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## Milestone 3.4

### Proposals

for innovation potential, innovation upscaling,  
on citizen engagement techniques



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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

ADRM Danube: The Association of Danube River Municipalities “Danube” (Bulgaria)

CSA: Coordination and Support Actions

D: Deliverable

DaWetRest: Danube Wetlands and floodplains Restoration through systemic, community engaged and sustainable innovative actions

EcoDaLLi: ECOsystem-based governance with DANube lighthouse Living Lab for sustainable Innovation processes

EU: European Union

IA: Innovation Actions

ICLEI: Local Governments for Sustainability

MEWF: Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests of Romania

MS: Milestone

NbS: Nature-based Solutions

RIA: Research and Innovation Actions

T: Task

WP: Work Package

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## Introduction

Within the ECOSystem-based governance with DANube lighthouse Living Lab for sustainable Innovation processes (EcoDaLLi) project, Work Package 3 (WP3) is focusing on innovative practices in spatial policies for the protection and restoration of freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity. If one looks more into details, WP3 has been set up to pursue two different objectives. As a Coordination and Support Action (CSA) its first objective is to foster exchanges and knowledge transfer via the Danube & Black Sea Lighthouse. Its second objective is to improve the local potential for innovation, innovation upscaling and citizen engagement at the local level.

Task 3.3 (T3.3) has been precisely developed to fulfil WP3 second objective. In fact, T3.3 is composed of two distinct elements: establishing the EcoDaLLi panel and providing recommendations of workshops in relation to WP5. Achievement of those two elements is correlated to the present Milestone 3.4 (MS3.4). While the Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests of Romania (MEWF) has developed the funding documents of the panel, ICLEI Europe, in collaboration with ACTeon from WP5, have reflected upon and suggested some key recommendations on training programmes. This milestone document has also benefited from the comments and suggestions from Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, the project coordinator, and from The Association of Danube River Municipalities “Danube” (ADRM), WP3 lead organisation.

The present document is providing ground recommendations on training programmes to be developed under WP5, with a special attention to improve the local potential for innovation, innovation upscaling and citizen engagement, targeting local stakeholders from the 4 Danube territorial basins. It is addressed to the expert panel and aims to serve as a basis for the panel’s further reflections and suggestions on how to reinforce innovation and actively engage citizens within the Danube & Black Sea Lighthouse area.

The recommendations contained in this document have found fertile ground in previous resources developed by the EcoDaLLi partners during the project’s implementation. Deliverables 3.2 (D3.2) and D.5.1 have been thoroughly screened, due to their high relevance in bringing local stakeholders’ perspective on the existing gaps in innovation and citizen engagement and in presenting a detailed catalogue of services supporting innovation. Furthermore, this document is the result of a fruitful collaboration with WP5, in analysing the results of surveys conducted by ACTeon in April-May 2025 and interviews conducted by ICLEI Europe in May-June 2025, as part of T5.3, to further identify existing barriers to innovation and solutions to overcome them.

The first resource worth mentioning is EcoDaLLi D3.2, *Reports of at least 4 sessions organised by EcoDaLLi as part of established events*. The four workshops organised in 2023 have been tailored to address and identify the most pressing needs of, barriers faced by and potential solutions for local stakeholders, covering the Danube’s geographical regions of Upper, Middle, and Lower Danube, and Danube Delta & Black Sea. Discussions focused on the main topical areas as identified by the Mission Ocean: water quality, biodiversity & climate change and circular/blue economy. Within the reflections of the various stakeholder groups, some key thoughts have been shared with regards to innovation potential. These key thoughts could serve as a useful basis when defining the training programme, providing potential topics for webinars and other peer-to-peer learning activities.



The second important source of information is EcoDaLLi D5.1, *Catalogue of services supporting innovation*. This deliverable provided a solid analytical basis for identifying four categories of innovation: technological, social, governance-related and financial. It also mapped practical support mechanisms, such as funding tools, training formats and advisory services. Furthermore, D5.1 identified specific enabling conditions and barriers across the Danube region, offering a systemic view of how innovation processes are initiated, supported and scaled up. These insights were instrumental in shaping targeted recommendations, including those relating to citizen engagement and data co-production.

Last but not least, the authors have led interviews with two experts involved in the DaWetRest project and working both on innovation potential and upscaling as well as on citizen engagement techniques. Interviews were conducted on May 28, 2025 and June 6, 2025, lasted about 30 minutes each and were semi-direct, with a set of questions that can be found as an annex document (Annex 1). Thanks to the recommendations of ADRM Danube, the authors have interviewed Ms. Raluca Nicolae, Technical Director of the Environmental Department at Geostud and Dr. Viktoria Czuppon, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Pannonia. Interviews were helpful to identify additional gaps and barriers in the three sections, to formulate complementary recommendations where needed and to drive to our attention existing good practices from other projects or initiatives.

The recommendations are therefore organised into three main thematic sections - Innovation Potentials, Innovation Upscaling, and Citizen Engagement Techniques - each providing an in-depth analysis of observed practices, barriers, and enabling factors across the Danube region. These sections also outline strategic directions and political recommendations to promote systemic innovation, strengthen multi-level governance, and ensure the social inclusiveness and operational viability of ecosystem restoration efforts.

While the milestone is structured around three main sections, it is important to highlight that the recommendations provided are not rigidly confined to a single category. In many cases, the same recommendation may be relevant across two or even all three blocks, reflecting the interconnected nature of innovation processes. This overlap is not only natural but also valuable, as it underscores the systemic and holistic approach needed for sustainable innovation. Additionally, insights related to Living Labs often intersect with all three categories, and may be considered as a transversal element or a standalone thematic area within the milestone.

By consolidating insights from technical, institutional, and social dimensions of innovation, the document seeks to support the creation of a robust, scalable, and participatory innovation ecosystem aligned with the objectives of the Mission Ocean and the Danube Lighthouse.

