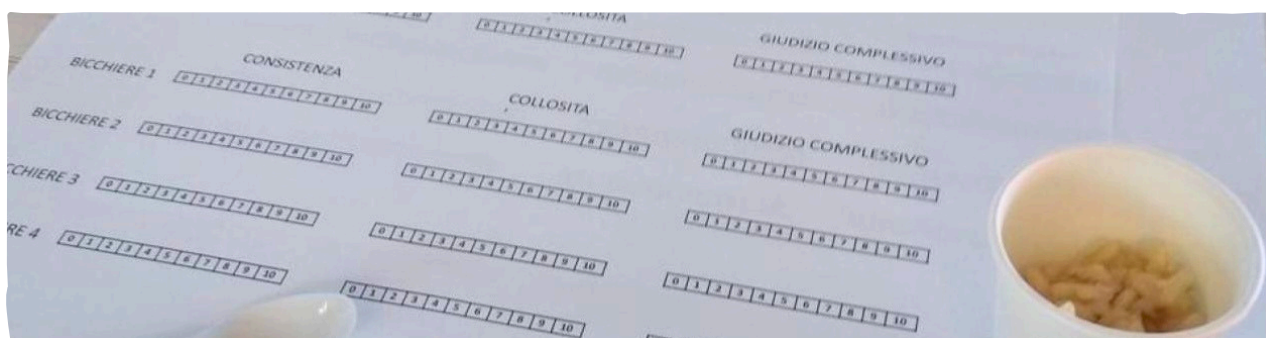


Figure 2: Example of a rice sample ready for tasting in a culinary breeding training event organized during LiveSeeding

Knowledge Exchange & Training – Facilitate peer-to-peer exchange and effective knowledge sharing

A Living Lab is a learning environment functioning as a collaborative knowledge-sharing system. However, knowledge exchange is often constrained by limited time, language barriers (including English proficiency), and a lack of truly tailored training.

Recommendations supporting knowledge exchange and training include:

- ✦ **Strengthening peer-learning mechanisms:** to disseminate knowledge effectively, both internally and externally, it is important to move beyond the one-way flow of information from researchers to farmers, which can limit learning potential. This includes farmer-to-farmer exchange, fostering alignment and mutual learning, and strengthening participants' alignment;
- ✦ **Interactive and participatory training:** training should be interactive and participatory, incorporating organic and participatory selection activities or field visits, for example Participatory Plant Breeding, as these approaches promote effective learning for farmers and researchers;
- ✦ **Cross-fertilization:** cross-visits and shared moments with other national and international experiences, involving diverse Living Lab actors, are important to improve peer-to-peer learning, support problem-solving, share good practices, and build and exchange knowledge;

- 
- ✘ **Materials and communication in local languages:** materials and communication should be provided in local languages whenever possible, as relying solely on English may limit accessibility and meaningful participation. Training should go beyond English-only delivery, being adapted to local languages and contexts and tailored to the specific needs of participants.

Financing & Infrastructure – Overcoming financial and infrastructure challenges

Financial resources, infrastructure and machinery are essential for organic breeding, as they enable farmers and Living Lab participants to manage field trials, process seeds, and implement innovations effectively. Key challenges include limited funding, high equipment costs and economic pressures on farmers, which can reduce participation and affect the long-term sustainability of participatory organic breeding initiatives.

Recommendations:

- ✘ **Ensuring financial support from national and local/regional governments:** access to public funding can help the long-term sustainability of Living Lab activities by covering operational costs and enabling continuous innovation;
- ✘ **Promoting the sharing of tools and machinery within the Living Lab network:** the collective use of equipment, such as seed cleaning machinery, reduces individual costs, optimizes resource use, and strengthens collaboration among participants;
- ✘ **Ensuring a stable supply of organic seeds:** long-term supply stability to farmers for professional cultivation beyond experimentation is essential to maintain engagement over time. When sufficient plant reproductive material is available and supply systems are reliable, actors are more likely to remain involved.

