

Terra Agora Labs

Version 3.1 · 30 August 2026

The Portuguese version of this document is the binding version.

Living laboratories for long term regeneration

What Terra Agora Labs Are

Terra Agora Labs are planned as real places where regeneration can be tested and learned over time. The first Lab initiative is planned for 2026. No Lab has yet been established.

The framework described in this document is settled. The practice of measuring, namely baselines, periodic monitoring and reporting that is comparable across landscapes, is being built in stages and reaches full operation during the course of 2027.

A Lab is a region, not a parcel. It takes in the land, the people who work it, the enterprises that depend on it, the municipality, the schools, the associations and the people arriving from elsewhere, and treats all of it as one living system rather than a set of separate problems. Unlike research centres or pilot projects, Labs will operate inside real ecological, social and economic conditions, over long horizons.

A Lab does not require the Foundation to own land in that region.

Where the Foundation holds land, a Lab can build on it. Where it holds none, a Lab can exist all the same, convened with landowners, Guardians, municipalities, enterprises and institutions already there. This matters: the places that most need this work are not the places where the Foundation happens to hold title.

Labs are not demonstrations. They are sites of responsibility.

Each Lab will exist to:

- Test regenerative practices in real landscapes
- Generate practical knowledge grounded in lived reality
- Support Guardians, communities and institutions in learning what works and what does not
- Build evidence, capability and trust for long term land care

Why Labs Matter

Portugal faces systemic challenges that cannot be solved through short projects or abstract research:

- Fragmented land ownership and unmanaged territory
- Ageing landholders and a lack of new entrants
- Soil degradation, water stress and biodiversity loss
- Declining rural populations and fragile local economies

Terra Agora Labs respond to this gap by creating spaces where:

- Regeneration can unfold at landscape scale
- Learning is cumulative rather than extractive
- Ecological, social and economic dimensions are held together

- Knowledge is generated with land and communities, not about them
- Labs turn uncertainty into learning, without putting land at risk.

What a Company or a Patron Would Be Supporting

A living system in one region, with many actors inside it

Most environmental support buys an output: trees planted, hectares treated, a report delivered. A Lab is a different proposition. What is supported is a region's capacity to look after itself: the relationships between the people there, the knowledge they build together, and the economic activity that makes staying viable.

There is a pattern the Foundation meets repeatedly. A company has roots in a region, often because the family of its founder comes from there, and would rather do something durable in that place than fund a project anywhere. It has no land there, no wish to acquire any, and no appetite for operating anything. What it has is a reason to care and the means to convene.

That is exactly what a Lab needs and exactly what a region can rarely pay for. The Foundation brings the standard, the method and the independence; the region brings the actors and the knowledge; the supporter makes the convening possible over enough years for it to count.

The Foundation's Role Here Is Catalyst

In a Projecto Guardiã the Foundation holds land and holds a standard. In a Lab it does neither. It convenes.

The purpose of convening is threefold, and the third matters most:

- Knowledge: what is learned in one place, recorded so that it can serve in another
- Solidarity: people who were each solving the same problem alone, working on it together
- Innovation: new ways of making a living from a place without consuming it

Innovation sits at the centre of the Labs because it is the part almost nobody else is doing. There is no shortage of diagnosis about rural decline, and no shortage of restoration technique. What is scarce is what lies between them: economic arrangements that make care of a landscape a livelihood rather than a subsidy.

A Lab is therefore built to carry an idea all the way. From what a place already knows, through what can be tested on the ground, to an activity that can employ somebody. That last step requires incubation, which is a discipline in its own right and one the Foundation does not claim to have. It will be done with partners who do. Conversations with social innovation incubators are exploratory; nothing is agreed.

The Underlying Argument

Why a region, and why economic form is the missing piece

The reasoning behind the Labs is not the Foundation's invention. It follows an argument worked out in rural Spain, set out here because it explains what the Labs are for.

Twentieth century policy divided territory in two: zones for production, meaning cities, industry and intensified agriculture, and zones for conservation, administered by limiting economic activity rather than integrating it. The combined zone, where people make a living by looking after a place, was left

out. Much of what conservation policy calls natural space is not natural at all: it is cultural landscape that entered ecological drift when the management stopped.¹

Depopulation, on this reading, is not a sentimental loss but a functional one. The small rural settlement was a structure for managing an ecosystem. When it empties the management stops, and the consequences arrive as fire, as loss of biodiversity, and as a landscape nobody answers for.

The response is not to restore what was there. The people who held that knowledge are gone, and nostalgia is no use. What is needed is a generation who know what the old ones knew and a good deal besides, and an economic form they can work within: diversified, built on value added rather than scale, in which maintaining the ecosystem is part of the production rather than a cost set against it.

