

Mapping Report on Challenges



BELGIUM



**Improving Farmers' Wellbeing
through Social Innovation**

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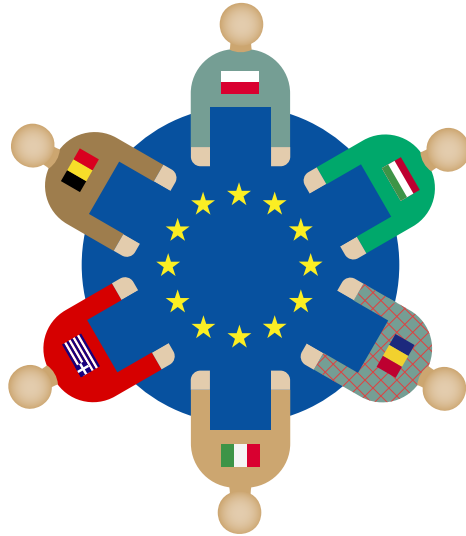
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1.

Introduction

This paper is part of a larger Horizon 2020 Thematic Network entitled 'FARMWELL'. This project aims at mapping social innovations in farming and making these social innovations more accessible for farmers and the larger community, with the prime purposes of improving the overall wellbeing of individual farmers, farming households and the larger rural community. With this purpose in mind, 6 European countries (Belgium, Greece, Romania, Poland, Italy and Hungary) have systematically mapped the main social challenges they are being confronted with. Based on this mapping exercise, a set of social challenges have been selected for deeper elaboration and analysis. In addition, a set of social innovations have been mapped that aim at improving the wellbeing of individual farmers, farming households and rural communities.

This research which took place in the first half of 2021 is meant to provide a systematic evidence base upon which social innovations in farming can be analyzed further on their effectiveness and made more accessible through innovate communication. In addition, these papers should enable a productive exchange of ideas



and insights between different European countries and partners involved in the FARMWELL project.

This paper presents a case-study on Belgium. After this introduction, PART 2 'Methodology/data gathering' will present the main methodological steps undertaken in mapping and analyzing these social challenges and innovations. PART 3 'Description of main challenges' will provide a general introduction to the main challenges Belgium is being confronted with. In part 4 'Analysis of selected theme(s) in social challenges', a limited number of social challenges is being selected and delved into in a systematic manner and based on primary data gathering. For this paper, one social challenge has been selected for further elaboration: barriers for coping. Part 5 then gives a concise summary of the main arguments and insight put forward in the paper. The paper is finally concluded with a table that provides 10 important social challenges in Belgium that have the explicit aim of improving the overall wellbeing of individual farmers, farming households and rural communities.

2.

Methodology/ data gathering



Primary data-gathering, in combination with a literature analysis constitute the basis of this mapping paper. Published literature – in particular government reports with recent data on the state of agriculture in Belgium – has been used to come to grips with the main socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the farming sector in Belgium. The main findings of this literature analysis have been integrated in section 3.1. ‘*Overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the farming population*’ and section 3.2. ‘*Socio-economic characteristics of the farming population*’. These two sections will enable the reader to obtain a basic understanding of the specificities of the farming sector in Belgium. Where possible, country-specific findings are put in a larger European perspective.

The second part of the paper consisting of the more in-depth elaboration of social challenges and social innovations, is based on a longer process of data-gathering over different stages organized by ILVO and a set of Flemish farming organizations. This data-gathering was and is part of a larger research line that has been developed over

the years within ILVO on wellbeing among farmers in Flanders. For obvious reasons, the EU funded Farmwell project that started on January 1, 2021 forms a major component of this research line and its further development.

A first stage of data gathering was organized between November 2018 and March 2019 and consisted of 3 components. First of all, a quantitative questionnaire was distributed among 650 farmers from the agricultural monitoring network database. These data allowed to obtain a representative overview on the number of farmers whom experience stress and social challenges in their daily lives, how many seek help in case of problems, which types of aid channels they prefer ... These quantitative data have been complemented with two qualitative rounds of data-gathering throughout 2019. In-depth individual interviews have been conducted among 30 farmers. These farmers were both male and female, had a background in different farming sectors and were equally spread all over Flanders. A last component consisted of 9 focus group discussions, reaching a total of 60 farmers. Ultimately, 90 farmers, both men (41) and women (49) were consulted in this qualitative round of interviews. This first set of data provided a good insight in the major social challenges farming families are being confronted with (see also: Messely et al., 2020).

A second and third phase of data-gathering was organized in the first months of 2021. Digital interviews have been organized with a wide range of farming organizations, who have a special attention for farmers' wellbeing. The main objective was to better understand their overall strategy towards the problem of wellbeing in farming and get a better sense of ongoing programs and interventions in this regard. These interviews therefore constitute the empirical basis of the social intervention table at the end of this paper. All in all, representatives of 13 organizations have been approached. These 13 organizations can be divided