## 1. Recommendations on innovation potential (innovation readiness, innovation management, market potential)

The Danube region represents an opportunity for innovation aimed at supporting ecosystem restoration, where different **typologies of innovation, including technological, social, governance-related, and financial elements**, are progressively reshaping practices, tools, and partnerships. Building upon existing initiatives and leveraging regional diversity, the potential to further develop and diffuse innovation is significant, provided that current gaps are



systematically addressed. Good practices can be found in the various typologies of innovation above-mentioned.

**Technological innovation** encompasses applying advanced tools, digital technologies, and technical expertise to enhance ecological restoration efforts. Below are some inspiring projects that showcase this approach:

- The [DanubeSediment project](#), which developed the first transnational sediment balance for the Danube River, offering concrete guidance for integrated sediment management at the river basin scale.
- The [IDES project](#), which deployed an ecosystem services assessment tool to evaluate the effects of water quality management scenarios and to support policy design in multifunctional floodplains.
- The design and installation of fish-friendly hydroelectric turbines (Koukouvinis et al., 2023), demonstrating how engineering and conservation objectives can converge through biomimetic solutions.

Such initiatives demonstrate the value of investing in technological readiness and transferability, and point to the need for targeted support to integrate innovation into national and local restoration strategies. In addition, technological innovation is to be connected with social and governance innovations, as *“it tends to be more easily implemented when strong social and governance frameworks are already in place, as these create the necessary foundation for adoption and long-term success”*, as stated by our interviewees.

**Besides, social innovation** plays a key role in advancing inclusive, equitable, and sustainable restoration. It focuses on community engagement, capacity co-creation, and the development of participatory governance models. Below are some notable examples that reflect this approach:

- The [Connecting Nature](#) project in Sarajevo, where an urban garden at a children’s home has become a tool for intergenerational learning and co-management, promoting nature-based solutions and social cohesion.
- The [CLEVER Cities initiative](#) in Belgrade, which turned a disused railway track into a linear park through co-design processes that actively involved local residents and stakeholders, thus embedding innovation into urban regeneration.

These approaches show how innovation is not only a matter of new products or systems, but also of creating new social relationships, narratives, and practices. In the context of freshwater ecosystem restoration activities, *“social innovation is especially critical, as many restoration actions rely on citizen science and community engagement”*, according to the interviewees.

**Furthermore, innovative governance and policy** frameworks are essential for coordinating complex, cross-sectoral efforts and embedding restoration objectives into broader planning and decision-making systems. Below are some relevant initiatives that reflect this approach:

- The [NEVERMORE project](#), which fosters the co-production of climate scenario models for evidence-based decision-making at multiple levels of governance.



- The [Integrated Territorial Instrument in the Danube Delta](#), a mechanism enabling strategic alignment of funding, stakeholder participation, and investment priorities for integrated territorial development.
- The [TID\(Y\)UP project](#), which facilitated the formulation of a multi-country action plan against plastic pollution, bridging institutional, sectoral, and geographical boundaries.

These cases reveal the potential of adaptive governance, multi-level coordination, and participatory decision-making processes to unlock and sustain innovation in ecosystem governance. Besides, interviewees listened to by the authors stress that “*governance innovation is particularly needed to develop new mechanisms for effective collaboration across regions and countries, especially in complex transboundary areas like the Danube Basin*”.

**Eventually, innovative financing solutions** play a crucial role in addressing investment barriers and mobilising resources for ecosystem restoration. Below are some recent developments that illustrate this approach:

- The issuance of green bonds in Hungary to support projects such as the rehabilitation of the Mosoni-Danube (Koch, 2023; Chappon et al., 2023), demonstrating how financial innovation can underpin ecological goals.
- Emerging proposals for a Danube Cross-border [Private Equity Fund](#), fintech regulatory sandboxes, and ESG bond platforms, aimed at improving capital flow towards sustainability-driven innovation.

Such mechanisms can contribute to creating a more attractive investment landscape for ecosystem restoration, provided that regulatory and capacity challenges are adequately addressed.

## Barriers and Constraints

According to the **literature, surveys from WP5** and **stakeholder interviews** analysed in WP3 and WP5, innovation in the Danube region faces several persistent barriers. Although the number of survey responses and interviews conducted was limited, the data reveals recurring challenges that can hinder innovation efforts, even in sectors strongly focused on sustainability.

- Lack of transversal skills and interdisciplinary capacities among key actors involved in restoration.
- Fragmentation of innovation and collaboration networks, limiting synergies, shared learning, and stakeholder engagement, coupled with a “*lack of coordination among the different stakeholders that limit cross-border collaboration*”<sup>1</sup>.
- “*Fragmented policy and governance regarding freshwater ecosystem restoration*”.
- Restricted access to funding, especially from private or national sources.
- Limited infrastructure and technical facilities for piloting, testing and scaling up innovative solutions.
- Regulatory barriers that hinder experimentation, innovation uptake, or cross-sectoral coordination.
- Limited access to technical expertise and innovation support services.

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<sup>1</sup> Text in italic is extracted from the interviews’ transcript.



- Difficulty accessing relevant markets for nature-based or innovative restoration solutions.
- Language and cultural differences limit stakeholder engagement and reduce participation in innovation and restoration efforts across diverse communities in the Danube Basin.
- Low integration of stakeholder voices, especially citizens, who are mostly consulted without long-term engagement. *“Their input rarely translates into actual influence on decision-making processes. This gap significantly reduces the potential for socially inclusive and context-sensitive innovation.”*
- *“Data and monitoring gaps on biodiversity status coupled with inconsistency across the Danube regions, limiting the capacity for adaptive management”.*

In light of these barriers, the table below (Table 1) gathers the recommendations for the training programme, indicating for each recommendation the barrier it intends to address, the expected benefits, its innovation category, its source, its format translation for the training programme, its target group and its engagement likelihood.

**Table 1.** Recommendations for the training programme regarding innovation potential. **Sources:** D3.2, D5.1, survey and interviews.