Horizontal Proliferation & Cultural Change – Enhance replicability of organic breeding practices, promoting cultural change at local and wider scales

Horizontal proliferation and cultural change in breeding approaches face key challenges, including **resistance due to conservative mindsets and fear of change**, as well as limited awareness of organic breeding practices. These factors reduce understanding, engagement, and adoption beyond the core actors.

How to increase awareness and drive cultural change among all actors?

- ✘ **Tailored communication:** Living Labs should leverage the diversity of participants to design communication strategies adapted to different audiences and profiles. Using accessible language and context-specific messaging supports cultural change and improves the dissemination and adoption of organic breeding practices;
- ✘ **Use shared databases and open tools:** citizen science platforms, such as SeedLinked, help disseminate knowledge, enhance credibility, and share evidence from field trials, quality assessments, and post-harvest analyses;
- ✘ **Leverage social media and local channels:** promote organic seeds and Living Lab activities through digital platforms and local networks to reach broader audiences and strengthen community engagement;
- ✘ **Engage Farmers First:** build trust and strong local relationships with farmers to embed the Living Lab in the territory. Farmers' involvement raises awareness, fosters long-term participation, and indirectly promotes the adoption of organic seeds;
- ✘ **Targeted awareness actions and campaigns:** promoting initiatives to increase understanding, acceptance, and demand, especially in more conservative contexts, is essential to overcome resistance and support wider adoption. These actions should target farmers, researchers, value chain actors, and citizens, as all are needed to drive cultural change.



Participatory activities by the LiveSeeding Living Labs

Within the Living Lab approach promoting organic breeding, one of the key recommendations for strengthening actors' involvement and commitment across the entire food value chain, from farmers to citizens, is the organization of participatory activities. In particular, on-farm events represent valuable opportunities to engage new actors. A day in a farm and in the field can provide opportunities for training, knowledge co-creation, and the identification and overcoming of challenges, while also raising awareness and fostering cultural change by reaching a diverse range of actors. Around 60 on-farm and demonstration events have been organised within the LiveSeeding Living Labs across the 13 countries, engaging actors from the entire food supply chain.

Research & Policy Interface – Communicate with policymakers, involve them in the innovation process, and influence policy

Living Labs provide a space where participants can actively communicate and exchange with policymakers and co-produce solutions. They help incorporate evidence into policy decisions at local, regional, and national levels. This is both a critical opportunity and a significant challenge for Living Labs.

To influence policy and integrate Living Lab results into decision-making, active engagement of policymakers and public institutions is essential.

Misalignment with existing policy frameworks is the main challenge that make scaling-up difficult.

Living Labs should align with existing policy frameworks, including biodiversity strategies, and be anchored in formal legal frameworks. This increases the uptake of Lab outcomes in decision-making.

Which tips from LiveSeeding Living Labs?

- ✦ **Plan strategic involvement of policymakers:** policymakers should be involved at appropriate stages of Living Lab development. It is important first to consolidate the Living Lab community, build a shared voice, and generate evidence before engaging policymakers in a structured and effective way;
- ✦ **Develop concrete and targeted recommendations early:** creation of specific, policy-relevant recommendations (e.g., on new variety types such as Organic Varieties & Organic Heterogeneous Material) translates research findings into actionable messages. These outputs serve as entry points for policy engagement and lay the groundwork for more structured dialogue with decision-makers over time.

Monitoring & Impact- Building a feedback loop system

Monitoring collects and analyses information to track progress, support learning, and adapt Living Lab activities, goals, and results. Living Labs often lack structured feedback, clear evaluation of results, and evidence of impact, making it hard to see outcomes and benefits.

What do we need to start integrating a feedback loop and monitoring system?