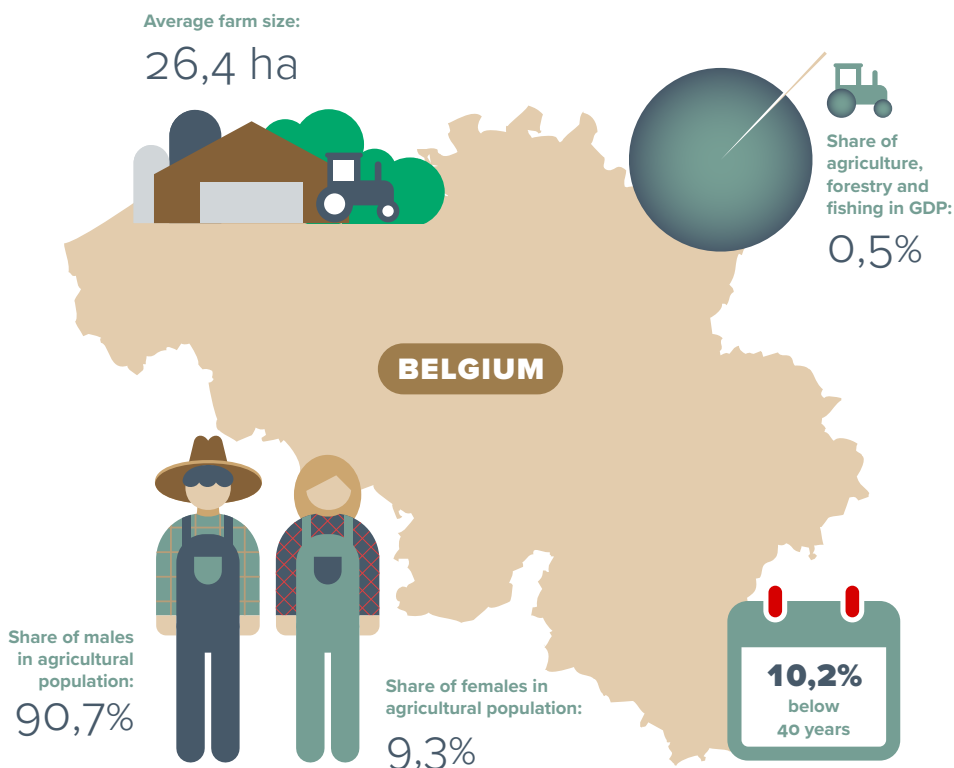
Digital interviews have been organized with a wide range of farming organizations, who have a special attention for farmers' wellbeing. The main objective was to better understand their overall strategy towards the problem of wellbeing in farming and get a better sense of ongoing programs and interventions in this regard.

into 8 'regular' farming organizations: (1) Algemeen Boerensyndicaat (ABS), 2) Vrouwen van het Algemeen Boerensyndicaat (VABS), 3) Jong-Algemeen Boerensyndicaat, 4) Boerenbond, 5) Ferm-Agravrouwen, 6) Groene Kring, 7) Bioforum and 8) Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) netwerk. Next, 2 farming organisations have been interviewed who have historically been set up with the specific objective to improve farmers wellbeing: 1) Boeren op een Kruispunt (BoeK) and 2) Landelijk Infopunt voor Vrouwen (LIV). These organizations were complemented with an interview with 3 government agencies: 1) Departement Welzijn, Volksgezondheid en Gezin (Department Wellbeing, Public Health and Family), 2) Agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid (Agency for Care and Health), 3) Departement Landbouw en Visserij (Department for Agriculture and Fisheries).

The third and last phase of data collection was organized throughout the months of February, March and April 2021. In this last round, ILVO mandated several farming organizations to start a round of digital group consultations among their members. In general: 5 to 10 members/farmers took part in these digital meetings. These consultations were organized around the three main issues that were distinguished through our first round of research in 2018-2019; that is: a) stress factors farmers are being confronted with, b) barriers to aid, c) individual competences to cope with stress factors. In order to avoid a replication of the findings that were already gathered, these group discussions explicitly focussed on solutions to the problems farmers are being confronted with in terms of stress, barriers to aid and individual competences. Crucial hereby was to get a better grip on certain solution/social innovations, based on a farmers' perspective and rooted in their everyday practice and experience. The following organizations have organized these digital focus group discussions: Ferm, Boerenbond, Innovatiesteunpunt, (V)ABS and Groene Kring. These organizations were provided with a briefing by ILVO and a standardized Powerpoint Presentation (PPT) with guiding questions to organize the discussions. Throughout the consultations, these PPTs with guiding questions were then filled in by the farmers organisations. The filled in PPT was then further complemented with informal notes and observations. All in all, 27 of these digital focus group discussions have been organized of which the data have been reported back to ILVO and are also being used in the writing up of this paper. Lastly, on June 22 and June 24, 2 practice groups have been organized within the framework of FARMWELL. These Practice Groups consisted of a total of 29 participants, almost equally divided over actual farmers (15) and representatives of farmers' organizations (14). In these Practice Groups, 2 actual social innovations have been discussed that attempt to deal with the 2 major social challenges that are systematically elaborated throughout this paper; limited coping mechanisms and barriers to aid. The insights gained through these Practice Groups is hereby described in part 4 'Analysis of selected themes in social challenges'.

3.

