



AfriFOODlinks

Living Lab by EStà in Lusaka

Building food governance: first steps of the
Food Desk

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1. Context of the Living Lab

Within the AfriFoodLinks project, EStà leads Task 5.5, which focuses on “Connections with Open Innovation Actors.” EStà’s contribution lies in conceptualizing and operationalizing an inclusive and socially grounded approach to Open Innovation, aimed at mapping and engaging a diverse ecosystem of actors in both European and African urban food systems. This involves analyzing definitions and practices of Open Innovation, supporting the design and implementation of Living Labs, and facilitating cross-context learning through surveys, literature reviews, and stakeholder engagement. EStà also contributes to the development of methodological guidelines, supports capacity building, and ensures that social dimensions—such as community engagement, equity, and cultural relevance—are integral to innovation processes.

Task 5.5 foresees the design and implementation of Living Labs with Afrifoodlinks cities. For this reason, EStà developed an original methodology of Living Lab and selected innovative cities to apply it to. Each Living Lab uses the same methodology and vision but is customised and adapted to the local context.

For EStà, a Living Lab is a facilitated, participatory process that starts from a specific need or guiding question and involves a diverse range of stakeholders. The goal is to create cohesion, foster mutual understanding, and build a shared commitment around common policy objectives.

Through open dialogue and co-design, a Living Lab helps:

- Create cohesion among key stakeholders
- Foster the participants’ engagement and ownership of the process
- Understand shared issues and needs
- Legitimize decision-making processes
- Build capacity for collaborative governance
- Develop a shared vocabulary and knowledge base
- Clarify common goals and visions

By doing so, LLs serve as catalysts for open innovation in policy-making, enabling local actors to take ownership and co-create solutions that are both effective and grounded in real-world complexity.

2. Why Lusaka?

The Lusaka pilot project under the AfriFoodLinks initiative focuses on strengthening urban food governance through the establishment of a centralized Food Systems Office within the Lusaka City Council (LCC). This office serves as a coordination hub to synergize food-related initiatives, overcome fragmented governance, and improve policy alignment.

Key Objectives and Activities

- Establish and operationalise the Food Systems Office, recruiting a coordinator with expertise in food systems governance.
- Map and monitor all internal and external food-related projects to enhance coordination and avoid redundancy.
- Strengthen the Lusaka Food Policy Council as a multi-stakeholder platform for collaboration, holding quarterly meetings for strategic dialogue.
- Develop a long-term sustainability strategy, including national government involvement and partnerships with other cities.
- Address infrastructural challenges, such as power disruptions, through alternative solutions.

Expected Transformations

- Enhanced governance of Lusaka's urban food systems.
- Institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder collaboration through the Food Policy Council.
- More efficient and effective coordination of ongoing food-related initiatives.



3. Program of the main workshop

Before the workshop in Lusaka, EStà coordinated remotely with key partners—UNZA (University of Zambia), Hivos, and the Lusaka City Council—to align on objectives and structure the co-design process. This preparatory phase laid the groundwork for a shared understanding and collaborative approach. Upon arrival in Lusaka, EStà conducted one-on-one meetings with key local stakeholders, allowing for a deeper contextual insight and the establishment of trust-based relationships. These conversations were essential to fine-tune the workshop content and ensure alignment with local priorities.

In parallel, EStà took part in the launch event of the Freshgrows project, which served as a key opportunity to connect with a broad network of stakeholders active in the food and sustainability sectors. This event significantly enriched the mapping of actors and perspectives relevant to the local food system and urban policy landscape. Through this multi-layered engagement strategy, EStà ensured that the co-design process was informed, inclusive, and anchored in Lusaka's real-world dynamics.