Recommendation	Category	Source	Format translation	Target group	Benefits	Addressed barrier(s)	Engagement likelihood
<b>Decarbonise and depollute the shipping industry and fleet through the use and promotion of sustainable energy technologies,</b> including supporting the research and development of ships powered with solar panels to depollute water.	Technological	D3.2 workshops	Webinar/ Field visit/ Local workshop	SMEs & businesses, academia, policymakers	Knowledge of best practices, enhanced policy integration, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, influence on funding and policy	Limited infrastructure and technical facilities for piloting, testing and scaling up innovative solutions	Medium/High
<b>Support the development and installation of solar panel technology for irrigation systems,</b> including their use on water channels to generate sustainable energy, with the involvement of farmers and other agricultural stakeholders.	Technological	D3.2 workshops	Field visit/ Local workshop	SMEs & businesses, farmers, policymakers	Knowledge of best practices, enhanced policy integration, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration	Limited infrastructure and technical facilities for piloting, testing and scaling up innovative solutions	High
<b>Develop datasets and inventories to map and identify trees and green spaces for improved urban planning,</b> drawing inspiration from the <a href="#">UrbanRelief</a>	Technological	D3.2 workshops, interviews	Webinar	Academia, NGOs & citizens, SMEs & businesses	Knowledge exchange, peer-to-peer learning, tools development	Limited infrastructure and technical facilities for piloting, testing and scaling up innovative solutions	Medium

project, which pilots effective tools for data collection and visualisation.							
<p><b>Include municipalities and other local level institutions in discussions held at national and transnational levels</b> to further develop green tourism practices on the ground.</p>	Governance & Policy	D3.2 workshops, interviews	Webinar/ Local workshop/ Field visit	Local, regional & national governments and public bodies, SMEs & businesses, NGOs & citizens	Knowledge exchange, peer-to-peer learning, knowledge of best practices	Fragmentation of innovation and collaboration networks, limiting synergies, shared learning, and stakeholder engagement	Medium/ High
						Low integration of stakeholder voices	
<p><b>Integrate a decentralised water management approach</b>, including the implementation of NbS Solutions to overcome challenges related to water pollution and wastewater treatment activities.</p>	Governance & policy	D3.2 workshops	Webinar/ Field visit	Local, regional & national governments and public bodies, SMEs & businesses, NGOs & citizens, academia	Enhanced policy integration, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, influence on funding and policy	Regulatory barriers that hinder experimentation, innovation uptake, or cross-sectoral coordination	Medium/ High
<p><b>Foster ecosystem-based innovation ecosystems</b>, promoting synergies between environmental, social, economic, and technical actors to support</p>	Governance & policy	D5.1	Webinar/ Local workshop	Local, regional & national governments and public bodies, SMEs & businesses, NGOs & citizens, academia	Fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, enhanced policy integration, facilitated knowledge exchange	Fragmentation of innovation and collaboration networks, limiting synergies, shared learning, and stakeholder engagement.	Medium/ High

systemic innovation.							
<b>Reinforce enabling environments</b> through coherent policy frameworks, financial instruments (grants, venture capital, subsidies), and cross-border platforms such as the <a href="#">EcoDaLLi Portal</a> .	Governance & policy, Finance	D5.1, surveys	Webinar/ Local workshop	Local, regional & national governments and public bodies	Enhanced policy integration, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, influence on funding and policy	Restricted access to funding, especially from private or national sources	Medium/ High
						Limited access to technical expertise and innovation support services	
<b>Facilitate innovation uptake</b> by aligning restoration goals with funding streams and incorporating innovation metrics into planning and evaluation processes.	Finance	D5.1, surveys	Webinar/ Local workshop	Local, regional & national governments and public bodies	Influence on funding and policy	Restricted access to funding, especially from private or national sources	Medium/ High
						Difficulty accessing relevant markets for nature-based or innovative restoration solutions	

<p><b>Promote inclusive co-creation mechanisms</b>, ensuring that innovation responds to local values, knowledge systems, and needs — particularly in rural, marginalised, and transboundary areas.</p>	<p>Social innovation</p>	<p>D5.1, interviews</p>	<p>Local workshop/ Field visit</p>	<p>Local, regional &amp; national governments and public bodies, NGOs &amp; citizens</p>	<p>Fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, enhanced stakeholder engagement &amp; participation</p>	<p>Fragmentation of innovation and collaboration networks, limiting synergies, shared learning, and stakeholder engagement</p>	<p>High</p>
<p><b>Address structural and legislative gaps</b> identified through stakeholder feedback, including barriers to innovation, lack of technical resources, and weak policy support.</p>	<p>Governance &amp; policy</p>	<p>D5.1</p>	<p>Webinar/ Local workshop</p>	<p>Local, regional &amp; national governments and public bodies</p>	<p>Enhanced policy integration, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, influence on funding and policy</p>	<p>Fragmented policy and governance regarding freshwater ecosystem restoration</p>	<p>Medium/ High</p>
<p><b>Develop targeted policies, tools, and programmes</b>, based on concrete suggestions</p>	<p>Governance &amp; policy</p>	<p>D5.1</p>	<p>Survey/ Local workshop</p>	<p>Local, regional &amp; national governments and public bodies</p>	<p>Enhanced policy integration, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, influence on funding and policy</p>	<p>Fragmented policy and governance regarding freshwater ecosystem restoration</p>	<p>Low/ Medium</p>

gathered through surveys, to create a more supportive and responsive innovation environment.						Regulatory barriers that hinder experimentation, innovation uptake, or cross-sectoral coordination	
<p><b>Implement multilingual support and localise project materials</b> to ensure accessibility and relevance for all stakeholders. This approach enhances inclusivity, boosts participation, and fosters innovation potential at local and regional levels.</p>	Social innovation	D5.1	Local workshop	Local, regional & national governments and public bodies, SMEs & businesses, NGOs & citizens, academia	Fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, enhanced policy integration, facilitated knowledge exchange	<p>Language and cultural differences limit stakeholder engagement and reduce participation in innovation and restoration efforts across diverse communities in the Danube Basin</p> <p>Low integration of stakeholder voices</p>	High