- ✦ **Appoint a neutral facilitator** focused on monitoring, with a clear mandate to support coordination, feedback collection, monitoring, and process facilitation. It is recommended that this monitoring role is independent to ensure objectivity and care in the process;
- ✦ **Use Quantitative tools** to systematically track progress in terms of results, outputs, and outcomes;
- ✦ **Qualitative & Social impact:** living Labs are also participatory processes. It is important to capture and monitor participants' perceptions, feelings, and satisfaction regarding co-creation processes, as well as network cohesion.

Living Lab on Rare Vegetables in Switzerland



LOCATION	Zurich region, Swiss Midlands (North of the Alps).
MAIN CROPS	Vegetables of all species, including rare crops like salsify.
MAIN FARMING PRACTICES	Mainly organic farmers; some producers use permaculture or regenerative agriculture.
DESCRIPTION	ProSpecieRara is a seed-saving NGO founded in 1982, preserving genetic resources and sharing know-how with gardeners, farmers, and chefs. Its work evolved from conserving rare varieties to spreading knowledge and integrating varieties into local agroecological contexts.
GOAL	To unlock rare vegetable varieties for specific growing systems and markets, with the help of participatory breeding projects, by testing the same varieties among different farming systems and marketing systems, by promoting varieties via tasting workshops to chefs and market partners; Encourage direct sellers and restaurants to adopt rare varieties, building on customer feedback, and increase the use of the PSR label.
ACTORS INVOLVED	Seed Saver organisation (ProSpecieRara); 400 seed savers; research institutions (FiBL, HAFL); organic seed & breeding company (Sativa Rheinau). Farmers & nurseries; retailers (Coop); commercial companies (Terraviva, Bio Partner Schweiz). Restaurants & chefs; gardeners, media, and citizens/consumers.
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	Participatory selection, tasting workshops, networking, and ring tests across multiple farms (Figure 3 & 4)
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE	Workshops, online variety database, PSR magazines, media interviews, and consulting with FiBL.
COMMUNICATION	PSR label is the main communication mean. It promotes sustainability in the products sold at Coop.ch supermarkets. Farmers use it occasionally for direct sales. At the moment, restaurants use it rarely, and almost never on menus.
MAIN RESULTS	Years of selection efforts to constitute new niche vegetable varieties, now reaching the market, including supermarkets.



Figure 3: Samples of rare root vegetables such as salsify available for public tasting at a ProSpecieRara market, with the aim of reviving interest in neglected crops (Image: ProSpecieRara)



Figure 4: Samples of three radish varieties grown throughout Switzerland and at various altitudes in 2025 as part of a participatory breeding project run by ProSpecieRara (Image: ProSpecieRara)



Living Lab Resilient Rice in Italy



LOCATION	Piedmont (Italy), Continental Europe, wet plains.
MAIN CROPS	Rice is the main crop, with legumes and minor cereals (e.g. millet) in rotation.
MAIN FARMING PRACTICES	All farms are organically managed; some also apply agroforestry practices.
DESCRIPTION	The “Resilient Rice” Living Lab, led by the RSR (Rete Semi Rurali ETS) and the Piedmont Organic Rice District, supports the transition to more sustainable and diversified rice systems. It focuses on developing and adapting diverse rice varieties (including Organic Heterogeneous Material) to local conditions through participatory, on-farm research.
GOAL	Strengthen the use of organic seeds through collaboration between farmers and seed providers. Support research on organic heterogeneous materials and their production and marketing within organic value chains and in the rice sector.
ACTORS INVOLVED	Farmers’ associations: Piedmont Organic Rice District (14 rice farms) and Polycolturae (6 farms). Seed enterprise (soc. agr. Una Garlanda dei F.lli Stocchi & c.); consumer communities; Universities (Turin, Milan); Rete Semi Rurali ETS (Civil Society Organization and Research Organization)
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	Farmer meetings, shared meals, participatory evaluations, farm visits, open days, Biodistrict festivals, and policy events.
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE	Participatory evaluations, farm exchanges, panel tests, and international workshops/conferences.
COMMUNICATION	The RSR label for OHM (Figure 6) is applied to the final product—in this case, the rice packet—before it is sold through alternative food distribution channels (Figure 7 & Figure 8).
MAIN RESULTS	Constitute the first three dynamic rice populations (OHM) - Medium, Long A, medium, and short-grain rice - resulting from participatory plant breeding, culinary breeding, and citizen science for culinary assessment, and sell them through alternative food networks.