3.1. The agenda

9.00 - 9.15	Welcome and registration	
9.15 - 9.30	Program of the day	Està
9.30 - 9.40	Welcome from the City council	City Council
9.40-9.50	Introduction of the project AfriFoodlinks	HIVOS
9.50-10.00	The Food Desk Process	UNZA
10.00-10.20	Introduction of EStà and key questions for the day	Està
10.20-11.15	Capacity building - The institutionalisation of food policies: ingredients and examples from the abroad	Està
11.15 - 11.30	Tea Break	
11.30 - 13.00	Group activity	
13.00-14.00	Lunch	
14.00 - 14.20	Welcome, summarizing from the morning and introduction of the afternoon	Està and HIVOS
14.20-14.40	Inspirational speech	Està
14.40 - 16.00	Group activity	
16.00-16.30	Closing remarks	Està and UNZA

4. The methodology

EStà has developed a distinctive Living Lab methodology designed to foster open innovation in the policy domain, with a strong alignment to the United Nations 2030 Agenda. The approach is grounded in the idea that complex societal challenges—such as those related to food systems, climate action, and urban resilience—require collaborative, systemic, and context-sensitive responses. Each Living Lab begins with the identification of a specific need or research question, which may arise from a funding opportunity, a partner organization, a local authority, or EStà’s own fieldwork and observations. From this starting point, EStà formulates a working hypothesis and builds a stakeholder map representing four categories: Government, Academia, Civil Society, and Industry. Ensuring diverse and meaningful participation from these sectors is a foundational principle.

The methodology unfolds across several key phases:

1. Explore: Està identifies a need, which may originate from a local stakeholder, a funding call or a project, or from Està itself, and formulates a Living Lab hypothesis in response. Based on this hypothesis, and with the help of local stakeholders, Està maps stakeholders across the four categories of the Helix Model (Government, Industry, Civil Society, Academia).

2. Engage: Està conducts an initial environmental scan and stakeholder interviews to refine the research question, validate the hypothesis, and co-define expected outcomes. This step allows Està to tailor the process to local realities and to surface key tensions, aspirations, and opportunities.

3. Design: Està assumes the role of Curator, developing the workshop design in dialogue with the convening partner. This includes defining the workshop's theme, objectives, expected results, and the list of invitees. Particular attention is given to inclusiveness, accessibility, and linguistic diversity. The physical and relational setup of the workshop is carefully planned to encourage openness, creativity, and equity among participants.

4.. Meet-Up: The Living Lab workshop is structured as a facilitated group process composed of several interactive and co-creative moments. The process is underpinned by seven guiding principles: urgency, dialogue, respect, complexity, multi-stakeholder inclusion, continuity, and trust. These create the conditions for a meaningful, transformative experience for participants.

5. Feedback & Follow-up: After the workshop, Està provides a concise, accessible report that captures the key results, highlights participants' voices, and offers forward-looking recommendations. The report is not only a record of what happened but a tool for continuing the conversation and supporting future actions.

Està's Living Lab methodology is more than a tool—it is a process of collaboration and co-creation. By nurturing shared ownership, common language, and collective intelligence, the Living Lab acts as a catalyst for long-term alliances and systemic change. It brings together institutions, practitioners, researchers, and citizens to navigate complexity, build trust, and design policy solutions that are inclusive, grounded, and impactful.

4.1. The stakeholders

The Living Lab involved councillors from the Lusaka City Council and a set of key stakeholders identified by our team in loco (UNZA, Hivos and City Council):

- Civil Society Organization-Scaling Up Nutrition (CSO-SUN)
- Community Technology Development Trust-CTDT
- Solidaridad
- Zambia Bureau of Standards
- Zambia Land Alliance
- Consumer Unity Trust Society
- District Agriculture Coordinating Office
- University of Zambia
- Loctaguna Organics
- GIZ
- FAO
- Agriconnect
- Hivos

Between the morning and the afternoon session, 35 actively people participated in the Living Lab. The entire workshop is co-organized with UNZA (University of Zambia), Hivos, and the Lusaka City Council to ensure a deep understanding of the local context, foster shared ownership of the process, and guarantee institutional legitimacy. This collaborative design strengthens the relevance and impact of the outcomes by aligning them with the perspectives, priorities, and responsibilities of key territorial actors.

5. The activities

5.1. Capacity building

EStà opened the day by introducing the concept of institutionalising food policies—meaning the formal integration of food-related issues into government structures and decision-making frameworks. This process is essential to ensure long-term commitment, policy continuity beyond political cycles, and the capacity to enact systemic change. Institutionalisation supports greater effectiveness, transparency, and coordination in addressing complex food system challenges, moving beyond fragmented interventions to structured, policy-driven action.