Description of main social challenges – national level



3.1. Overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the farming population

3.1.1. Declining Farm Population

When mapping the social challenges farmers in Belgium¹ are being confronted with, it is evident that Belgium follows some of the larger European and even global agrarian transformations, characteristic for the 20th and 21st century. An obvious general trend that can be noted is that the overall number of farms and farmers is declining. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of farms contracted with 60% in Flanders, whilst Wallonia was confronted with a decline of 56% over the same time period (DAEA 2020: 3).² Quite logically, the number of people working (both as owner-cultivators or as hired labour) in agriculture has also steadily declined over the years. Whilst in 1980, there still were 185.134 people working in agriculture in the whole of Belgium, in 2016, this number has subsided until 70.993 people (Statbel 2020). Quite logically, the relative contribution of agriculture to the national gross domestic product has declined until a measly 0,5%. It hereby needs to be mentioned that this number does not take into account the larger chain of agro-industrial companies involved in further processing, packaging ... of prime agricultural products. Overall, agriculture employs 1,2% of the total working population in Belgium, compared to 4,4% in the whole of the EU (Eurostat 2020: 167).

3.1.2. Ageing Farm Population

As in many other countries all over Europe, the overall farming population is ageing. Whilst in 2007, the average age of a farmer in Flanders was 50 years, by 2018, this had already increased to 54 years. Only 10% of all farms in Flanders in 2018 were headed by farmer below the age of 40 (Platteau et.al. 2018: 14). For the Wallonia

¹ Due to its particular institutional organization, literature on farming in Belgium tends to be divided among the Flemish and Walloon region. Policy in agriculture is also one that is divided over the different regions and is no longer a national, Belgian competence. As a result, little reference will be made in this report to the national level. Instead, the Flemish and Walloon region will mostly be treated separately.

² The data for the Flemish case are mainly deducted from the so-called 'Agricultural Report' (Platteau J., Lambrechts G., Roels K. & Van Bogaert T. (reds.) (2018) *Uitdagingen voor de Vlaamse land- en tuinbouw. Landbouwrapport 2018*, Departement Landbouw en Visserij, Brussel), published every 2 years by the Flemish department of Agriculture and Fisheries. This report is based on the compilation of a wide range of diverse data, the most important ones being: the 'Agricultural Monitoring Network' (landbouwmonitorsnetwerk) wherein the accountancy numbers of about 650 Flemish farms are being compiled and surveys organized by Statbel (Statistics Belgium). Data for the Walloon case are mainly retrieved from a recent report published by Direction de l'Analyse Economique Agricole (DAEA) (2020), '*Evolution de l'Economie Agricole et Horticole de la Wallonie*'. This report consists of a compilation of a diverse set of data, amongst others data compiled by the Direction Générale Statistique (DGS) and a wide variety of Walloon government administrations.

case, the most recent data could only be obtained for the year 2016 (SPW Agriculture, Ressources naturelles et Environment 2020). Here we see that that only 6% of the farmers are below the age of 35. By and large half (49%) of the total farming population is aged above 55. Based on these data, it can be argued that the average farmer in Belgium can be labelled as middle aged to old. This generational stratification in Belgium roughly follows the EU averages. For instance, in 2016, only 10,2% of the total farming population was younger than 40 in Belgium, whilst in the EU, this is a figure of 10,7% (Eurostat 2020: 166). Adding to this general characteristic is the observation that the average farmer is in general male, with 90,7% of farmers in Belgium being male. This figure is remarkably higher when compared to the EU average of 71.3% male farmers (Eurostat 2020: 12). The result of this downward trend is that farm succession has become a prime social challenge the farming sector in Belgium is being confronted with. In Flanders, only 13% of farmers indicate that they have a potential successor. The situation in Wallonia seems to be somewhat rosier when it comes to farm succession as 35% of Walloon farmers indicate that they have a potential successor (DAEA 2020: 2).

3.2. Socio-economic characteristics of the farming population

3.2.1. Farm Size

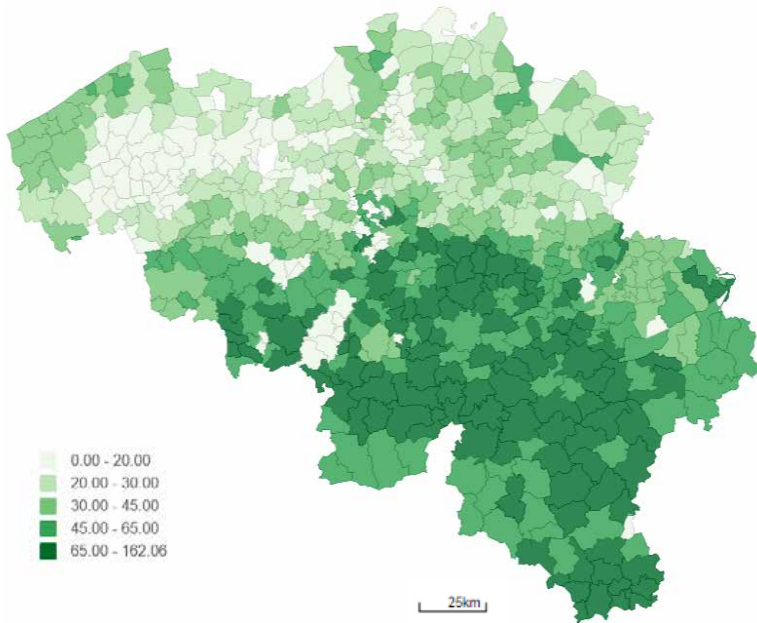
A potential hypothesis accounting for the difference between Flanders and Wallonia in terms of farm succession might lay with the larger farm sizes in Wallonia when compared to Flanders. In 2018, the average farm size in Flanders consisted of 26,4ha while the average farm in Wallonia totaled 57,3ha (Statbel 2020).³ This difference can clearly be detected from the map below showing how the larger farms are situated in the Southern Walloon region in Belgium while the smaller farms are clearly concentrated in the Northern Flemish region.

