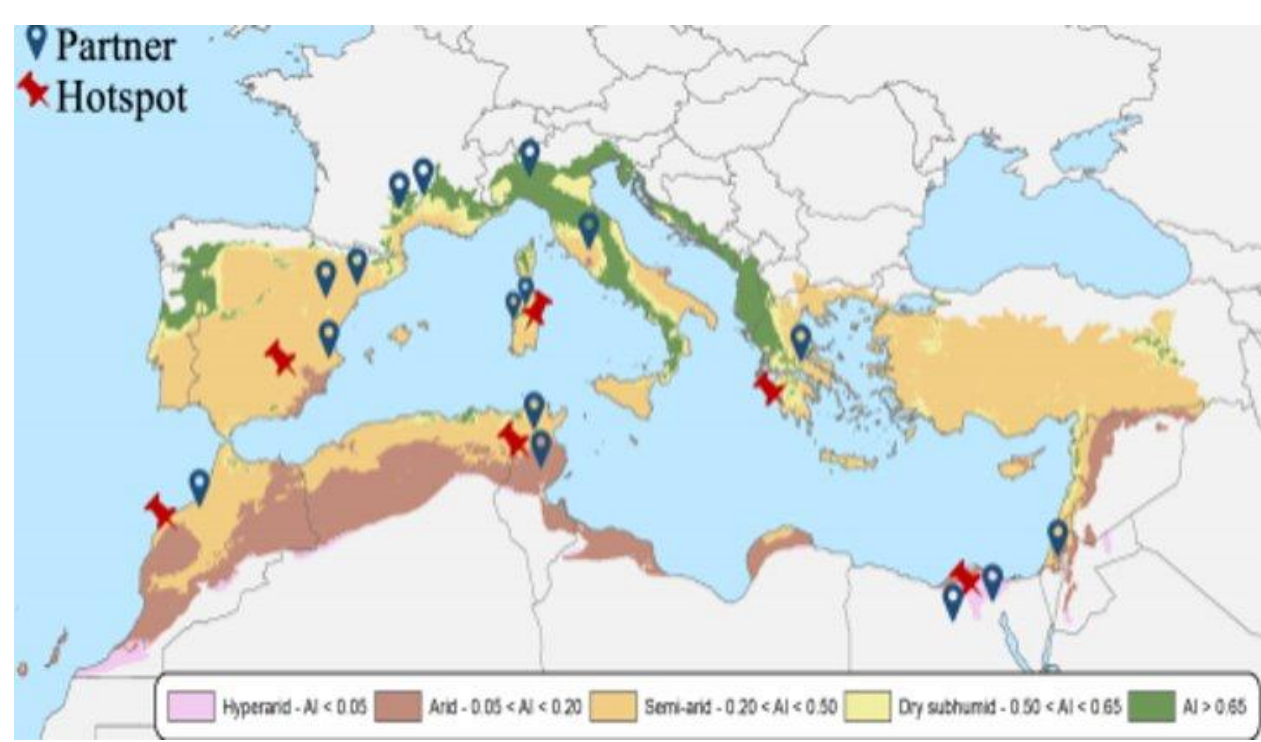


# Connecting Science and Local Knowledge: Lessons from Stakeholder Engagement in SALAM-MED

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Land and water degradation are critical challenges across Mediterranean drylands, affecting livelihoods, ecosystems, and resilience. SALAM-MED addresses these issues by testing and co-designing Nature-based Solutions (NbS) through six Living Labs located in Spain, Greece, Italy, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. Stakeholder engagement is a central component of this approach, aiming to connect scientific research with local knowledge, validate NbS under real conditions, and build ownership and collaboration among communities, policymakers, and researchers.



✓ **Connecting science and local knowledge through stakeholder engagement has proven essential to co-design Nature-based Solutions that are both effective and socially grounded in Mediterranean drylands.**

## Stakeholder Engagement approach

SALAM-MED applied a Living Lab methodology to foster co-creation and continuous interaction between scientific and non-scientific actors. Stakeholder engagement activities were embedded in the project's General Assemblies and complemented by on-field visits, ensuring direct dialogue with local communities and practitioners.

The process followed a structured yet adaptive framework:

- Stakeholder mapping based on the quadruple helix model (policy, science, business, and civil society).
- Stakeholder Engagement Workshops (SEWs) combining discussions, demonstrations, and field observation.
- Iterative feedback integration, where insights collected during SEWs were used to refine Living Lab activities and research priorities.
- Cross-country comparison to identify common themes and context-specific challenges across the six Mediterranean sites.

This approach allowed the project to bridge research and practice, validating Nature-based Solutions (NbS) under real-world conditions and enhancing their social and environmental relevance.

## Social and political impacts

- The stakeholder engagement process strengthened trust and collaboration between researchers, local communities, and institutions. By creating spaces for dialogue during General Assemblies and field visits, the project fostered mutual learning and increased awareness of sustainable land and water management practices. Participants reported enhanced understanding of NbS applications, improved networking among local actors, and greater motivation to maintain collaboration beyond the project's lifespan.
- SALAM-MED's participatory approach helped connect field-level experiences with policy and governance discussions. Interactions with local and regional authorities highlighted the relevance of NbS for territorial planning and climate adaptation strategies. The project also contributed to reinforcing institutional capacity by promoting coordination between research institutions, public agencies, and local organizations.

Together, these outcomes demonstrate how structured stakeholder engagement can create lasting social and institutional value, ensuring that scientific innovations are both legitimate and actionable within real Mediterranean contexts.

- Inclusiveness was a guiding principle of the SALAM-MED stakeholder engagement strategy. Particular attention was given to involving youth, women, and early-career researchers in both the scientific and field components of the project.
- During the Stakeholder Engagement Workshops and field visits, young professionals and women researchers actively participated in data collection, facilitation, and communication tasks, strengthening their technical and interpersonal skills. In several Living Labs, women farmers, cooperative members, and local entrepreneurs shared valuable traditional knowledge and contributed to the co-design of Nature-based Solutions.

These experiences promoted knowledge exchange, confidence, and visibility for groups often underrepresented in research and policy processes, reinforcing SALAM-MED's commitment to inclusive innovation and capacity building in Mediterranean drylands.