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Concept Paper

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# Keeping It Real: Insights from a Sport-Based Living Lab

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## Topic

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# Keeping It Real: Insights from a Sport-Based Living Lab

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**Abstract:** Sport for development (SFD) initiatives have faced numerous criticisms around the focus on individual-level (micro) outcomes and lack of integration at the community (meso) and structural (macro) levels. As a result, there is growing recognition that programmes need to find ways to work with and engage a wide range of community members and stakeholders through more inclusive, participatory approaches. One such approach is known as Living Labs. In the following conceptual article, we present the Sport and Social Cohesion Lab (SSCL) project, which implemented a Living Lab approach in various sport-based programmes from four different European countries. The main components of the Living Lab framework are presented, and practical insights are derived from the project. In addition, the unique and sometimes critical role of sport is reflected upon in relation to the Living Lab context. Through this, this article provides practitioners and academics with potential building blocks to implement Living Labs and/or embed participatory approaches in sport and physical activity contexts and social settings more generally.

**Keywords:** sport for development; social cohesion; social inclusion; participation; participatory programming; participatory research; governance

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, sport and physical activity have been increasingly recognised and implemented as tools to promote social development in neighbourhoods, cities, and communities across Europe and globally. As a result, numerous programmes have emerged that seek to promote social development through a variety of sport-based approaches [1,2]. However, along with this growth, this field—known as sport for development (SFD)—has

encountered criticisms. For one, there are concerns that programmes focus too strongly on individual-level outcomes, ignoring or obscuring the systemic factors that may limit social development in the first place [3]. Similarly, there has been criticism that programmes do not take sufficient account of local contexts, resulting in misaligned programmes that do not readily meet the needs, expectations or views of practitioners, stakeholders and, most importantly, participants within the community [4]. This critique is even more prevalent in contexts involving so-called vulnerable or marginalised groups, who are often subjected to top-down programming that reproduces existing power structures as opposed to having a meaningful voice within their own development [5,6].

Alongside these critical analyses, there is growing recognition that programmes need to move beyond interventions that focus solely on the individual level and instead find ways to work with and engage a wide range of community members and stakeholders [5,7]. The belief is that such inclusive, participatory approaches allow programmes to respond to community needs, foster engagement, and achieve more sustainable outcomes by working at both the individual and institutional levels. As a result, several related participatory approaches have been developed and implemented in fields such as community or international development, and adapted within SFD, under various banners, such as co-creation, co-production, participatory programming and participatory action research [8–10].

Another similar approach is known as Living Labs. Living Labs are characterised by multi-stakeholder involvement, user engagement, innovation and co-creation in a real-life settings [11], and they offer a more applied or practice-oriented approach to address some of the criticisms levied against SFD programmes. Against this background, the Sport for Social Cohesion Lab (SSCL) project was designed to implement a Living Lab approach within five Sport for Social Cohesion programmes in four different European countries. This approach was chosen to help the programmes to directly engage with programme participants, to develop an understanding of the elements that promote social cohesion in a sport setting, and to co-create activities and tools to explore, support and understand social cohesion within these communities.

In the following conceptual article, we present the SSCL project and the Living Lab framework developed within the project. From this, we further delve into the different components of our framework and offer practical insights derived from our three-year project. As such, we aim to provide other practitioners and academics with potential first building blocks to implement Living Labs in sport and physical activity contexts, as well as in social settings more generally. With this context in mind, this piece should not be understood as a purely academic piece but rather as a framework and associated insights derived from a mix of research, experience and reflection gathered from over three years of project work.

Moving forward, our piece progresses in three steps. First, we will provide a more detailed overview of the SSCL projects and its goals. Afterwards, we will introduce the project's Living Lab framework and offer experiential insights from our work. Finally, we will critically reflect on the project and our framework, concluding with recommendations for future practice and research.

## 2. The Sport and Social Cohesion Lab (SSCL) Project

Featuring a consortium of ten partners (four universities, four sport-based NGOs and two international networks), which are presented in Table 1, the SSCL project aimed to increase social cohesion in diverse urban contexts by adopting a participatory Living Lab approach within five organisations across four European countries. As highlighted above, Living Labs are a multi-method design and research methodology for developing approaches in co-creation with public, non-profit, and private stakeholders [11,12] and can potentially help to address some of the criticisms levied against SFD.