<p><b>Invest in tailored training</b>, especially for local governance bodies, SMEs, and community-based actors, via capacity-building, training on business models and commercialisation &amp; mentoring, coaching, and consulting services, &amp; Institutional training.</p>	<p>Cross-sectorial</p>	<p>D5.1, surveys</p>	<p>Webinar/ Local workshop</p>	<p>Local, regional &amp; national governments and public bodies, SMEs &amp; businesses, NGOs &amp; citizens, academia</p>	<p>Fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, enhanced stakeholder engagement &amp; participation</p>	<p>Lack of transversal skills and interdisciplinary capacities among key actors involved in restoration.</p>	<p>High</p>
<p><b>Ensure consistency and continuous support beyond project implementation for data collection</b> between demonstrating sites and managing authorities.</p>	<p>Technological</p>	<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Local workshop/ Field visit</p>	<p>Local, regional &amp; national governments and public bodies, NGOs &amp; citizens, academia</p>	<p>Fostered data collection, fostered cross-sectoral collaboration</p>	<p>Data and monitoring gaps &amp; inconsistency on biodiversity status across regions, limiting the capacity for adaptive management</p>	<p>High</p>

One key aspect to consider when designing the training format, based on the interviews, is to prioritise “*knowledge exchanges and study visits, as well as the development of toolkits and simple step-by-step guides*”. This would support cross-disciplinary work among stakeholders and also the implication of less experienced stakeholders in innovation activities.

## 2. Recommendation on innovation upscaling

Innovation is a fundamental driver for achieving large-scale ecological restoration and resilience in the Danube River Basin. However, the true transformative impact of innovation is realised only when promising approaches are expanded, replicated, and embedded across multiple territories, governance levels, and stakeholder networks. Within EcoDaLLi, upscaling innovation is conceived not simply as the technical dissemination of successful projects, but as a systemic process requiring enabling environments, cross-sectoral cooperation, and strategic investment.

The workshops organised under D3.2 provided key insights into how innovation can be implemented across the Danube Basin, particularly by leveraging territorial strengths and fostering systemic collaboration among local actors. Within these discussions, stakeholder dialogues revealed relevant considerations that can foster the development, transfer, and uptake of innovative solutions, particularly targeting sustainable agriculture and tourism practices in the Danube basin.

Besides these insights collected on the ground, several support mechanisms have been identified, mapped, and assessed to foster the diffusion of innovation across the Danube region under the work of WP5. For example, the catalogue of Innovation Support Services (ISS) developed under WP5, systematises a diverse array of services essential for upscaling, including:

- Technical assistance and R&D collaboration to adapt innovations to new socio-ecological contexts.
- Legal advisory services supporting regulatory compliance and the protection of intellectual property rights.
- Financial support instruments, ranging from EU grants to innovative investment mechanisms, designed to sustain long-term scaling processes.
- Matchmaking and networking services that facilitate connections between innovation developers, implementers, investors, and policy actors.

Beyond technical support, scaling innovation depends critically on the presence of enabling conditions that nurture continuity, trust, and strategic investment. Key enabling factors identified include:

- Availability of robust digital infrastructure and data platforms such as the EcoDaLLi Portal, providing open access to tools, data, and learning resources that facilitate informed decision-making and knowledge exchange.
- Policy coherence and vertical integration, ensuring that innovations can be mainstreamed into spatial planning, water management, climate adaptation, and biodiversity protection policies at local, regional, and national levels.
- Structured, recurring, and modular training programmes, offering progressive learning pathways for diverse stakeholder groups (e.g., municipalities, SMEs, NGOs, farmers, and community organisations).
- Stable and diversified funding sources, moving beyond project-based, ad hoc grants toward longer-term financial mechanisms, leveraging instruments such as Horizon Europe, Interreg, and LIFE programmes.

## Barriers and Constraints

Despite the availability of mechanisms and opportunities, several persistent barriers, identified in all the resources consulted, limit the effective upscaling of innovations in the Danube region:

- Siloed governance structures, where different policy sectors (environment, economy, energy, transport) operate in isolation, impeding systemic approaches.
- Mismatch of skills, particularly the shortage of expertise in areas critical for scaling such as investment readiness, business development, and cross-sectoral negotiation.
- Scarcity of dedicated infrastructure, such as pilot sites, living labs, and demonstration areas, which are vital for validating innovations before broader replication.
- Regulatory uncertainties and fragmentation, leading to legal inconsistencies across countries and discouraging private sector investment in innovative restoration solutions.
- Lack of funding opportunities.

These constraints emphasise the need for systemic reform, not only technical fixes, to create an environment truly conducive to innovation upscaling. Based on the comprehensive analysis conducted under D5.1 and the feedback collected from stakeholders, a set of strategic directions is proposed to strengthen the upscaling of innovation across the Danube Basin (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Recommendations for the training programme regarding innovation upscaling. **Sources:** D3.2, D5.1, survey and interviews.

Recommendation	Category	Source	Format translation	Target group	Benefits	Addressed Barriers	Engagement likelihood
<b>Align regulatory frameworks across countries.</b>	Governance	Interviews, D3.2	Workshop/ Webinar	Policy makers	Harmonise rules to facilitate the replication of innovative solutions	Regulatory uncertainties and fragmentation	Medium
<b>Support agro-farming and regenerative farming</b> via the use of Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) platforms to connect and promote such innovative initiatives.	Circular economy	D3.2	Workshop/ Webinar/ Field visit	Policy makers, Civil society, Academia, Businesses	Advance circular economy transitions	Mismatch of skills	Medium/ High
<b>Strengthen awareness-raising activities and training programmes</b> on Good Agricultural Practices via expanding technical capacity and building stakeholder	Circular economy	D3.2	Workshop/ Webinar/ Field visit	Businesses, Civil society, Academia	Foster peer-to-peer learning, strengthening stakeholder engagement	Mismatch of skills	Medium/ High