The capacity building highlighted the practical dimensions of structured food governance, advocating for the creation of legal mandates, dedicated offices such as Food Policy Councils, cross-departmental coordination, and the inclusion of civil society, academia, and the private sector in decision-making. Embedding food strategies into broader urban frameworks—such as public health, planning, and climate policies—was presented as a critical strategy, alongside securing stable

funding and fostering citizen engagement. However, several challenges were also acknowledged. These include fragmented governance landscapes, insufficient political will, lack of reliable data, weak participatory mechanisms, and institutional resistance to change. Overcoming these barriers requires not only political commitment but also adaptive, inclusive governance models.

Three main approaches to food governance were discussed: institution-led governance, where city or national institutions develop and manage policies; multi-stakeholder governance, which relies on participatory bodies such as Food Policy Councils; and champion-driven governance, where individuals or organisations act as catalysts for policy innovation and advocacy.

Drawing from international experience, EStà presented case studies from Milan, Turin, and Rome. Milan demonstrated a comprehensive model where research institutions and political actors collaborated early on to create a dedicated Food Policy Office and integrate food into city planning, with support from the Milan Urban Policy Pact. Turin offered an example of strong civil society engagement and innovative practices despite the absence of a formal policy. Rome illustrated a gradual, grassroots-led process that culminated in the creation of both a Food Policy Council and a technical Food Desk, highlighting the importance of participation and continuity. From these examples, key lessons emerged for Lusaka: recognise food as a fundamental right; engage the community in mapping and monitoring the food system; build political support around urgent issues; create legal mandates and operational roles within city governance; align local policies with international commitments; and ensure coordination through dedicated platforms like food desks or councils.

Capacity building concluded by setting a clear path forward for Lusaka: to develop a structured, inclusive governance framework that responds to local realities while drawing inspiration from global experiences.



5.2. Group activity

The heart of the Afrifoodlinks Living Lab unfolded in two dynamic and highly participatory group sessions designed to activate collective intelligence around local food governance.

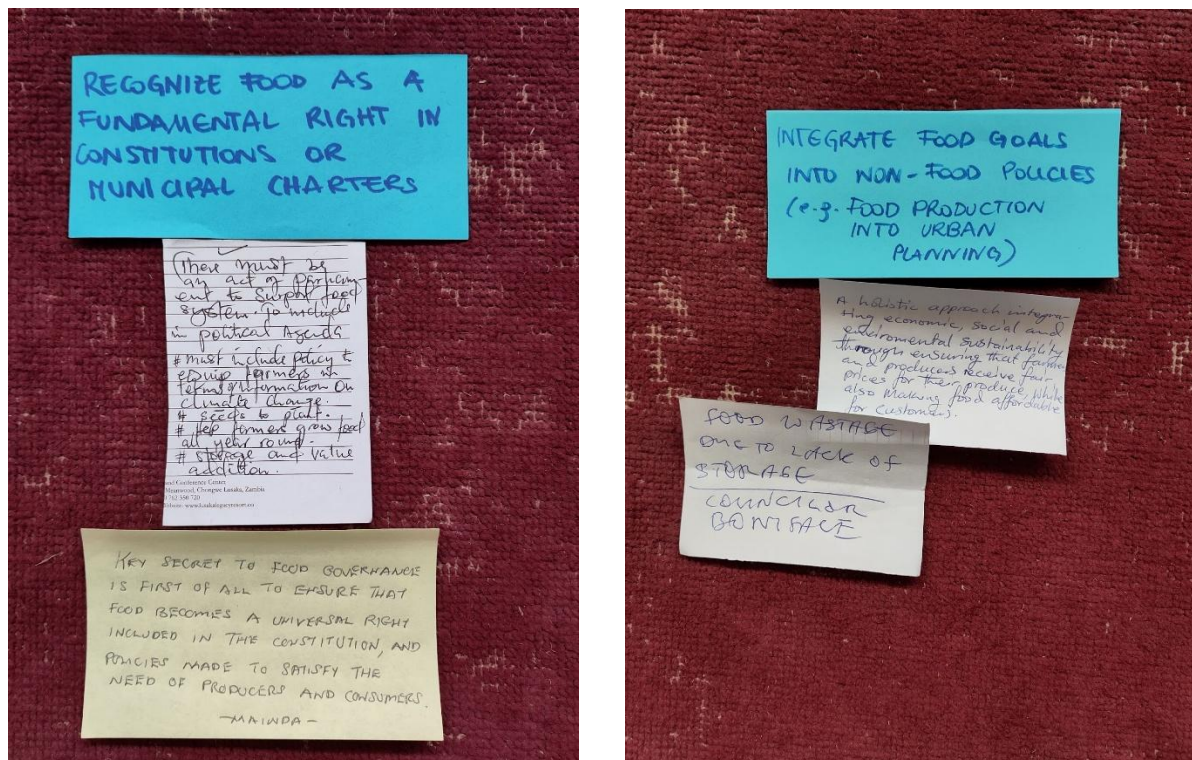
In the morning, after an inspiring capacity-building session on international food policy experiences, participants gathered in four multi-stakeholder groups to begin shaping their vision for Lusaka's food future. The first task invited each group to formulate a compelling question—something they would like to ask the facilitators based on the morning's discussions. This opening round allowed for a moment of clarification, exchange, and connection between local curiosities and broader policy expertise.

