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Exploring the relationship between living labs and citizen science

Spela Zalokar, Bertille Auvray, Nehis Osagie

The roundtable session held on 3 March 2026, explored the dynamic intersection between citizen science and Living Labs, focusing on how these two methodologies can be synergistically applied to foster innovation and inclusive societal development.

The session was facilitated by Spela Zalokar and Bertille Auvray from the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) and Nehis Osagie from WAAG FutureLab, alongside researchers:

- **Isayvani Naicker (Evisights)**: "Evidence and Insights working with Citizen Science Networks and Living Labs for building Actionable Policies within Sustainable, Collaborative, and Creative Innovation ecosystems", representing the project: ENFORCE.
- **Tudose Nicu Constantin & Mirabela Marin (National Institute for Research and Development in Forestry "Marin Drăcea")**: "From Monitoring to Action: How Citizen Science is Transforming Forest Management", representing the project: ENFORCE.
- **Pr. Cristian Ioja (University of Bucharest, Center for Environmental Research)**: "From Living Labs to Citizen Science: Bridging Innovation for Climate Adaptation in Metropolitan Areas", representing the project: CARMINE and ScienceUs.
- **Nikki Jepkema, Amy Jeschke & Lieke Dalstra (Hanze University of Applied Sciences)**: "Three Days Inside: Navigating Dilemmas of Reciprocity, Ethics, and Trust when Embedding Citizen Science in Living Labs", representing the project: Bridge2Health.
- **Sorin Cheval (National Meteorological Administration)**: "Co-Creating Climate Services: Lessons from Citizen Science and Stakeholder Engagement Across Europe", representing the project: CARMINE, CrossEU and OptFor-EU.
- **Rosa Arias (Science for Change)**: "The marriage between Living Lab and citizen science: Applied insights and future directions", representing the project: SPOON. Arias presented the Policy Brief on "The Marriage of Citizen Science and Living Labs" accessible at: https://catedrauabcruilla.cvc.uab.es/the-marriage-of-citizen-science-and-living-labs/

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Discussion points

The Link Between Living Labs and Citizen Science, and Benefits of Combining Both Approaches

Living Labs and citizen science are complementary approaches that both place citizens as active drivers of research and innovation. Living Labs provide structured methodology, governance, and innovation-oriented tools, while citizen science brings public engagement, inclusive data collection, and direct community knowledge. Combined, they benefit all stakeholder groups: citizens gain greater participation and access to actionable data; researchers access more diverse datasets and more functional co-created tools; policymakers receive better-informed regulations and increased institutional trust; industry can "test before invest"; and the broader ecosystem gains dynamic regulatory learning and safe experimental settings. Notably, Decision Support Systems co-developed with high citizen engagement were consistently more operational than those built with less involvement.

Ethical Dilemmas

Upfront informed consent requirements can undermine the trust-building that makes genuine community engagement possible. Discussion threads included the power imbalance between researchers and communities, the cultural sensitivity required around consent (in some contexts, signing forms signals distrust rather than protection), and the emergence of creative alternatives such as video-based or illustrated consent documents. A case study from Italy further illustrated how the "living lab" label itself caused distress, residents near a landfill associated "lab" with medical testing, leading the team to reframe the space as a "participatory arena."

Scalability and the Living Lab as an Upscaling Mechanism

Scaling citizen science across cultural or national contexts is consistently harder than expected. Some initiatives are too locally rooted to replicate elsewhere, and this is not a failure. Where scaling is the goal, living lab structures offer a promising vehicle through their multi-stakeholder ecosystems and governance scaffolding. Co-created digital tools like DSSs give teams something concrete to bring to new communities. Post-project sustainability remains a structural challenge, particularly for NGO-hosted labs with limited resources.

Managing Conflict and Ensuring Equitable Participation

In many cases, conflict already exists before researchers arrive. The project team's role is mediator, and who is approached first matters, as that group will be perceived as the researchers' ally by others. Power hierarchies also persist inside the room: a student will not speak freely in front of their teacher; a clinic worker will not contradict a representative of their funding organisation. Practical strategies discussed included holding separate conversations before joint sessions, creating smaller safe spaces, grounding discussion in shared regulatory frameworks, and embedding legal expertise in high-conflict settings.

Language, Labels, and Accessibility

Jargon like "living lab," "quadruple helix," or "co-creation" can alienate the very people these approaches aim to empower. Speakers consistently recommended using plain language centred on the shared problem and letting the methodology follow.

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Key takeaways

01 **Living Labs and Citizen Science: combine both approaches by design, not by accident.** Living Labs provide the structure, governance, and multi-stakeholder infrastructure, while citizen science brings the inclusive data collection, community knowledge, and engagement methodology. Neither approach is fully complete without the other, citizen science lacks the institutional power to drive change, while living labs risk losing genuine citizen perspective without it.

02 **Citizen engagement improves research quality: invest in engagement early, it pays off in output quality**. Projects that invested heavily in co-creation and citizen involvement consistently produced more functional, operational outputs (particularly DSSs) than those that didn't. Genuine engagement is not just an ethical nice-to-have; it produces measurably better results.

03 **Ethical processes need to fit the community, not the other way around.** Standard consent and ethics procedures can actively undermine the trust-building that makes community research possible. Researchers hold significant power, and with that comes the responsibility to be creative and culturally sensitive, using visual consents, video formats, or iterative consent processes, while remaining transparent about what they can and cannot offer communities.

04 **Scaling up is harder than it looks, and not always the right goal: be honest about what scaling requires.** Transferring a citizen science project from one cultural or national context to another is consistently more difficult than expected. Not every project should scale and recognising that is not a failure. Where scaling is the goal, living lab structures (with their institutional links and governance) can serve as an effective vehicle, alongside tangible tools like co-created digital platforms that give new communities something concrete to engage with.

05 **Language and labels matter enormously: lead with the problem, not the methodology.** Jargon can be confusing. The most effective practitioners communicate in plain terms around shared problems, build relationships over time, and let the methodology follow, rather than leading with frameworks that mean little outside academic circles.

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