Both in Wallonia and Flanders larger farms experience less difficulties in finding a successor and it are particularly smaller farms facing this challenge. For instance, in Wallonia, those farmers declaring they have already found a successor on average have a farm of 74ha, those declaring not yet having found a successor have an average farm of 39ha (DEAE: 2).

³ For a correct interpretation of these data about the average acreage of a farm, it is important to take into account that the largest part of agricultural land is rented. In 2016, only 36,8% of all agricultural land in Wallonia was held as private property. For Flanders, this is a similar number with 38,1% of the agricultural lands being held as private property (DEAE 2020: 5).

Average farm size in ha. (Belgium 2019)

Source: Statbel 2020



	Wallonia	Flanders
1980	21ha	8ha
2000	37ha	16ha
2019	58ha	27ha

Source: Statbel 2020

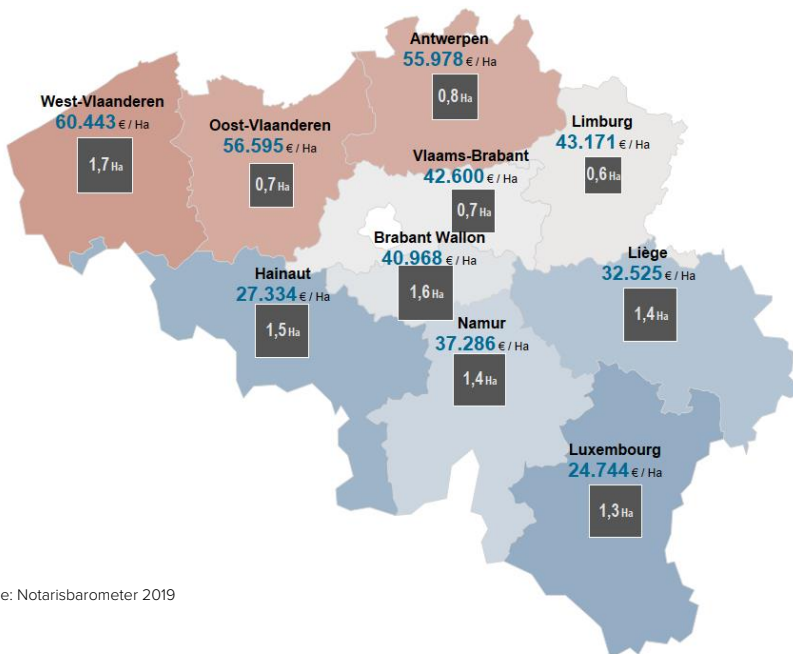
Importantly, the absolute decline in the number of farms and farmers mentioned above, needs to be seen as one of differentiation in the overall nature of farming, rather than being understood as the ‘end of farming’. When taking into account the changes occurring between 1980 and 2016, the average size of a farm in Belgium has tripled in terms of acreage (Statbel 2020). As can be deduced from the table below, this dynamic is more outspoken in Flanders when compared to Wallonia. Whilst in Flanders, the average farm size increased by a factor of 3.37; in Wallonia we notice an increase of 2.76.

Despite this scale enlargement, the large majority of farms in Belgium can still be labeled as family farms, although the share of hired labour has increased from 3,9% in 1980 to 27,9% in 2016 (Statbel 2020). It needs to be noted that some notable differences can be discerned over different sectors. For instance, data for the Flemish case (Platteau et.al, 2018: 76) illustrate that work in fruits, vegetables and floriculture farms, often with a more seasonal character, is for more than 75% done by hired labour, in many cases foreign hired labour. In sectors such as cattle and livestock, this percentage of external hired labour decreases to less than 20% percent with the large majority of these farms retaining their family character.

Due to this scale enlargement; land being used for farming in Belgium is not in sharp decline. When we overlook the period 1980 – 2019, we see the acreage of land being reserved for agriculture in Belgium remaining remarkable stable from 1.418.121 ha in 1980 to 1.358.705 ha in 2019 (2020). Interestingly, a significant 46% of the total surface of Flanders (Platteau et.al, 2018: 156) is being used for agri- and horticulture, despite being one of the regions in the world with the highest population density. In the case of Wallonia, this number lays somewhat higher at 54% (DAEA 2020: 3). These numbers for Flanders and Wallonia even lay above the EU average of 38,2% (Eurostat 2020: 164). As a result, despite the overall demographic decline of the farming population, agriculture remains very important in terms of its spatial impact on the landscape and its larger environmental consequences (both negative and positive). Despite this scale enlargement, it also needs to be mentioned that recently there is an increasing tendency wherein agricultural lands are being bought up and transferred from professional agriculture towards so-called recreational farming purposes. This dynamic can for instance be evidenced by the increasing popularity of tending horses, purely for leisurely purposes.

3.2.2. Price of Land

In 2019, the price of 1 ha of agricultural land in Belgium averaged 44.696 €, compared to an average price of 36.379 € in 2014 (Notarisbarometer 2019). It needs to be noted however that considerable regional differences can be discerned in Belgium. The map below shows the average price per ha. of agricultural land per province for the year 2019. In this map, the significant difference between the Northern Flemish region (West- Vlaanderen, Oost-Vlaanderen, Antwerpen, Limburg and Vlaams-Brabant), compared to the Southern Walloon region (Hainaut, Brabant Wallon, Liège, Namur and Luxembourg) can once again be noted. The squares show the average size of an individual parcel of agricultural land per province.



