EELAP
Enriching European landscapes with agroecological practices

Interview with project coordinator Rūta Žulpaitė (EURAF, France)

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CONTEXT AND GOALS

Which crops and farming systems do you work with, and what key challenges are you addressing?

We are not focusing on specific crops. Within the consortium, we work in both arable and grassland regions, looking at how agroforestry can accelerate the transition towards agroecology, and how agroecological principles can help improve existing systems.

More broadly, the project aims to develop and strengthen agroforestry across the European continent, taking into account the different realities of each country.

The conditions and contexts we work in are quite diverse. For example, in Germany, agroforestry and agroecology are better known and benefit from robust support systems. But in other countries, such as Slovenia, Slovakia, and Hungary, these approaches are less prevalent and are only now gaining traction. In all cases, we adapt our work to the regional and territorial context to support the uptake of agroecological principles.

Who are your main stakeholders, and how do their needs shape the project? How are farmers and local stakeholders involved?

We engage a wide range of stakeholders, mainly through our living labs. Depending on the country, these include farmers, foresters, local authorities, agribusinesses, NGOs, academia, some living labs are starting from scratch, and the idea is to build a stable group while gradually involving more actors through workshops, activities, consultations, interviews, and surveys. We rely heavily on input from local actors.

Since the project started recently, we are focusing on developing the right strategies with local stakeholders and identifying shared challenges and priorities. We work at the "landscape scale" although this concept varies from one living lab to another.

METHODS AND INNOVATION

What new or creative approaches have you used to engage stakeholders and adapt to local conditions?

This is one of our biggest challenges: finding the right balance between a meta-strategy agreed on by all partners and the flexibility needed to adapt to local needs. We give partners space to determine what works best for their communities and practitioners. Each living lab will develop its actions together with local actors.

What challenges have you faced so far, and how are you dealing with them?

One major challenge is defining what agroecology means in different contexts. We need time to align our understanding and find the right definitions. Each partner approaches the topic differently, but we need a shared understanding, expressed in language that stakeholders can relate to and that highlights the benefits for them. Working with agroecology and agroforestry sometimes means navigating varying strategies, and we are gradually trying to highlight and strengthen the connections between the two. Education will be a key element. It takes time and progress is slow, but that allows us to have deeper discussions and ensure

that the impact goes beyond the project itself. The project is just the starting point.

EARLY INSIGHTS

What early results or surprises have emerged since the project started?

Not so many results yet as the project started recently. But we are glad to see already really positive interest from partners and the LLs stakeholders. They all want to learn from each other. This is a very good signal.

How are local stakeholders responding?

There is clear interest, although it still depends very much on the local strategies of each living lab. Some follow a more structured model with regular meetings, workshops, and events, while others use more hybrid methods. Overall, engagement is good, and things are just getting started. However, several partners, especially living lab facilitators, mention that farmers can feel tired of constant projects and activities, particularly in countries where they more frequent, such as Germany. This means we need to find new ways to approach and engage stakeholders, including farmers.

It is important to demonstrate concrete benefits. We are still working on finding the right approach, learning how to present agroforestry to farmers. We aim to show its potential as a gateway into agroecology, highlighting that while the two aren't identical, agroforestry thrives when rooted in agroecological principles and a strong social dimension. This will be something we share at the end of the project.

VISION AND ADVICE

What is your long-term vision for agroecology in your field?

As a project, we still need to define a shared vision. This vision should be relevant in different contexts and countries such as Slovakia, Ireland, and Germany.

As coordinator, I want to bring agroforestry closer to agroecological principles and help accelerate this transformation at local, regional, and national levels. I want to highlight the links between agroforestry, climate change mitigation, and biodiversity restoration. And this must be done democratically and collectively.

What advice would you give to future project coordinators?

It is crucial to align on the project's objectives from the very beginning, to define and co-create them together. When the project is designed collectively, it becomes much easier to work together from the start, and it saves a lot of time.

We should strive to expand our reach beyond the typical agroecology circles. By engaging more different stakeholders, we can broaden our impact and deliver greater value to a wider range of local communities.

Enriching European Landscapes with Agroecological Practices

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

Project title: EELAP (Enriching European landscapes with agroecological practices)

Topic: agroforestry practices

Start date: 01/05/2025

Coordinator: EURAF (European Agroforestry Federation), France

Number of partners and Living Labs: consortium of 8 organisations, including 6 LLs

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