**Table 1.** Overview of the partners in the SSCL project.

Partner	Location	Type	Role
German Sport University Cologne	Cologne, Germany	University	Coordinator Support Bochum Living Lab
In Safe Hands e.V.	Bochum, Germany	NGO	Lead Bochum Living Lab
The Hague University of Applied Sciences	The Hague, Netherlands	University	Lead Hague Living Lab Support Den Bosch Living Lab
ISA	Den Bosch, Netherlands	NGO	Lead Den Bosch Living Lab
Munster Technological University	Tralee, Ireland	University	Support Dublin Living Lab
Sport Against Racism Ireland	Dublin, Ireland	NGO	Lead Dublin Living Lab
Palacky University Olomouc	Olomouc, Czech Republic	University	Support Olomouc Living Lab
Fotbal pro Rozvoj	Prague, Czech Republic	NGO	Lead Olomouc Living Lab
The International Platform on Sport and Development ( <a href="http://sportanddev.org">sportanddev.org</a> )	Copenhagen, Denmark	International Network	Support Project Dissemination
European Network of Sport Education	Vienna, Austria	International Network	Support Project Dissemination

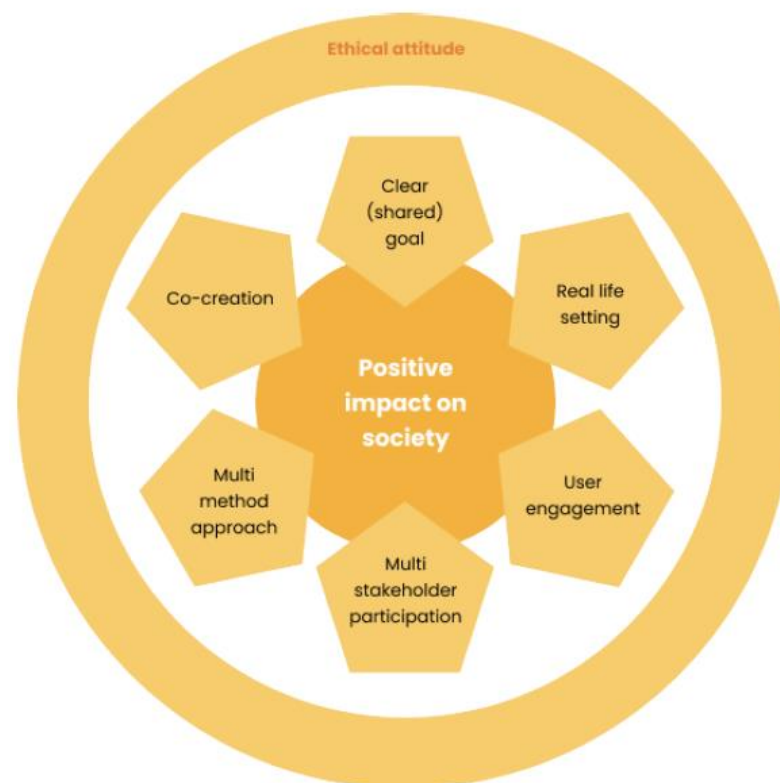
Formally defined as “open innovation ecosystems in real-life environments using iterative feedback processes throughout a lifecycle approach of an innovation to create sustainable impact” [11], the definition of Living Labs nonetheless remains varied and contested [12,13]. Building on previous work in the sporting context, we understood Living Labs to be both a physical location and a collaborative approach whereby different parties test and implement solutions in a real-life setting [14]. In that sense, Living Labs can be understood as sharing many characteristics with Participatory Action Research (PAR), as they focus on co-created solutions, power sharing and the development of tangible actions [15]. In contrast with PAR, however, there is no explicit focus on research or the integration of researchers.

Our consortium included five organisations who collaboratively designed and implemented Living Lab activities within their local contexts. In Dublin, Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI), which has existed for over 20 years, focuses on combating racism, challenging discrimination, promoting cultural integration, and providing opportunities to marginalised communities, including socio-economically disadvantaged youth, refugees, and immigrants. Their Living Lab facilitated after-school sport for children in North-east inner-city Dublin, one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Ireland. In Bochum, Germany, in Safe Hands (ISH) works towards an appreciative intercultural coexistence. Working directly in local primary schools, ISH uses sport and exercise as a medium to foster the emotional, social, and intercultural competences of school children, primarily those between 6 and 10 years old. In the Czech Republic, Fotbal pro Rozvoj (FpR; in English, Football for Development) has developed non-formal tools for education through football and collaborates with social workers to develop the social skills of youth from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who attend activities at so-called drop-in centres. In Den Bosch, the International Sports Alliance (ISA) integrated their Living Lab activities within their SheGotGame programming, which focuses on teenage girls from the local community who are trained as young leaders and who can then independently facilitate sport activities for other teenage girls. Finally, the Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS) focused its Living Lab on the neighbourhood of Morgenstond. Working with the local municipality, community members and other stakeholders, the Lab concentrates on offering sport and leisure activities to groups that typically do not have opportunities to access sport or physical activity.