Source: Notarisbarometer 2019

3.2.3. Farm succession/young farmers

Young farmers find it increasingly difficult to start farming, one of the reasons being the sharp increase in the already high price of agricultural land the past years; although it needs to be mentioned this also poses problems for older farmers who wish to expand their business. As indicated by many young and old farmers alike, it has become near impossible to acquire new land, either through rent or as private property. Obtaining access to land is therefore understood to be among the largest needs among young farmers in Flanders (Platteau et.al, 2018: 153).

Adding to this high price for land, is the constant financial pressure of being up to date with new and competitive technological innovations. This puts serious strains on future financial viability, in particularly of small and medium-sized family farms who are being confronted with limited profit margins and often feel pressurized to take up loans, further adding to the overall feeling of financial insecurity and stress. An additional problem here is the observation that costs for diverse sorts of input, such as fertilizers or crop protection technology, has steadily increased over the years while the price of the actual agricultural products often has stabilized or even decreased. This has put further pressure on the financial profits and overall economic sustainability of many farms (Platteau et.al., 2018: 150). These problems of high capital input both for land

and technology, together with a general assessment that workload in farming is high when compared to other professions, makes that farming for many young people is no longer considered an attractive profession.

3.2.4. Family Income

As this paper fits within a project on social challenges, we primarily focus on annual family income in this section as an indicator for larger socio-economic wellbeing, rather than economic performance and efficiency per se.⁴ In a recent report published by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for the Flemish context (Departement Landbouw en Visserij 2021: 68), it can first of all be noted that there are significant differences between different farming sectors in terms of family income. As such, it makes very little sense to make definitive statements about the economic outlook of the overall farming sector. For instance, the average family income over the period 2014-2018 is remarkably higher in horticulture (93.600 €) when compared to agriculture (44.700 €). A remarkable outlier hereby is constituted by 'vegetables cultivated in greeneries' (glasgroentebedrijven) where the average annual family income over 2014-2018 is an impressive 206.800 €. When we look at agriculture more specifically, a remarkable low annual income is generated by beef cattle farms with an average family income of 15.400 €. When these data are recalibrated as average family income (AFI) per working hour (WH), we obtain the following data:

	Vegetables in Greeneries	Fruits	Pigs	Dairy Cattle	Arable Farming	Beef Cattle	Horticulture	Agriculture
AFI/MH	€ 44,00	€ 11,70	€ 15,30	€ 10,30	€ 11,10	€ 3,60	€ 19,90	€ 10,80

These data clearly indicate that there are notable differences between different farming sectors. Adding to that, we have to take into account that also within these sectors themselves, differences in terms of family income can be significant. Lastly, some sectors are, on average, clearly confronted with considerable financial difficulties and even outright poverty (Departement Landbouw en Visserij 2021: 79). This is particularly the case for those farms involved in beef cattle. Taking into account that the average Flemish households spends about 36.895 € a year, it is obvious that farming families earning their income uniquely through beef farming, can never spend this amount of money on a yearly basis. On the contrary, without an additional income, a large share of the cattle farmers in Flanders live below the officially designated poverty line.

⁴ These data are based on the recently published report: Departement Landbouw en Visserij (2021), Landbouwrapport 2020 (LARA), and only apply to the Flemish case.

3.2.5. Farming and Social Contestation

A last social challenge that needs to be mentioned is that farming families are increasingly being confronted with growing concerns about the societal and environmental impact of farming.

A last social challenge that needs to be mentioned is that farming families are increasingly being confronted with growing concerns about the societal and environmental impact of farming. This discussion seems to be most outspoken in Flanders due to its high population density and dominance of capital intensive farming.⁵ For instance, a heated debate was waged when throughout 2021 a Belgian daily 'De Standaard' (Renson 2020-12-01) published a series on the emergence of so-called 'megastallen' (mega stables). The underlying message of this series was that the growth of these mega stables raises new questions about societal impact (stench, landscape/open space, heavy trucks in residential areas ...) and environmental impact. Popular and widely read publications such as these have angered many farmers and farming organisations, openly stating that young people have increasing doubts whether to start farming in a societal climate that seems to be increasingly hostile against farmers. Discussions such as these about the impact of high-intensity farming seem to be somewhat less the case in the Walloon region for a number of reasons, including a lower population density and a more extensive model of farming, reflected in the larger average acreage as illustrated above. Another crucial difference between the Flemish and Walloon agricultural sector is the remarkable difference in the number of farms involved in organic farming. Due to regional policies actively supporting the transition towards organic farming, the Walloon region in 2018 had 14% organic farms, totaling a number of 1742 farms (SPW Agriculture 2020). This is significantly higher when compared to Flanders, where organic farms only constitute 2% (Platteau et.al. 2018: 13) of the total number of farms.

⁵ Another social characteristic of the farming population is that they are increasingly highly educated. Due to the capital intensive model of farming with its strong emphasis on technological innovation, farmers these days have to meet a set of diverse skills. This characteristic is reflected in the emphasis on education and training of the farming population in Flanders. For instance, in Flanders, the number of farmers with a so-called informal practical training is clearly declining. Among younger farmers of less than 40 years in 2016, this group consists of less than 20%, with over 80% having had some sort of formal agricultural education (Platteau et.al., 2018: 80).