Figure 5: Field visit to the “Una garlanda” farm, part of the Resilient Rice Living Lab, during the third Annual Meeting (2024) in Novarello (Italy)



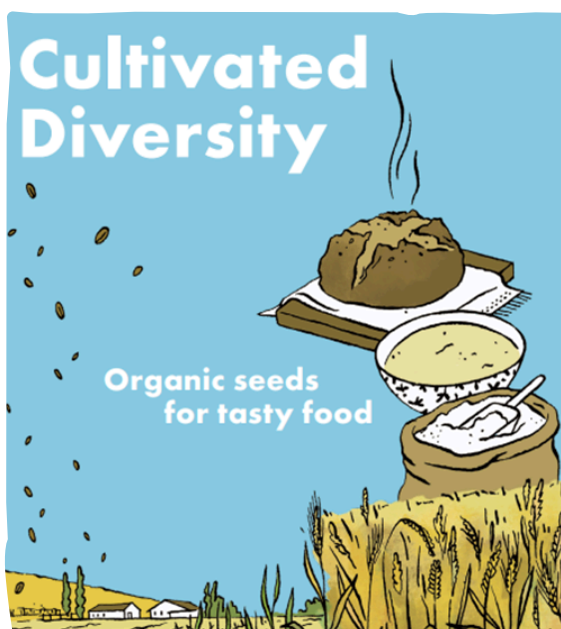
Figure 6: Package of ‘Riso Resiliente’ (a medium-grain rice population), available in alternative food outlets

Living Labs as a network to engage citizens and disseminate new narratives about the benefits of organic seed systems for society

There is a persistent knowledge gap among citizens regarding agrobiodiversity management, and an even greater gap with respect to the benefits of organic plant breeding and organic varieties for transforming the food system.

When communicating with consumer-citizens, it is essential to focus on the following key elements:

- A clear explanation of what is meant by cultivated biodiversity;
- The motivations for organic breeding, based on demonstrated benefits;
- The importance of local adaptation and climate resilience;
- Flavor and nutritional value related characteristics of the developed varieties;
- Community building and role of consumers along the value chain to promote cultivated diversity in the field;
- Narratives based on practical examples, such as varieties developed by the local Living Lab, help convey the message directly.



A flyer has been developed to raise public awareness and communicate information about organic breeding, and can be used during Living Lab events to effectively communicate their work (Figure 7).

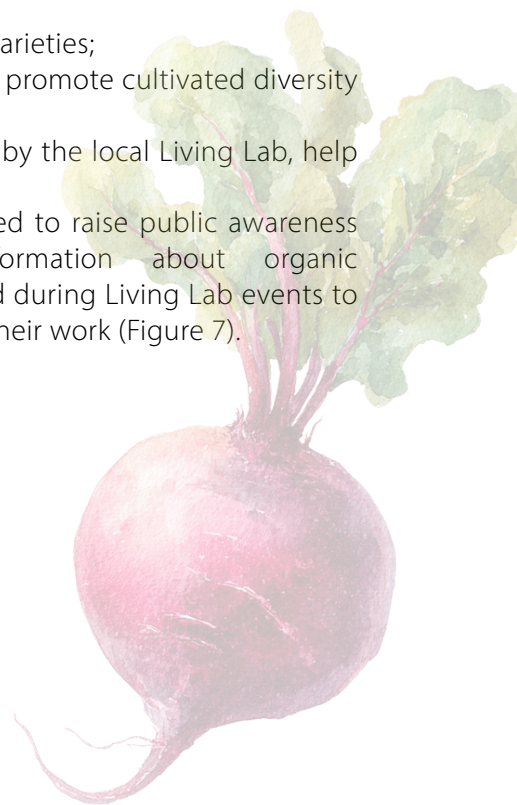


Figure 7: Cover page of the flyer developed to communicate diversity, climate resilience and local adaptation to citizens.