Two consequences follow for how a Lab works. Rules are made for one place and do not transfer; there is no template, and a Lab arriving with one would fail. And the unit of organisation is collective rather than individual, which is why cooperatives and neighbourhood structures recur in this work.

What Happens Inside a Lab

Each Terra Agora Lab will integrate four core dimensions.

1. Ecological practice

- Regenerative land use approaches adapted to local soils, water, climate and biodiversity
- Long term ecological monitoring, not short term indicators alone
- Learning how landscapes respond over years and decades

2. Social and community processes

- Working with local communities, municipalities and neighbours
- Testing participatory governance and shared care of the land
- Rebuilding social connection to land as a living system

3. Economic viability

- Exploring regenerative livelihood models rooted in place
- Testing financial sustainability over horizons of ten years or more
- Understanding what makes Guardianship economically viable without extraction

4. Governance and responsibility

- Applying guardianship agreements, standards and oversight
- Learning how governance holds under pressure, conflict or change
- Generating insight into long term institutional design

Labs will be places where responsibility is exercised, not simulated.

How Terra Agora Labs Generate Value

Terra Agora Labs are intended to generate multiple forms of value, aligned with the Four Returns framework, the work of Willem Ferwerda, developed by Commonland: inspirational, social, natural and financial.

¹The argument is that of Jaime Izquierdo Vallina, «Una nueva economía para la aldea del siglo XXI», *Mediterráneo Económico* 35 (2021), pp. 105 to 120. Commonland reaches the same observation about the missing combined zone by a different route.

Inspirational return

- Practical learning for Guardians, policymakers and funders
- Replicable insights for land trusts and institutions
- Credible evidence that long term care is possible and workable

Social return

- Stronger local relationships and shared care of the land
- Increased community capacity to care for land collectively
- Reduced conflict through clear roles and governance

Natural return

- Improved soil health, water retention, biodiversity and ecological function
- Evidence of regeneration that unfolds over time, not in single snapshots

Financial return

- Viable regenerative livelihoods and land based enterprises
- Reduced long term public and environmental costs
- Demonstration of alternatives to extractive land economics

Value is not extracted from Labs. It accumulates over time.

Who Labs Are For

Terra Agora Labs will serve multiple audiences:

- Guardians: to learn, adapt and strengthen practice
- Landowners: to understand what long term care can look like in reality
- Investors and funders: to see tangible value created beyond financial return
- Institutions and policymakers: to access grounded evidence for long term land policy
- Learning Pathway participants: as places of real world learning and mentorship

Labs will act as a bridge between land, practice, learning and governance.

How Labs Are Funded and Governed

Labs are intended to be supported through Foundation core funding via the Comunidade Terra Agora, purpose bound funds for monitoring, learning and research, and legacy partnerships supporting learning, research or dissemination. None of these funding routes is yet in place.

Key safeguards:

- Labs do not compromise land protection or the asset lock over the Strategic Assets
- Patrons do not control land use or outcomes
- Learning is transparent, ethical and accountable
- Financial support never overrides ecological or social integrity

Progress is managed, not merely reported. A shared platform is planned, so that what each Lab learns is recorded consistently and can be compared with another, and so that the cost of monitoring does not fall on the people doing the work.

Platform evaluation is under way and full operation is expected during the course of 2027.²

A loss of natural capital in the Strategic Assets is not compensable by financial gain.

Labs exist inside the Foundation's governance framework, not outside it.

Why This Matters for Investors and Partners

Terra Agora Labs will allow supporters to:

- Invest in long term value, not short term outputs
- See how regeneration performs under real conditions
- Support learning that benefits entire landscapes and systems
- Contribute to institutional knowledge that outlives any single project

Supporters are invited to sponsor a region and the people in it, and not to direct them. What the support buys is the possibility of the work, never a say in its outcome.

A Closing Note

Regeneration cannot be proven in theory alone. It must be lived, tested, monitored and carried through time.

Terra Agora Labs will exist so that:

- Land is not experimented on without care
- Learning does not happen without accountability
- The future is built from practice, not promises

Labs are where regeneration will become credible.

Framework note

The Four Returns framework is the work of Willem Ferwerda, developed by Commonland. Its twenty year cycle is a planning and monitoring cycle. The Foundation's own horizon is permanence across generations, with a working horizon of seven generations for a Projecto Guardiã.

Invitation

If you would like to learn more about a Terra Agora Lab, we invite you to begin with a conversation.

Caring for land, learning and responsibility, across generations.

Terra Agora Foundation

²One of the candidates under consideration is ValueFlow. No selection has been settled as at this version.