3.3. Main stress factors the farming population is being confronted with

Before delving deeper into issues that negatively impact on farmers' wellbeing in Flanders, we first wish to give some basic data about the overall sense of wellbeing of the farming population and compare these with other socio-professional sectors. These data should allow the reader to better assess the relative gravity of some of the social challenges farmers are being confronted with. A first set of data is provided by the so-called Flemish 'werkbaarheidsmonitor' (work quality monitor) of 2019 (Bourdeaud'hui et.al. 2020). These data indicate that the relative number of farmers (43,4%) experiencing problems in terms of work-life balance is higher when compared to the average self-employed (30,4%). Next, 50,3% of farmers experience their work pressure as high, compared to 20,9% for the average self-employed. Based on these data, it can be concluded that farmers, compared to other socio-professional groups experience higher stress levels. These problems are also reflected in the survey conducted by ILVO wherein 48% of the respondents indicated that their work exhausts them mentally; 42% of the respondents state that their work has a negative impact on their social life (Messely et.al. 2020). At the same time, it needs to be noted that 50% of farmers indicate that they think they have a qualitative job (compared to 52,6% on average among self-employed) (Bourdeaud'hui et.al. 2020). It hereby seems to be the case that despite a high workload, many farmers still take pleasure and pride in farming. Qualitative data gathered by ILVO that will be discussed further below show how wellbeing is often intimately tied to a feeling of autonomy. Many farmers indeed indicate that they particularly enjoy their freedom and autonomy, of not having a boss who says what to do and what not to do, of not having to comply to the dull working rhythm of 9 to 5 office jobs. Another factor that is considered as positively contributing to wellbeing, is the fact that work is conducted outside, in nature. It is exactly when this sense of autonomy and freedom is being curtailed, that farmers find less joy and satisfaction in their job.

Based on a longer research trajectory developed by ILVO over the past years (for more information: see section 2: Methodology/data gathering), it has been argued that in particular two aspects have a direct impact on the overall wellbeing of farming populations; that is a) stress factors, and b) coping capacity. For a number of reasons, it has been decided to focus on the aspect of coping capacity for further elaboration in section 4. However, before delving more systematically into this discussion, we first wish to provide a general overview of the main stress factors that have been detected throughout this research.

3.3.1. Regulation and Administrative Burdens



“That’s why I no longer go to technical meetings anymore because you always come home with the feeling that you are doing things wrong [...] and I definitely don’t go to the managerial meetings! Because there you only get to hear what is forbidden or mandatory from now on. And by the time you get home it has already changed!”

A large number of our respondents indicated that they see regulation and administration as increasingly complex, rapidly changing and in some instances even highly irrelevant. Regulation, most prominently epitomized by a wide range of inspections taking place on the farms for a variety of issues, is hereby understood as evidence of a widening gap between the daily practice of farming versus the abstract and sometimes alienating logic of administration and policy. First and foremost there is the increasing amount of regulation, administration and monitoring that compels farmers to do certain things and prohibits others. In particular those tasks perceived as ‘externally imposed’ such as administrative work were often understood to be annoying, decreasing motivation, autonomy and negatively influencing wellbeing.

The amount and speed of changes in regulations for farmers could also be identified as a major source of frustration and many expressed anxieties that the complexity of regulation can result in certain administrative mistakes made by farmers, resulting in their turn in different fines and penalties. Many felt that regulation could always change in no time, forcing farmers to continuously adapt to be in line with novelties. As expressed by a male farmer:

“that’s why I no longer go to technical meetings anymore because you always come home with the feeling that you are doing things wrong [...] and I definitely don’t go to the managerial meetings! Because there you only get to hear what is forbidden or mandatory from now on. And by the time you get home it has already changed!” (Male, 46, mixed dairy and poultry farmer).

Most farmers expressed that they lack the time, and sometimes the knowledge to do all the administration

on time and in a correct way. Farmers talked about a sprawl of different specialised agencies responsible for supervision of specific legislation while farmers themselves have to know and present everything in detail, which often becomes too much to accomplish.

3.3.2. Financial Uncertainties

Many farmers in Flanders experience stress due to financial uncertainties. First, there are some farmers being confronted with outright poverty. As explained by a male dairy farmer:

"... today I took a picture of my refrigerator. If you would show that to a normal person, they would cry. You do have a capital that you are building with animals and so on. But, right now, the month has been so bad that I can't buy food at the end" (Male, 36, dairy farmer).

Quotes such as these confirm the observation made in the previous section that segments of the farming population in Flanders live below the poverty line and are confronted with structural poverty. However, there is also a second aspect apart from mere income and that is an increasing sense of uncertainty. There is a strong perception among multiple farmers that there is a growing risk of price fluctuations for their products and that there are increasingly more 'bad years' that can no longer compensate for the 'good years'. This significantly adds to uncertainty and stress. In addition, it was often mentioned that costs for investment are clearly on the rise, further adding to financial insecurity and high degrees of indebtedness. Tellingly, 49% of the farmers in Flanders indicate that they are not satisfied with their financial income (Messely et.al. 2020).