In-person communication with citizens during Living Lab events

In-person communication moments are important for introducing and strengthening new narratives around organic breeding, as well as for spreading knowledge and raising awareness.

In-person knowledge exchange (e.g. at tasting stands in shops, farmers' markets, fairs, demonstration days, or Living Lab events), where consumer-citizens are most likely to become aware of the important yet difficult-to-communicate topic of cultivated diversity, should be prioritised.

Living Labs can host on-farm demo-events, including workshops, field days, recipe-sharing sessions, culinary breeding activities, and tasting events, where the public can sample new and in-development plant varieties. These face-to-face events represent valuable opportunities to communicate the added value of "special" varieties and organic breeding in a direct and engaging way. In addition, these participatory moments enable citizens to become active contributors to the food system, helping to shape the development of crops that are both delicious and sustainable.

Local food policies as an entry point for Living Labs to engage with policymakers

LiveSeeding has significantly advanced pathways to integrate cultivated biodiversity into local food policies, filling a major gap: the marginalisation of cultivated biodiversity within the urban agenda and local food policies. This work was carried out as part of the integration and engagement of citizens, cities and local authorities in supporting organic breeding along the entire supply chain.

During LiveSeeding project, several actors in the organic and agroecology oriented seed networks, citizens, civil society, and local authorities, gathered through workshops (including one side event at the 11th Governing Body meeting of the FAO International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture in Lima in December 2025), webinars with Milano Urban Food Policy Pact cities, and the fully dedicated event **1st European Symposium “Fostering Cultivated Biodiversity through Local Food Policies”** (Granollers, Spain, April 2025), around the topic on how to include cultivated diversity in food policies.

This process resulted in the Manifesto “Cultivated Biodiversity and Local Food Policies,” which sets out 32 strategic actions to support municipalities in integrating cultivated biodiversity into their local public policies, as well as a Manual presenting 32 practical examples of actions fully implemented by European municipalities (Figure 8).

These initiatives can significantly support and inspire the work of your Living Lab and help to strengthen the interface between participatory research, policy and civil society by:

- ✎ providing clear recommendations, actions and strategies designed to support cultivated biodiversity, promoting the involvement and commitment of policymakers and local authorities in these spaces;
- ✎ promoting policy and institutional frameworks that are aligned with the work of Living Labs, focused on organic selection and the organic supply chain.



Figure 8: Manifesto and Manual supporting agroecology-oriented local policies



The Manifesto and the Manual offer both inspiration and a practical starting point for promoting cultivated biodiversity, guiding and inspiring you to define activities, engage with local authorities and build your local food system.

Further reading

Want to explore this topic further? In this section you will find a selection of related resources. Click on any link to access the full resource. ✎



DELIVERABLES

[Report on communication strategies, new narratives and science-based data on the ecological, societal and economic benefits of organic breeding \(Deliverable 6.1\).](#)

[Manual on the Integration of Cultivated Biodiversity in Local Organic and Agroecology-Oriented Food Policies \(Deliverable 6.2\).](#)

[Report on key factors of success for value chain and society-supported organic plant breeding \(Deliverable 6.3\).](#)

[Label based marketing strategies for food products derived from OHM and OV's \(Deliverable 6.4\).](#)

[A compiled report from on-farm demonstration, trainings and knowledge sharing events \(Deliverable 6.5\).](#)



POLICY DOCUMENTS

[Manifesto "Cultivated Biodiversity and Local Food Policies"](#) (available in several languages)

[Policy Brief - Enhancing cultivated biodiversity through Food policies in European food systems](#)



DISSEMINATION TOOLS

[Cultivated Diversity - Organic seeds for tasty food \(Dissemination flyer for citizens, available in several languages\).](#)



[All materials from the LiveSeeding project.](#)

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