engagement at the local level.							
<b>Align capacity-building programmes with the objectives</b> of the Danube Lighthouse and Mission Ocean.	Cross-sectoral	D5.1	Workshop/ Webinar	Policy-makers, Businesses, Academia, Civil society	Promote competencies such as systems thinking or interdisciplinary collaboration	Mismatch of skills	Medium
<b>Develop operational guidance frameworks</b> , in providing templates for business planning, financing strategies, legal compliance and risk management protocols and monitoring and evaluation systems, incorporating social and ecological impact indicators.	Cross-sectoral	D5.1	Workshop/ Webinar	Businesses, Academia	Support systematic scaling processes	Lack of funding opportunities  Scarcity of dedicated infrastructure	Medium
<b>Strengthen transnational and cross-sectoral knowledge exchange</b> via Living Labs, innovation fairs, joint programming initiatives, and digital knowledge platforms.	Cross-sectoral	D5.1	Workshop/ Webinar/ Field visit	Academia, Businesses, Policy-makers, Civil society	Foster cross-border learning, Promote best practice sharing, Stimulate collaborative development pathways across sectors and regions	Regulatory uncertainties and fragmentation  Mismatch of skills  Siloed governance structures	Medium/High

<p><b>Create enabling legal and policy frameworks</b> that support scaling efforts to harmonise regulatory frameworks across national borders and provide targeted financial and fiscal incentives.</p>	Governance	D5.1	Workshop/ Webinar	Policymakers	Facilitate the replication of successful innovations in new contexts	Regulatory uncertainties and fragmentation	Medium
						Siloed governance structures	

In light of these recommendations, scaling innovation should be understood as a dynamic, multi-level, and socially-embedded process. It requires coordinated action, sustained investment, institutional adaptation, and the empowerment of local communities. By embedding scaling strategies into the governance systems of the Danube region, nurturing an innovation-oriented culture, and promoting collective learning processes, it is possible to accelerate the ecological transition and contribute significantly to achieving the objectives of Mission Ocean, as well as to the long-term resilience of the Danube’s freshwater and coastal ecosystems.

Some good examples of small-scale innovation with high replication potential across territories can be found “*in the **Green Hatchery** at the Middle Danube demo site—an innovative NbS that supports wetland restoration in a protected area under the DaWetRest project. It introduces long-term ecological monitoring by transferring responsibilities to local authorities, ensuring continuity beyond the project. Additionally, citizens are engaged through a digital platform, promoting participatory data collection and awareness*”.

### 3. Recommendations on citizens engagement techniques

Engaging citizens is essential for ensuring that ecological restoration efforts in the Danube River Basin are both inclusive and sustainable. When local communities are actively involved, restoration initiatives gain valuable insights, build stronger local support, and increase their long-term impact.

In the context of EcoDaLLi, citizen engagement goes beyond raising awareness or gathering feedback. It is viewed as an ongoing, collaborative process that enables individuals and communities to take part in shaping ecological outcomes. This involves using a variety of participatory tools, fostering open dialogue, and creating opportunities for shared decision-making between citizens, experts, and institutions.

As part of D3.2, four workshops were held in 2023 with the aim of fostering dialogue and collaboration among local stakeholders across the Danube River Basin. These workshops were designed not only to identify and address critical environmental and socio-economic challenges but also to explore the role of citizens in shaping sustainable solutions.

All workshops have also recognised the need to empower citizens, by involving them in co-creation and co-design processes. In fact, such an empowerment process would contribute to leverage the barrier of people's distrust in NbS, by associating them from the beginning in the development of such innovative practices, thus sensitising them to the related benefits of such solutions. Based on these observations, we recommend the following action:

This section also synthesises insights from D5.1 (Catalogue of Services Supporting Innovation), with a specific focus on citizen engagement techniques. Drawing on findings from surveys, workshops, Living Labs, and interviews conducted throughout WP5, it identifies effective methods for involving citizens in ecological restoration and innovation processes across the Danube region. These insights form the basis for a set of targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening citizen participation and improving the design and implementation of participatory strategies. Training and education are critical to fostering stakeholder readiness and innovation literacy. T5.2 of EcoDaLLi has highlighted the importance of tailoring training programmes to diverse audiences, including municipalities, NGOs, private actors, and citizens.

### **Inclusion and Equity: Engaging Marginalised Communities**

Strengthening citizen engagement involves more than just inclusion in participatory processes and activating local networks. Monitoring activities, tailored to different generations and target groups, have been highlighted as a key technique to successfully integrate citizens into innovative solutions like NbS. Based on these observations, we recommend the following action.

Engaging these groups ensures that a broader range of lived experiences, priorities, and knowledge systems contribute to the co-design of solutions. This inclusivity enhances the cultural and social relevance of restoration interventions, reinforces public legitimacy, and improves uptake and long-term stewardship of ecological assets.

In practical terms, equity-oriented engagement means designing processes that are accessible, linguistically and culturally appropriate, and adapted to the needs of specific groups. It also requires tackling structural barriers to participation, such as digital exclusion, mobility constraints, or institutional distrust.

#### **Useful examples and projects:**

- Danube Delta Living Lab: Focused on biodiversity, engaging 200 participants in discussions on resource protection. It also engages local communities and experts to develop conservation measures. This combination of local and expert knowledge enhances innovation potential by offering solutions to complex environmental problems.
- Lower Danube Living Lab: Addressed innovations in water supply systems, with the contribution of 200 participants offering diverse perspectives.
- Middle Danube Living Lab: Focused on climate change adaptation, involving 150 participants from local authorities, experts, and communities.
- In Draž, stakeholders—including entrepreneurs and NGOs—collaborated to develop climate resilience and sustainable water use solutions.
- Events like the International Forum on Sustainable Development helped share research findings and promoted broader application of successful practices.