3.3.3. Professional Risks

Each farmer is confronted with a set of risks over which he/she has no control. These include amongst others diseases on animals and/or crops, extreme weather conditions ... In particular changing weather conditions and, more recently, some years of exceptional drought added to feelings of uncertainty and the assessment that a set of new challenges need to be met in the near future. Adding to that, farmers also realize that they are more susceptible for potential work accidents. These have a direct impact on the physical health of the farmer but can also potentially jeopardize the future of the farm as, in contrast to some other socio-professional sectors, it is near impossible to find a replacement with the same expertise and work experience.

3.3.4. Weak Negotiating Position

Farmers perceive their position in the larger commodity chain as weak and subordinate, best exemplified by the low price they receive for their agricultural products. In addition, it is being mentioned that farmers too often do not receive a fair price and that they have no control whatsoever over these prices. Importantly, these financial problems and low prices are perceived as evidence of an overall socio-political impotence of farmers. This perceived powerlessness and the feeling of increasingly being subjected to external (f)actors that determine whether their efforts result in success or failure weighs heavily on farmers. Besides the impact of the low prices on farm profitability and income, farmers struggled with their role as price takers because low prices can simply undo all the efforts made to develop a successful farm. In addition, farmers experience the low price that they receive for their products often as lack of respect and appreciation for their work. As explained:

“it is as if a farmer is doomed to keep producing at rock bottom prices [...] it’s a beautiful job, but it’s a shame they make it this hard ... Sometimes you see on TV that people say that we need the farmers. But we don’t feel that! Today we don’t feel appreciated for the products we produce by the supermarkets or buyers who come on the farm!” (Male, 36, dairy farmer).

3.3.5. Uncertain Future Perspective

Many farmers experience a constant pressure to grow, invest, enlarge ... in order to maintain an economically viable farm. Questions arise as to the limits of this model and whether these investments are still worthwhile. Very few farmers are convinced that holding on to a model of small-scale farming is a viable future oriented strategy, yet also feel stress due to the constant need for scale enlargement and financial investment in innovation. Also, many farmers indicate they have difficulties finding a successor, further adding to a whole set of questions surrounding the future and overall viability of their farm. The findings from the individual interviews and FGDs hereby confirm the larger observation put forward above that only a minority of 13% of farmers in Flanders indicate that they have a potential successor.

3.3.6. (Dis)respect and Performance

Many farmers explicitly indicate that they take pride in what they are doing. They also perceive their profession as an important and even essential one; feeding the larger population with good-quality and healthy products. As such, many farmers have an exceptional drive for what they are doing and consider long working hours

as normal. At the same time, many farmers experience a great deal of disrespect by the larger society, not being valued enough for the essential labour they are performing; a point already touched upon above when we discussed recent media reports that were interpreted by many farmers and farming organisations as proof of a society increasingly being intolerant towards farming. These frustrations also have to be understood against the background of societal discussions about the ecological impact of high-intensity farming. The impression of an overall negative media coverage feeds the impression of being 'under attack'. For some farmers this went as far as having the feeling of being 'unwanted' by society. As mentioned by a 58 year old male farmer:

"... what kind of feeling does society still have about us? They don't care. [...] Everyone is in their own world right now. The environment is central now. People want quality of life, a job, free time and beautiful and healthy nature. We no longer fit in with that, despite the fact that we are badly needed for food!" (Male, 58, Fruit farmer).

3.3.7. Demanding Performance

There is an increasing feeling that farming these days is a demanding profession. First of all, there are long working hours and the nature of the job is physically demanding. Quite tellingly, the survey conducted by ILVO illustrated that 45% of farmers indicate that their work exhausts them physically as they experience physical discomforts, migraine, fatigue, exhaustion, etc. (Messely et.al. 2020). In addition to this physical component, many farmers also express that a lot of skills and capacities need to be combined. Apart from the skills traditionally associated with 'farming', farmers these days also need to be a financial expert, accountant, engineer ... adding to feelings of stress and discomfort. This observation also needs to be understood in relation to the burdens put forward by complex regulation as mentioned above. As vividly explained by a female farmer:

"I'm sorry, but I also have a PHD, I know things pretty well! But I don't think it's exactly fair what you expect from farmers. I actually think it is very narrow minded. You are all Bio engineers, the only thing you need to know is the Bio legislation. But we need to know the bio legislation, the FAVV⁶, the manure legislation and more. And that's actually incidental! We especially need to know the crops! And I find that almost incomprehensible!" (Female, 41, CSA farm).

⁶ Federal government agency responsible for food chain safety

4.

Analysis of selected themes in social challenges: coping capacity

For this paper, a decision has been made among the 3 Belgian partners of this project (ILVO, Ferm and Innovatiesteunpunt) to systematically delve into the aspect of coping capacity. The main argument behind this focus on coping capacity lies in its immediate policy relevance; a point particularly relevant for the partners, Ferm and Innovatiesteunpunt, who are working on a daily basis to improve the daily lives and wellbeing of farmers in Belgium. A focus on coping also allows to make a smooth transition to an analysis of social innovations in farming, an issue we understand to be pivotal to the larger rationale of the FARMWELL project. Understanding why or why not certain farmers manage to cope with their problems; why certain barriers exist to (different types) of aid ... hereby is a crucial stepping stone to better understand the need, effectiveness, potential adaptation ... of certain ongoing social innovations