Overall, these organisations represented significantly different settings, thus allowing the project to gather insights and experiences from different common SFD environments. In addition, in each country, one university partner was present to support the Living Lab and assist in the multi-method collection of feedback from different stakeholders. Furthermore, the project was built on a logical sequence of outputs, whereby the SSCL project began by initially mapping the needs and situations of the project partners as well as other organisations in Europe [16], and then later integrated these findings into a first Living Lab Framework to guide activities in each setting. Through the data and experiences collected, the framework was refined and integrated into a Living Lab Toolkit, which features direct insights and experiences from the five Living Labs [17]. The results from these different outputs, especially the aforementioned toolkit, form the basis of this conceptual article.

### 3. The SSCL Living Lab Framework

Living Labs represent a practical, multi-stakeholder approach aimed at innovation and co-creation in real-life settings [12,18]. However, the exact definition, structure and objectives of a Living Lab may change slightly depending on the context of the lab. For example, many Living Labs tend to focus on product development and prototyping rather than tackling social topics [18]. Therefore, for the SSCL project, we felt it was important to clarify and develop the components within our Living Labs to suit the unique context and goals of our project. To do so, we built on existing work concerning Living Labs [12,14,18] as well as our consortium's experiences delivering sport-based Living Labs. Focus groups with local stakeholders, a pan-European survey, informal interviews, regular project meetings, and a logbook tracking activities within each national setting directly fed into the development and conceptualisation of our Living Lab framework. From this, we identified eight key components within our Living Labs, as illustrated in Figure 1. In particular, a new insight and an addition to the framework is the ethical attitude that supports all the components and which we describe further below (see also Breed et al. [19]).



**Figure 1.** Main components of a Living Lab. Developed by Breed et al. [19] (based on Cobussen et al. [14] and Malmber et al. [18]).

Central to this framework is a positive impact on society, be it through working towards the goal identified by stakeholders in the Living Lab [20] or through the process of inclusively engaging different members of the community. Indeed, evidence suggests that the act of engaging in participatory or co-creation processes can facilitate feelings of ownership and empowerment [21]. To support this positive impact, the other components identify the individuals, values and approaches anchoring the Living Lab, including a real-life setting, user engagement, multi-stakeholder participation, a multi-method approach, co-creation, and a clear, shared goal. Underpinning these components is an ethical attitude that animates each of the individual components. In the following sub-sections, we provide more comprehensive definitions of these surrounding components, as well as examples and insights from our experience within the SSCL project.

### 3.1. Ethical Attitude

Our framework stresses the need for ongoing reflection and an ethical attitude within the Living Lab context. As such, this is an overarching component that encircles all the other components within our framework. It is not that Living Labs are inherently at risk of being unethical. Rather, we recognise that ethics are involved in any social process and are particularly important and relevant in Living Labs, where there may be significant power differentials between stakeholders. For instance, within our various settings, there were at times important power disparities between community members from vulnerable groups and the sponsors or institutions funding the programming.

As such, an ethical attitude implies constant reflection on the whole collaboration and activities. In other words, every step of the Living Lab should be underpinned by reflection and “ethics work”. Sarah Banks [22] describes ethics work as the effort to identify ethical issues and power processes and to reflect on one’s own position and that of others. Thus, this involves moving beyond mere formal (university) guidelines and is instead a process iteratively negotiated throughout the Living Lab [23]. For example, in Living Labs featuring professionals or academics, accepting the knowledge and ways of knowing of other groups can challenge certain perceived standards and norms, and thus, it requires a high level of self-reflection, transparency, reciprocity, and trust. Throughout the SSCL project, we attempted to develop tools to promote such reflection, including developing key reflection questions for each Living Lab component, as well as developing tools to diarise activities and initiate discussions with stakeholders. However, despite our best efforts, issues of power relations remained ever-present through the SSCL project.

### 3.2. Clear and Shared Goal

In our framework, at its core, a Living Lab is centred around a specific local challenge or goal identified by community members and stakeholders in a real-world setting. This goal, however, is not static but rather a dynamic and iterative component that may change or evolve over time. This also means that identifying this goal is not something that can merely be achieved through a handful of interviews or a survey. Identifying a clear, shared goal involves trust, commitment and long-term collaboration between different stakeholders and community members.

