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EVALUATING LIVING LABS- FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN TRANSFORMING, LEARNING AND JUSTIFYING

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Living labs are understood as collaborative platforms in which different actors from research, government, business and citizens work together in finding solutions for complex societal challenges. They are increasingly seen as an instrument to support sustainability transitions, such as transitions to a circular bio-based and climate smart society. Living labs can create spaces for joint experimenting and learning by exploring the barriers and possibilities for transition and to co-create viable solutions. These high expectations and the increased interest to work through living labs has sparked a keen interest in methods for assessing performance and effects of living labs. Various scientific views and practical approaches for monitoring and evaluation already exist. Policy evaluation or project management evaluation are results-oriented evaluations focusing on input, output, outcomes, and impact. Reflexive approaches for evaluation focus on learning processes of participants, and on the evolution of the entire process and the view of own achievements. Transformative evaluation approaches focus on the extent to which particular innovations (technologies) developed in living labs contribute to a wider (sustainability) transition ambition. Each of these approaches is suitable for specific situations. However, based on research in three cases, we found none of these approaches tailored sufficiently to need to assess the dynamic role and contribution of living labs in relation to wider transition processes. Therefore, informed by the research in the three cases and building on existing approaches, we compiled an evaluation framework that is more capable of capturing such dynamic role and contribution of living labs. The paper describes the framework and shares the first results of testing it in three Living Labs that aim to contribute to a carbon positive agriculture in the Netherlands. It describes how the framework was developed and applied in relation to the specific characteristics and context of each living lab. The paper contributes to the development of appropriate ways of assessing the roles that particular living labs are effectively playing and the ways in which that contributes to wider sustainability transformations.

Keywords: living labs, evaluation, carbon neutral agriculture, transition