- Open digital platforms, such as the [EcoDaLLi Portal](#), which serve as hubs for information sharing, collaborative mapping, crowdsourcing of ideas, and citizen science contributions.
- Living exhibitions and demonstration projects, offering physical and symbolic spaces for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and experiential learning.
- **Youth Inclusion Toolkit** developed within the NBS EduWORLD project, which offers a variety of methods for local governments to engage with youth. This includes youth surveys, hackathons, board games, and youth councils—techniques that aim to sensitise, empower, and involve younger audiences, while also restoring trust between communities and local institutions.
- Urban-scale examples such as [CLEVER Cities \(Belgrade\)](#) illustrate how participatory processes can revitalise underused spaces, turning them into multifunctional ecological infrastructures co-created by communities. These models confirm that innovation is strengthened when it emerges from collective intelligence, practical experimentation, and place-based values.
- Workshops—such as the "Deltas and Wetlands" symposium involving 178 participants—enabled the co-design of actionable plans tackling environmental, social, and economic challenges.
- The "[whole school approach](#)" integrating ecological practices into the daily life of schools. This approach views the school as a living lab, connecting not only students and teachers but also parents, local associations, and the broader community, to create a more holistic and inclusive learning environment.
- In France, the National Museum of Natural History has developed educational activities focused on biodiversity monitoring, which can serve as an inspiring model for similar initiatives.
- EU-funded projects like [NBS EduWORLD](#), implemented in cities like Paris and Belgrade. The NBS EduWORLD project has also produced some [learning units](#) to help local governments in designing such monitoring activities in their respective territory.
- Simpler scientific protocols with printed materials to accommodate those who may face digital barriers. An example of this approach is the [Vigie Nature Oiseaux programme](#), developed by the National History Museum of Paris.
- Inclusive innovation is not only an ethical necessity but a strategic requirement for sustainable and just ecosystem restoration. As demonstrated by initiatives such as *Connecting Nature* in Sarajevo, actively involving marginalised communities—including children, elderly residents, low-income groups, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities—can profoundly reshape both the process and outcomes of innovation.

### Expanding Citizen Science: from data collection to societal transformation

Defining citizen science is not easy. It is at once a tool, a methodology, a political stance, and a philosophy of knowledge. Its application within ecological restoration spans from simple monitoring activities to more complex processes of co-producing data, narratives, and even governance proposals. While traditionally associated with data collection — especially regarding biodiversity and water quality — citizen science increasingly acts as a driver for social innovation, challenging conventional boundaries between experts and laypeople.

In the Danube context, citizen science initiatives should not be reduced to auxiliary tools for data generation, but instead recognised as active mechanisms of epistemic justice. They enable new actors to participate in defining what counts as valid knowledge, especially in territories where formal data infrastructures are weak or contested. Such processes contribute



to what scholars term “hybrid knowledge systems,” where official and community-based data interact to inform planning and restoration.

A critical aspect often neglected in citizen science initiatives concerns the ethics of data governance. Who owns the data? Who has the right to access, re-use or monetise it? As communities collect increasingly valuable environmental information, there is a need to shift from traditional data-sharing protocols (e.g. FAIR: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) to approaches that also respect community rights and priorities (e.g. CARE: Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics).

In the Danube Basin, the cross-border nature of restoration and the presence of marginalised or rural communities make these questions particularly urgent. Training programmes should thus include a specific focus on ethical data management, co-developed consent protocols, and the development of data charters or common governance frameworks.

Beyond monitoring, citizen science can trigger institutional change and even legal action. In several international cases, community-generated data have been used to challenge environmental decisions in court or pressure for policy change. The EcoDaLLi framework could build on this potential by connecting citizen science with civic environmental rights, supporting training modules on science-based advocacy, and establishing legal advisory services to validate and support such initiatives.

This potential is particularly relevant in areas of environmental degradation or contested infrastructure development, where official monitoring is limited or politicised. Citizen-generated evidence can fill gaps, increase transparency, and serve as a basis for claims to environmental justice.

Despite its transformative potential, citizen science is not without risks. When poorly designed, it can lead to tokenistic participation, data extraction without community benefit, or volunteer burnout. For example, expecting communities to continuously collect complex data without feedback, recognition or integration into decision-making processes undermines trust and reduces long-term engagement.

### **Towards Place-Based Citizen Science in Living Labs**

The EcoDaLLi Living Labs represent a fertile ground for experimenting with place-based citizen science, where local communities not only monitor their environments but also help define indicators, identify problems, and design responses. In this perspective, citizen science is not merely a tool, but a means of democratising innovation.

Incorporating territorial knowledge, cultural memory, and lived experiences can enrich scientific understanding and improve the legitimacy of restoration efforts. Training should thus include ethnographic methods, storytelling, and mapping exercises that allow the integration of multiple knowledge forms, including those that are not easily quantifiable.

### **Barriers and Constraints**

According to the **literature, surveys and stakeholder interviews** analysed in WP3 and WP5, citizen engagement in the Danube region faces several persistent barriers. The data reveals

recurring challenges that can hinder citizen involvement efforts, even in sectors strongly focused on sustainability:

- Citizen’s lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations
- Fragmented or underrepresented local stakeholder networks
- Differences in generational perspectives and community interests. The elderly being considered as more reluctant to such innovative practices or attributed to on the ground misunderstanding about the potential NbS, that are sometimes perceived as against any economic development.
- Lack of meaningful involvement of local communities
- Distrust between the local communities and the different layers of governmental
- Limited inclusion of marginalised or vulnerable communities
- Promotion of long-term ownership and resilience
- Limited citizen participation (e.g. Limited number of responses when trying to involve citizens via surveys and interviews)

In light of these barriers, the table below (Table 3) gathers the recommendations for the training programme, indicating for each recommendation the barrier it intends to address, the expected benefits, its innovation category, its source, its format translation for the training programme, its target group and its engagement likelihood.

**Table 3.** Recommendations for the training programme regarding citizen engagement. **Sources:** D3.2, D5.1, survey and interviews.