Fellow local (social) organisations can particularly help to facilitate partnerships and connections to relevant stakeholders. Often, these organisations have a much better understanding of the local context, including community needs, cultures, and practices. They can provide insight into the challenges and opportunities that exist in the area and can play a vital role in defining a community’s goals and needs. Yet, local organisations are not merely service providers that potential Living Labs can approach as needed. Many social and participation-oriented projects suffer from short-term and top-down approaches, leaving local organisations with a feeling that external stakeholders merely come to take what they need and do not meaningfully engage with the community in a long-term, sustained fashion [24]. Indeed, many projects in SFD and beyond have been critiqued for employing participatory approaches in a mere check-box fashion. In turn, this can breed



a lack of trust and familiarity between stakeholders, which can make it difficult to work towards a clear and shared goal. For example, in ISA's initial attempts to set up their Living Lab, there was too little contact with local partners and community members, making it difficult for the organisation to establish a meaningful shared goal and find an adequate setting to host activities. Eventually, the organisation shifted its planned Living Lab to a location already hosting ISA activities, allowing the organisation to directly engage with and build on existing networks and relationships.

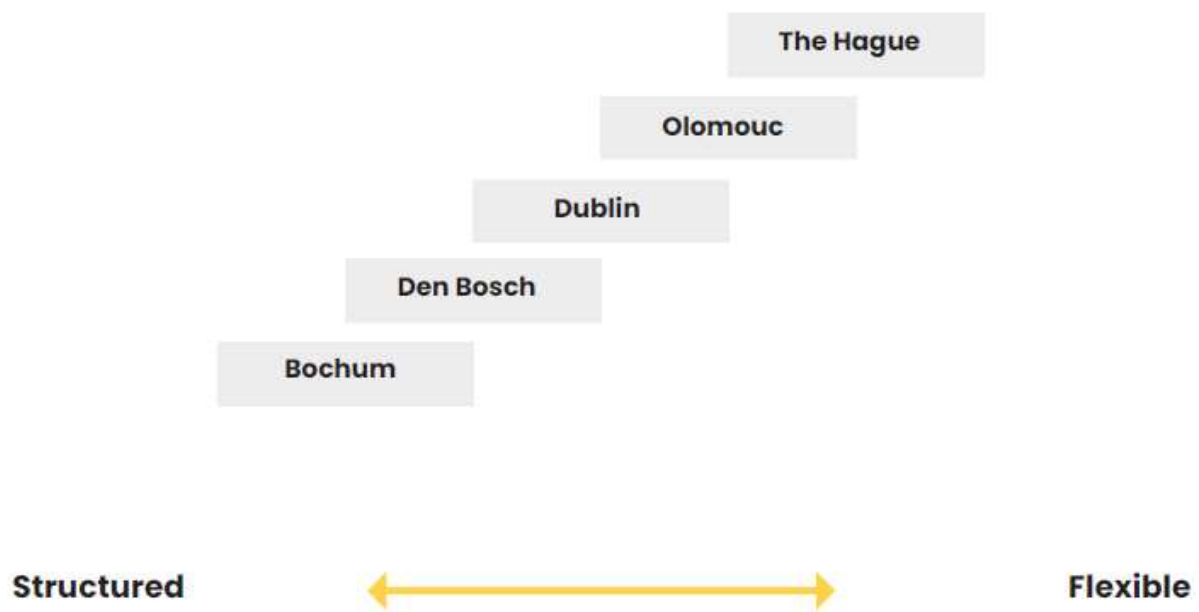
This potential tension makes it crucial that, before embarking on activities, organisations spend sufficient time building trust with communities and local organisations. This can be achieved with a community engagement strategy—e.g., by having a structured presence in the community, planning partner meetings with local organisations, being transparent about motivations, listening to their ideas and regularly sharing information about potential Living Lab activities. Informal participation in other community events is also a way to obtain a feel for the organisations and the community and to become further embedded in local life.

### 3.3. Real-Life Setting

Within our framework, we define a real-life setting as a setting in a specific geographic area where the goal definition and subsequent actions are a joint, multi-stakeholder responsibility. In other words, similar to other authors, we consider a Living Lab to be both place-based and place-responsive [12]. Thus, this contrasts with other forms of “test” or “field” labs where the setting is controlled, user engagement is narrower, and decision-making is usually top-down [25]. The real-life setting means that we try to understand and work on a specific challenge together with different organisations and community members, while also being mindful of the inherent flexibility and constraints that exist within each setting. Some settings may allow end-users and stakeholders to develop activities more flexibly, while others may impose inherent restrictions relating to time, location, and materials.

For example, reflecting on the settings of our five Living Labs, there was significant variability in the environments, opportunities, and constraints across the separate locations. For instance, the THUAS Living Lab was directly embedded in the Hague municipality, giving it the flexibility to approach partners and engage with different stakeholders to co-create and implement activities with a relatively high degree of freedom. In contrast, In Safe Hands was rooted directly within a school context. This was certainly advantageous as it allowed the organisation regular, scheduled, and consistent contact with participants and educators. However, this also meant that the programme was bound to the physical and temporal constraints of the school and that engagement with further stakeholders could be limited. During the project, we reflected on these various settings and, as shown in Figure 2, situated our Living Labs along a continuum of more structured to more flexible. Here, we understand more structured contexts as those having more rigidly defined conditions, including in relation to the target groups, location of activities, type of activities, and timing of activities. In contrast, more flexible contexts imply that the Living Labs had greater latitude in the timing, location, and stakeholders of the activities.