Then came the main creative challenge: designing the “perfect recipe” for a sustainable food governance system in Lusaka. Each group received a set of “ingredients” curated by EStà—principles and elements drawn from best practices in the field—as well as the option to add up to two “secret ingredients” previously identified individually by participants earlier in the day. Using a large poster, groups were asked to give their recipe a title, list their chosen ingredients, and describe the method—the step-by-step process to combine them into an effective governance model. This playful yet rigorous format encouraged both strategic thinking and imaginative collaboration. The session closed with a plenary sharing, where each group presented its recipe, highlighting common values and contextual nuances.

The main ingredients to the perfect recipe that the councillor highlighted are here summarised:

1. **Acknowledge Political and Resource Challenges:** Limited budgets and political will are major barriers to implementing effective food systems, requiring strategic planning and stakeholder mobilization.
2. **Support Farmer Empowerment and Adaptation:** Effective food governance should include actions that help farmers adapt to climate change, improve year-round productivity, and access seeds and storage solutions.
3. **Mobilize Multi Level Stakeholder Involvement:** Successful food policy processes depend on inclusive participation, involving community members, local councils, and district authorities in both planning and monitoring.
4. **Foster Local Knowledge and Innovation:** Policies should draw from local knowledge and experience, encouraging innovation and consistent consultation with stakeholders and communities.

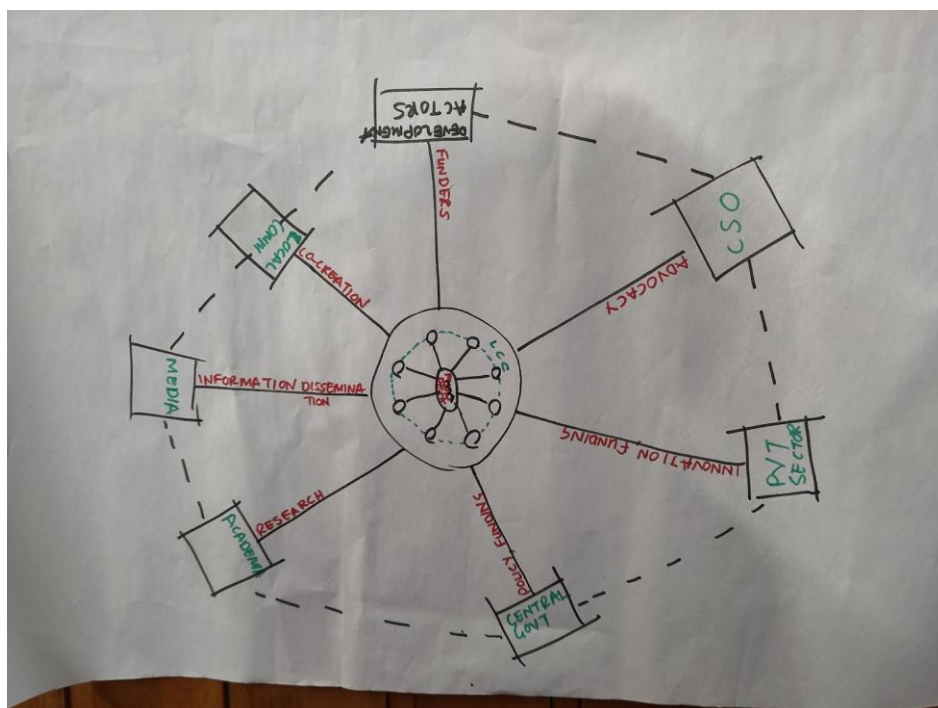
5. **Reduce Food Waste and Improve Distribution:** Address structural issues such as food loss due to inadequate storage and promote local food trading in safe and accessible environments.
6. **Enhance Data Transparency and Communication:** Open and user-friendly platforms are needed to publish and share information about the food system, increasing transparency and accountability.
7. **Raise Public Awareness and Education:** People need to understand the broader impacts of food waste on the environment, economy, and food security to support behavioral and policy change.
8. **Encourage Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration:** Strengthening coordination, knowledge exchange, and mutual learning among stakeholders can significantly improve the food system's effectiveness.