Recommendation	Category	Source	Format translation	Target group	Benefits	Addressed barrier(s)	Engagement likelihood
<b>Develop awareness campaigns in local languages</b> about the benefits of NbS and other innovative practices.	Social Innovation	D3.2, workshops , Interviews	Webinar/ Local workshop	Civil society, NGOs	Facilitated knowledge exchange, Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Recognition and motivation mechanisms	Citizen’s lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations	High
<b>Target primary and secondary education institutions</b> to raise awareness about the impact of water pollution.	Social Innovation	D3.2, workshops , Interviews	Field visit/ Local workshop	Academi, Citizens	Facilitated knowledge exchange, Peer-to-peer learning	Citizen’s lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations	High
<b>Establish a “matchmaker” role</b>	Cross-sectoral	Interviews	Webinar/ Local	Governments and public	Enhanced stakeholder	Limited citizen participation	High

before innovative action implementation, bridging the gap between technical language and local understanding, making the concepts and goals of the project clear, relatable, and accessible.			workshop/ Video explainers	bodies	engagement & participation	Citizen's lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations  Limited inclusion of marginalised or vulnerable communities	
<b>Map the existence of citizens' associations and networks across the four Danube territorial units</b> to include them in the co-design and participatory processes mentioned above.	Governance & Policy	D3.2, workshops, Interviews	Field visit/ Local workshop	Academia, Civil society, Local governments	Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Fostered cross-sectoral collaboration	Fragmented or underrepresented local stakeholder networks	Medium
<b>Target specific key groups within the local community</b> , such as farmers and farmers' associations, to address particular pollution issues and involve them in the participatory processes.	Cross-sectorial	D3.2, workshops, Interviews	Local workshop/ Field visit	Civil society, Public bodies	Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Fostered cross-sectoral collaboration, Targeted community empowerment	Fragmented or underrepresented local stakeholder networks  Lack of meaningful involvement of local communities	High
<b>Adapt monitoring activities</b> to engage different target groups, via creating synergies between education and NbS projects.	Social Innovation	D3.2	Local workshop/ Card games, board games/ Citizen science with tailored scientific protocols	Civil Society, Academia, NGOs	Peer-to-peer learning, Facilitated knowledge exchange	Generational and interest differences	High
<b>Establish a group of targeted and key citizens</b> active during the project to ensure project legacy and continuity at the local level.	Cross-sectorial	Interviews	Local workshop/ Field visit/ Capacity-building sessions	Civil society	Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Targeted community empowerment	Lack of long-term ownership and resilience	High
<b>Institutionalise the representation of marginalised voices</b> through youth councils, community forums, and gender-responsive facilitation frameworks.	Social Innovation, Governance & Policy	D5.1, D3.2	Webinar/ Local Workshop	Civil society, NGOs	Tools development, Peer-to-peer knowledge, Facilitated knowledge exchange, Youth	Distrust between the local communities and the different layers of	High

<p>For instance, drawing <b>inspiration from tools like the Youth Inclusion Toolkit</b> developed within the NBS EduWORLD project</p>					<p>empowerment and inclusion</p>	<p>governmental institutions</p>	
<p><b>Include information on incentives, compensation mechanisms, and funding options</b> to support and recognize citizen engagement as a valuable co-production of knowledge and impact.</p>	<p>Finance</p>	<p>D5.1</p>	<p>Webinar/ Survey</p>	<p>Governments and public bodies, Businesses</p>	<p>Enhanced stakeholder engagement &amp; participation, Influence on funding and policy, Facilitated knowledge exchange, Recognition and motivation mechanism</p>	<p>Limited inclusion of marginalised or vulnerable communities</p>	<p>High</p>
<p><b>Decentralise funding via channeling resources</b> directly to local actors from the outset, to ensure that <b>tangible benefits reach the community</b>, and to strengthen ownership and long-term commitment.</p>	<p>Financial</p>	<p>Interviews</p>	<p>Webinar/ Local workshop</p>	<p>Governments and public bodies, Businesses</p>	<p>Enhanced stakeholder engagement &amp; participation, Influence on funding and policy, Targeted community empowerment, Recognition and motivation mechanisms</p>	<p>Lack of long-term ownership and resilience</p>	<p>High</p>
<p><b>Cultivate communities of practice and identify local champions</b> who can drive the continued use, adaptation, and scaling of the knowledge and innovations introduced.</p>	<p>Social Innovation</p>	<p>D5.1, Interviews</p>	<p>Local workshop</p>	<p>Civil society, NGOs, Academia, Governments and public bodies</p>	<p>Knowledge of best practices, Facilitated knowledge exchange</p>	<p>Lack of long-term ownership and resilience</p>	<p>High</p>
<p><b>Develop and enforce participatory standards and minimum inclusion criteria for EU-funded projects</b>, accompanied by clear guidance on best practices and ethical engagement.</p>	<p>Governance &amp; Policy</p>	<p>D5.1</p>	<p>Knowledge exchanges</p>	<p>Policy makers, Civil society, NGOs</p>	<p>Enhanced stakeholder engagement &amp; participation, Knowledge of best practices, Inclusive governance frameworks</p>	<p>Limited inclusion of marginalised or vulnerable communities</p>	<p>Medium</p>
<p><b>Link engagement platforms to monitoring and adaptive governance mechanisms</b> to enable</p>	<p>Cross-sectorial</p>	<p>D5.1</p>	<p>Local workshop/ Webinar</p>	<p>Governments and public bodies, Civil society</p>	<p>Facilitated knowledge exchange, Enhanced stakeholder</p>	<p>Lack of long-term ownership and resilience</p>	<p>Medium/ High</p>