Given this, our framework highlights how it is crucial to understand where flexibility exists and where restrictions may manifest themselves within these real-life settings. For example, understanding the presence and availability of facilities within a certain setting can be crucial, as “buildings and constructions actively shape the place's meaning and the socio-spatial context” [26]. Being mindful of such realities and constraints can allow user and stakeholder engagement to occur in an honest, transparent fashion, and the parties involved can co-create activities while keeping any inherent restrictions in mind. Over time, it is also important to revise and reconsider these restrictions, as real-life settings are bound to change and evolve.



**Figure 2.** Structured–flexible continuum of the SSCL Living Labs.

### 3.4. User Engagement

Users are the experiential experts concerning the goal or challenge that a Living Lab is addressing. The involvement of end-users is critical to co-create locally responsive, relevant programming that considers the needs and wants of the community. In short, this engagement directly helps address criticisms that SFD programmes are often divorced from the needs, understandings, and perspectives of the communities in which they are located [27]. The knowledge of the community members is a key factor in the success of any Living Lab and ensures that the activities are grounded in the local context. As such, end-users should be involved in the Living Lab from the very beginning, so that the common goal can be developed to meet their needs and solutions can be co-created. Creating space for the knowledge of community members is not always easy, and understanding why community members do or do not participate in activities can be challenging [28]. Involving the local community takes time and requires adaptation, especially on the part of professionals who are often accustomed to highly formalised processes and forms of data collection. Indeed, input from local community members can even at times be perceived as a threat to individuals who have invested heavily in more conventional, academic knowledge, such as researchers or consultants. Given this, it is crucial that power is meaningfully shared with community members and that relationships are built on mutual respect, trust, transparency, and humility [9,24]. Without this, there is a real risk that the outcomes generated by the Living Lab will remain unsatisfactory and that, at worst, local community members will feel frustrated or excluded by Living Lab activities [29].

During the implementation of our Living Labs, we have sometimes struggled to engage and retain local community members in our activities, particularly in terms of having individuals engage with the design and co-creation processes. For instance, in the German context (ISH), the highly structured nature of the school environment and data protection regulations limited attempts to directly involve or interact with parents. The German partners initially designed a short, multilingual, mobile accessible survey for parents to provide feedback on the programme. However, due to data protection regulations, the organisation could not contact parents directly and instead relied on participating children to share the QR code for the survey. In addition, communications from German schools can sometimes be overwhelming, making it challenging for parents to engage with such requests. Ultimately, the survey was dropped and the focus was primarily set on engaging with coaches, teachers, and participating children.



Beyond these examples, lack of engagement can have several causes. Community members may lack trust in the implementing organisation, may not see the value in participating in the Living Lab, or may not know about the Living Lab at all. Whatever the cause, without extensive community engagement there is no chance of creating a successful and sustainable Living Lab. From our experience, however, numerous strategies can help to mitigate these challenges. For one, being inspired by the Czech Living Lab, a long-term relationship between the users (local youth from socially disadvantaged communities) and participant organisations' representatives in the field (social workers) proved to be crucial to fostering any kind of involvement. Furthermore, a strong partnership with local stakeholders is essential to reach the community members and ensure awareness. Implementing organisations should likewise communicate their Living Lab activities thoroughly and ensure that community members receive all the information. Once community members are engaged in the Living Lab, it is important to be open about what engagement looks like. While implementers may expect volunteering for committees or support with activities, such formalised engagement may not be for everyone. The values surrounding unremunerated volunteering or research participation that are often taken for granted within many sectors, including sport, may quite simply not be shared by all groups, and not all groups can afford to give their time away freely due to financial, care or logistical constraints [30]. Furthermore, power imbalances may exist within the structures of Living Labs, whereby implementing organisations may have paid staff to deliver Living Lab activities, while users are expected to engage on a voluntary basis. As such, Living Labs should consider ways to actively address these imbalances, including by creating new job positions, offering compensation to participating community members or providing other forms of recognition that are acceptable to the users.