In the afternoon, the focus shifted from ingredients to implementation paths. Participants were reorganized into three new groups, again ensuring diversity of backgrounds and affiliations. This time, they worked with structured frameworks representing different models of food governance. Their task: to select the model they would like to see in place in Lusaka—not necessarily the current one—and to populate it with key actors, including the City Council, the Food Desk, and a prospective Food Policy Council. Additional stakeholders could be added freely. Crucially, groups also defined the remit and responsibilities of each actor within

the governance framework, and concluded by identifying a concrete first step they felt ready to take to activate the proposed model.

All groups selected a similar structure for the governance where the Lusaka City Council and the food desk would have a central role in the entire food governance and act as coordinator and leader of the different territorial actions. Hence the first steps identified have been related to the operationalisation of the food desk and the strong need to actually make it work as soon as possible.



Facilitators from EStà and local partners provided support throughout the group work, ensuring that all voices were heard and that each team reached a meaningful outcome. The process was both generative and empowering, reinforcing the value of co-creation as a foundation for sustainable policy design.

6. The feedback

The feedback collected from participants through the evaluation form at the end of the workshop paints a strongly positive picture of the Afrifoodlinks Living Lab in Lusaka, both in terms of its overall quality and its impact on knowledge, engagement, and dialogue.

A total of 14 participants completed the evaluation, with a perfect gender balance: 7 male and 7 female respondents. The age group most represented was between 31 and 50 years (11 participants), followed by younger attendees aged 19–30 (2 people) and one participant over 50. This reflects an engaged and experienced group of professionals, primarily in their mid-career stage.

The stakeholder composition was diverse and aligned with the quadruple helix model. Academia was the most represented group (4 participants), followed by local authorities (3), local NGOs (2), and single participants from international NGOs, government institutions, civil society groups, private foundations, and consumer organizations. This diversity added significant value to the co-design process, bringing together perspectives from research, governance, activism, and the public. Participants expressed high satisfaction with the workshop, assigning an average score of 3.7 out of 4. They also highlighted the value of the session in creating a constructive and engaged dialogue, which was rated at 3.4 out of 4. The participatory methodologies received widespread appreciation (average score: 3.8 out of 4), confirming their effectiveness in fostering inclusive discussion and collaborative thinking.

A particularly notable outcome was the increase in participants' knowledge on the topic of sustainable food governance in Lusaka. Self-assessed understanding rose from an average score of 5.0 before the workshop to 9.1 after, indicating a significant leap in comprehension and awareness facilitated by the session's content and format.

Participants also felt comfortable (4.0/4) and involved (3.7/4) throughout the day, reinforcing the strength of the facilitation and the sense of collective ownership built during the event. While the tone of the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, several participants pointed out one recurring limitation: time constraints. Many felt the day was too short to explore the issues in sufficient depth and requested longer or multi-day formats in future editions. A few also noted the need for improved time management during transitions and activities, and one suggested that future workshops be hosted in venues less affected by internal institutional disruptions.

Another recurring suggestion was to share preparatory materials in advance, such as policy background documents, to allow participants to engage more deeply and contribute more critically. Finally, one respondent emphasized the importance of inclusion, encouraging future sessions to actively involve youth, women, people with disabilities, and other marginalized voices in the food governance conversation.



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