continuous feedback, foster social learning, and ensure flexibility in decision-making over time.					engagement & participation, Adaptive governance and social learning		
<b>Collect more citizen-generated data through surveys, participatory platforms, and consultations</b> to ensure local knowledge and lived experiences shape project design from the beginning.	Social Innovation	D5.1	Survey	Civil society	Facilitated knowledge exchange, Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation	Limited citizen participation	Medium
<b>Support capacity-building programmes,</b> incorporating new communication strategies, storytelling techniques, and digital literacy	Social Innovation	D5.1	Webinar/ Local workshop	Civil society, Academia	Facilitated knowledge exchange, Tools development	Limited inclusion of marginalised or vulnerable communities	Medium
						Lack of long-term ownership and resilience	
<b>Assess willingness to adopt pro-environmental behaviours and launch targeted awareness campaigns and Living Labs</b> to raise public interest in ecological restoration, tailored to different demographics and local contexts to ensure relevance, relatability, and actionability.	Social Innovation	D5.1, Living Labs	Field visit/ Local workshop	Civil society, Governments and public bodies	Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Targeted community empowerment	Citizen's lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations	Medium
<b>Involve citizens in the interpretation of collected data through Living Labs</b> to support the development of context-specific, responsive strategies that reflect community challenges and needs.	Cross-sectorial	Living Labs	Field visit/ Local workshop	Civil society, Governments and public bodies	Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Facilitated knowledge exchange	Citizen's lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations	High
<b>Create feedback loops</b> to ensure citizens are informed about how their input influences project decisions, thereby building trust and	Governance & Policy	Survey responses, Living Labs	Webinar/ Survey	Civil society, Governments and public bodies	Enhanced stakeholder engagement & participation, Recognition and motivation mechanisms	Citizen's lack of information or distrust regarding potential innovations	High

encouraging continued engagement.							
<b>Develop best practice guidelines and incorporate case studies</b> that highlight successful citizen engagement techniques.	Governance & Policy	Living Labs	Webinar/ Toolkit/ Participatory forum	Policymakers, Governments and public bodies	Knowledge of best practices, Facilitated knowledge exchange	Lack of long-term ownership and resilience	High
<b>Organise workshops and citizen science initiatives that enable hands-on involvement</b> in ecological restoration and innovation activities.	Social Innovation	Living Labs	Field visit/ Workshop	Civil society, NGOs	Facilitated knowledge exchange, Targeted community empowerment	Lack of long-term ownership and resilience  Limited citizen participation	High
<b>Foster collaboration between Living Labs</b> to stimulate creativity and broaden the pool of ideas	Cross-sectorial	Living Labs	Local workshop/ Field visit/ Peer-to-peer exchanging sessions	Academia	Facilitated knowledge exchange, Cross-sectoral collaboration, Tools development	Lack of long-term ownership and resilience	Medium
<b>Adapt and tailor communication materials to the age groups</b> , via the declination of communication supports and channels. Inspiration can be taken from the DaWetRest project.	Cross-sectorial	Interviews	Communication toolkit/ Webinar/ Education sessions	Civil society, NGOs	Facilitated knowledge exchange	Citizen's lack of information or distrust  Generational and interest differences	High

All those recommendations are supporting the bigger shift from top-down methods to bottom-up approaches. As the interviews conducted highlighted: *“One of the most effective approaches is **moving beyond top-down methods** and actively reaching out to isolated communities, involving them from the very beginning of the project. The goal is to engage citizens not just as recipients of information, but as **committed partners in the co-creation process**. This requires a clear **shift from a top-down to a bottom-up approach**, ensuring that community voices are heard early on and that they contribute meaningfully to the design and implementation of ecological solutions”.*

## Conclusion

This milestone is intended to serve as a reference document and stimulus for the EcoDaLLi expert panel in shaping and advancing the WP5 training programme. It synthesises key insights into innovation potential, upscaling mechanisms, and citizen engagement strategies relevant to the four Danube territorial basins. Its recommendations are aimed at guiding panel discussions and supporting the co-development of training pathways that are context-sensitive, inclusive, and actionable.

As a living document, the recommendations herein are open to adaptation as the project evolves. Their relevance may change depending on the implementation of future training activities such as workshops, innovation fairs, or online learning modules. The document thus provides a shared baseline to initiate reflective and strategic dialogue among EcoDaLLi partners and stakeholders.

## List of resources

*Deliverable 3.2, Reports of at least 4 sessions organised by EcoDaLLi as part of established events*, ICLEI Europe, EcoDaLLi project, February 2024, 55p.

*Deliverable 5.1, Catalogue of services supporting innovation*, ACTeon, EcoDaLLi project, January 2025, 53p.

Chappon, M., Kálmán, A., & Bene, K. (2023). Negotiating Stakeholder Preferences to Improve Project Sustainability; a Case Study from Szigetköz, Hungary. Hungary.

Koch, E., Ray, R. P., Tonni, L., & Marchi, M. (2023). Sustainable levee construction along the Danube River. In *9th International Congress on Environmental Geotechnics* (Vol. 4, pp. 399-408). Online Library of the ISSMGE.

Koukouvinis, P., & Anagnostopoulos, J. (2023). State of the art in designing fish-friendly turbines: concepts and performance indicators. *Energies*, 16(6), 2661.

## List of interviewees

Ms. Raluca Nicolae, Technical Director of the Environmental Department at Geostud. Interview held on May 28, 2025.

Dr. Viktoria Czuppon, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Pannonia. Interview held on June 6, 2025.

## Annex 1 - Interview questions

### Introduction

Could you briefly present yourself (organisation, expertise, projects involved, etc)?

### Section 1 – Innovation Potential

1. Based on your experience, what are the main barriers currently limiting innovation capacity in freshwater ecosystem restoration in the Danube region?
2. Which types of innovation (technological, social, financial, governance) do you consider most underdeveloped but promising in your context?
3. What kind of support or capacity-building would be most useful to foster innovation within local or regional institutions involved in restoration?

### Section 2 – Innovation Upscaling

4. Which enabling conditions (e.g., regulatory alignment, funding access, institutional support) do you consider most crucial for scaling innovative solutions in the Danube basin?
5. Can you share any example of an innovation (even small-scale) with high replication or transfer potential across territories?
6. What role do you see for cross-border cooperation in facilitating innovation upscaling? Are there specific challenges or mechanisms you would recommend?

### Section 3 – Citizen Engagement Techniques

7. What are the most effective methods you have seen for engaging citizens or stakeholders in co-creation of ecological solutions?
8. In your view, how can Living Labs better integrate marginalised communities in the development and testing of innovations?
9. What type of educational or awareness-raising actions are most needed to overcome scepticism or distrust toward innovative solutions such as Nature-based Solutions (NbS)?
10. What is, in your opinion, the key element to ensure long-term citizen engagement beyond the duration of individual projects or funding cycles?