### *3.5. Multi-Stakeholder Involvement*

A key element of the Living Lab approach is multi-stakeholder involvement. By working together, and especially by learning together, Living Labs can integrate different perspectives and develop solutions that are suitable to a specific context and goal. This is an important contrast to other, more bottom-up participatory approaches, as all the stakeholders are actively included, allowing the bottom-up community needs to be directly negotiated along the logistical, financial, and material realities of other stakeholders, allowing—hopefully—for the creation of feasible, realistic solutions. To develop these solutions and open up possibilities for change beyond individual outcomes, it is essential to include stakeholders who can address and alter relevant structures and systems. Therefore, the inclusion and involvement of professional stakeholders needs continuous attention and should focus on their willingness and ability to initiate and sustain structural change within their organisations and relevant systems.

The integration of multiple stakeholders, including users and community members, allows local needs to be considered while also being mindful of the opportunities, constraints, and resources available in each setting. To ensure comprehensive, multi-stakeholder engagement, it is important to explore and learn which organisations, experts and informal networks are familiar with or willing to work on the defined goal. One tool used in our project to assist with this is known as a context mapping. A context mapping, also known as a situational analysis, is a simple, structured format used to document the people, infrastructure, services, facilities, and stakeholders in each setting, thus allowing Living Labs to obtain a sense of the needs, challenges and potentials associated with the setting. Likewise, a context mapping also helps to identify stakeholders that the Living Lab should approach and potentially work with. Other Living Labs have also used similar tools, such as a scoping of stakeholder needs or developing power/interest matrices as ways to better understand the stakeholder environment [13].

In turn, a variety of formal and informal approaches can be used to engage stakeholders, identify shared goals, and develop common activities within the Living Lab context. For instance, to identify stakeholders within Olomouc (a city in the Czech Republic), FpR

cooperated with the partner university. Using FpR's regional contacts as a starting point, the partners identified stakeholders active at the local and regional levels and participated in a series of focus groups involving social workers, municipality and regional authority officials, educators, and Roma community coordinators. In turn, these focus groups helped to define the target groups, roles, and expectations of the stakeholders, and they contributed to the later design and implementation of FpR's Living Lab activities.

As stakeholders are identified and brought on board, it is important to establish an equal relationship between all the involved stakeholders. One review found that, despite exhortations about the need to include stakeholders, much of the decision-making was centred in the host organisation [12]. This makes it crucial to clearly define the roles and expectations of stakeholders and to revisit these expectations regularly, as well as to integrate shared democratic decision-making processes. Indeed, even if our framework and associated toolkit emphasise the need to identify stakeholders at an early stage, stakeholder involvement is an ongoing and continuous process within Living Labs. As the goals of a Living Lab evolve or its context changes in a real-life setting, stakeholders may exit or join over time and/or change their level of involvement.

### *3.6. Multi-Method Approach*

The Living Lab approach relies on continuous input from users and stakeholders and therefore requires a wide range of formal and informal feedback rounds or data collection methods. These methods may be rooted in more traditional academic approaches or in more informal, creative, or artistic approaches. Either way, in line with the overall ethos of the Living Lab, these methods should be adapted to the local context, be highly participatory and feed directly into the design, delivery, measurement and/or improvement of the activities. The exact objective and context will determine which method is appropriate. The method used will depend on the aim, context and people involved. Traditional quantitative or qualitative methods, as well as more creative and participatory methods, may all be appropriate to obtain feedback, support engagement and feed into the co-creation process. For the SSCL project, for instance, each partner hosted focus groups within their context to engage multiple stakeholders and understand their perspectives on sport, social cohesion, and their broader contexts. Other similar, traditional academic approaches can likewise be used in the Living Lab context—even surveys can be designed in collaboration with community members to ensure validity and relevance within the Living Lab and local context [30]. Yet, very often, it is crucial to use more informal, interactive, playful, participatory, or creative approaches that are more accessible or appealing to diverse groups. At one of the Hague's Living Lab sites, for example, implementers used a weekly drawing activity to better understand what kind of summer activities local children enjoy. Or, for instance, ISH often gathers feedback in a playful, active way from participating children. Different coloured cones are used to symbolise different answers and are then placed throughout the gym. After each question, the children respond by running to the corresponding cone. For example, there was a question about the extent to which children tell their families about the activities. At the same time, they can be assigned additional movement tasks or materials such as balls and use them to playfully move the cones around.

One point of tension within this multi-method approach may come from the common presence of professional or academic organisations within the Living Lab that may typically rely on more formalised approaches to collecting and analysing information. However, this reliance on formalised methods can limit the scope and relevance of the information collected. While there are advantages to these more formal methods, community members and local organisations may provide feedback or gather information in more informal or creative ways. Organisations implementing Living Labs must therefore remain open and attentive to these more informal ways of communicating information. As Brett Smith and colleagues [9] point out, different knowledge bases and contributions should be respected,

valued and combined. Informal discussions, observations or creative activities can all provide important clues about the needs and wants of local users.

### 3.7. Co-Creation

Co-creation here implies the engagement of stakeholders and community members in designing, developing and implementing solutions to a shared challenge [31,32]. As such, co-creation is intimately connected to other components of the framework, including especially user engagement, multi-stakeholder involvement and the use of multi-method approaches. Working towards co-creation in a real-world, multi-stakeholder environment is not easy, especially given that Living Labs typically focus on the kind of “wicked” problems that do not have a single pre-defined solution and cannot be solved by any one stakeholder or organisation. For their part, Kalinauskaite and colleagues [31] reflect on what they call transdisciplinary collaboration between different disciplines and a variety of sectors. This type of collaboration can be highly complex and dependent on interpersonal relationships, individual contexts, and other factors, yet it is also inherent to any process of co-creation [31]. The success of such collaborations strongly depends on the interpersonal qualities and characteristics of the collaborating parties, as well as on the values inherent to the Living Lab itself. As such, openness, innovative thinking, mutual learning, mutual equality, and willingness to share are crucial for successful co-creation [9,26,31].

Likewise, co-creation requires implementers to be receptive to feedback and show the flexibility to modify ongoing activities. In the Hague, following the drawing activity, a summer festival was designed reflecting the wishes of the children expressed through their pictures. Or, in the German Living Lab, the delivery structure of sessions was changed after discussions with coaches, educators and extensive observations. At the start of the project, sessions were delivered by two ISH coaches visiting the school. However, the presence of ISH coaches only within the appointed session times was seen as an obstacle to the development of coach–children relationships. This periodic presence at times limited the coaches’ ability to engage in depth with individual children and created situations where children actively challenged the coaches’ authority. Responding to this feedback, during the second year of the SSCL project, every session became co-led by an ISH coach along with an educator from the local school. In this way, the session benefited from the presence of both a regular, trusted educator as well as a coach trained to deliver sport-based pedagogical sessions focusing on socio-emotional and intercultural topics.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, it is important to be mindful of both the constraints and the opportunities presented by the real-world setting in which the Living Lab is operating. Otherwise, there is an inherent risk that co-created ideas are not actually feasible or implementable, leading to disappointment for stakeholders and users. To maximise opportunities for change on a more structural level, inclusion of professional stakeholders holding key positions is necessary. Continuous attention to who is needed to further the process of change is essential. What these stakeholders need to establish more structural change, whether by influencing policy or forging new alliances for example, should also be actively included in the process of co-creation.

A related challenge is to continually ensure that what is co-created is in line with the goals identified by the Living Lab. Any Living Lab will involve an ongoing process of trial and error, and different stakeholders will bring onboard different perspectives and agendas. However, it is essential that all the co-created activities clearly contribute to the positive impact that the Living Lab is trying to achieve. Otherwise, there is a risk of “mission drift”, whereby co-created activities are perceived as interesting but do not necessarily contribute to the goals of the lab. If this happens, the Living Lab stakeholders may need to either rethink the value of the co-created activity or have an open discussion about redefining the goals of the Living Lab.

#### 4. Final Reflections and Conclusions

In this article, we have presented the Living Lab framework developed as part of the SSCL project and shared insights and experiences gained through our efforts to implement this approach across four European countries. Unique in our attempt is that we deployed the Living Lab concept across a range of more structured or more flexible contexts, thus hopefully providing guidance to other organisations who wish to employ a more systematic participatory approach within their programmes. Looking back, one of the key lessons learned by our partners was not to be frozen or intimidated by the terminology of a Living Lab. In discussions at the beginning of the project, many partners realised that they were already implementing some of the key components of a Living Lab without necessarily using the exact same vocabulary—and this is likely applicable to many individuals and organisations working in development contexts, including the use of sport for development. The values and ethos of the Living Lab approach are most important, and the different components can help to support reflection and development of more participatory approaches in different contexts. Living Labs are organic and depend on the people involved. It is therefore important to be aware that Living Labs cannot be imposed but should be developed organically with all the stakeholders sharing and working towards a commonly understood goal. As noted above, elements of a Living Lab may already be in place, and it is important not to disrupt existing dynamics but rather to enhance them by involving new stakeholders or methods to improve current structures. It is also not necessary to call the entire process a Living Lab, and at times, translating the term to other national languages might be confusing or lacking pertinence. The context, values and considerations around the Living Lab are more important than the wording.

The more structured or flexible contexts used in the SSCL project also offered dramatically different conditions for implementation. The school context provided by far the most rigidity, with the Living Lab not only facing issues around dealing with the formal requirements of implementing activities in a school context—as recounted in the story about trying to deploy a short survey—but also in the overall reception of the approach. Many educators and school officials were reticent to participate in ISH activities, and our more general experience within the school context suggests that educators, who often have advanced degrees and years of experience, may be reticent to take on board feedback from external stakeholders or participants, or they may even feel threatened by such external input [33]. Indeed, having all the stakeholders embrace the experiential expertise of participants was, at different points, a challenge across all the Living Labs. This speaks to a need to ensure both individual and institutional support for the adoption and implementation of such a participatory approach. Otherwise, there is a risk that “participation” becomes a mere tick-box exercise that is not meaningfully embraced by implementers. This is where the reflection embedded in the ethical attitude is essential. By reflecting on the components with an ethical attitude—Is what I do or decide the good thing to do, in this moment and for who?—the components can be used as a meaningful guide without strict, generic prescriptions. In the medium and longer term, there is also a need that participatory approaches like Living Labs be embedded directly within local (sport) programming or policies. Institutional backing for these approaches is crucial to escape the often short-term, funder-dependent nature of current initiatives and to communicate to stakeholders that such approaches are meaningful, valued and supported.

The sport-focus of Living Labs also offered unique opportunities and challenges. Firstly, in most sporting contexts there is already a degree of end-user engagement. Sport is a highly interactive, social, and physical endeavour, and most sport activities cannot take place without a minimum level of end-user involvement. This social nature presents many opportunities to connect community members and other stakeholder groups, especially since the interactive setting can provide opportunities for groups to come together [34,35]. This was, for instance, the case in Dublin, where community centres, municipal officials, sport actors and other government officials engaged in various stages of the Living Lab. Second, and relatedly, sport is often embedded within structures off the pitch. Sport is

frequently multisectoral or intersectoral and provides opportunities to engage with a wide range of stakeholders from the health, education, business and community sectors [36]. For example, in different contexts, formal responsibility for sport may lie with government departments responsible for sport, culture, education or health. On the one hand, this means that sport-based Living Labs can provide opportunities to connect and involve different relevant stakeholders from different sectors. On the other hand, as responsibility for sport is often shared between actors in these sectors, there may be issues of competing agendas or lack of perceived responsibility for sport [37,38], including the fact that sport may be relegated to a secondary concern (e.g., in the education system). These different perspectives and agendas need to be considered in any sport-based Living Lab [39]. Despite the opportunities offered by the sport environment, our partners also remained aware that sport itself presents some challenges and its impacts are not inherently positive [40,41]. The nature of the sport, the norms associated with that sport, and the wider socio-cultural environment around sport can present unique challenges [42]. For all its potential, sport can also be a closed and conservative environment that can (inadvertently) exclude perceived outsiders, such as ethnic minorities or members of the LGBTQ+ community, or reproduce detrimental power structures [5,43]. Living Labs using sport need to remain aware of the many types and sides of sport, adhere to the mantra of “do no harm” and ensure that sport’s potential is properly channelled to contribute to the positive social goals of the Living Lab.

Though we hope that our framework and project have helped raise awareness and informed actors in the field of SFD about the potential of Living Labs, we recognise that extensive further work is needed. As hinted above, continuing to implement a Living Lab approach can be challenging, especially as many actors in the field are dependent on short-term funding associated with a so-called project-based approach that requires implementers to constantly re-apply for funding and prove the “impact” of their work [44]. The dynamic, flexible nature of Living Labs might, however, make it difficult to prove such “impact”, thus limiting their ability to be funded and supported in some contexts. Though we would ideally wish for a wholesale rethinking of how SFD initiatives, and social programming writ large, are funded, in the short term this also points to a need to further develop how Living Labs can be evaluated in the short, medium and long term [45]. Proper evaluation and research are also crucial to provide concrete ways to further embed Living Lab or similar approaches within policies and programming. Likewise, more work needs to be done to unpack the intricacies and unique features of implementing Living Labs in sport and physical activity contexts. Living Labs were originally conceived in more research- or design-oriented contexts, and how the physical, interactive, and multi-sectoral characteristics of sport play a role remain worthy of further exploration beyond the initial reflections developed in our project. Finally, more generally, our project, like many other Living Labs [12,26,32], predominantly focused on urban areas. Yet, over 30% of Europeans live in rural areas, and these areas face numerous unique economic and demographic challenges [46]. How Living Labs can contribute to these challenges and what are the particularities of working in such areas are also worthy of further work.

In short, with the SSCL project, we have worked to develop and raise awareness of the Living Lab approach as a potential answer to some of the criticisms levied against the SFD field, especially as in relation to its individual-focused outcomes and lack of engagement at the institutional and structural levels. However, such a method is highly context-dependent, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Future efforts will need to delve even more deeply into how such dynamic processes of engagement and co-creation play out for distinct groups, locations, and goals.

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