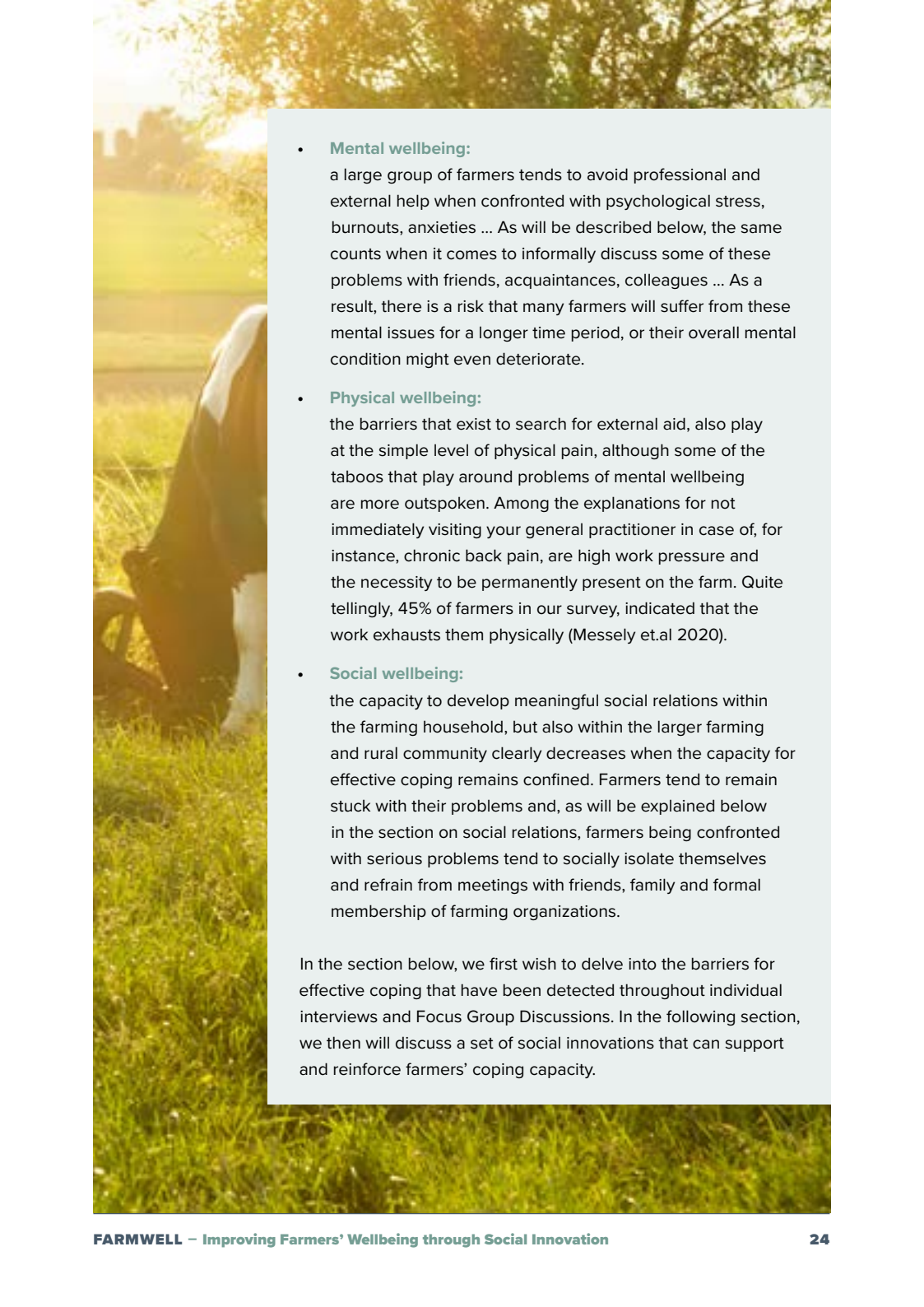
which aim to improve the wellbeing of farmers by tackling the many social challenges they are being confronted with.

Based on our data gathering, two types of coping have been distinguished. A first can be labelled as 'problem-oriented coping' that tries to look for solutions to problems at the level of farm management. The second type of coping can be labelled as 'emotion-oriented coping' and tries to look for solutions to some of the mental problems farmers/farming families are being confronted with. One particularly important component of this coping capacity is the manner in which a farmer can and/or wishes to access aid mechanisms that can provide help both in problem-oriented, as well as emotion-oriented coping. Aid hereby is defined in a broad sense ranging from information channels, to farmers organizations, social workers, psychologists or other forms of psycho-social help. What unites these different aid mechanisms is that they have a certain institutionalized character, differentiating them from mere informal networks. Obviously, both can to a certain extent be overlapping, as when a farmer deliberately asks for advice to a farmers' organization and at the same time, meets up with friends and acquaintances.

Importantly, our research revealed that there exist clear and strong barriers for farmers to proactively search for help. Our survey hereby indicated that 44% of all farmers prefer the strategy to simply work harder when confronted with problems, rather than looking for help or advice (Messely et.al. 2020). In case farmers make a choice to look for external help, they are more inclined to do so for problems at the level of farm management (problem-oriented coping) when compared to look for external help in case of mental problems (emotion-oriented coping). Tellingly, 41% indicated they would be open to look for external help in case of problems at the level of the farm, whilst only 24% would be willing to do so for more personal mental problems (Messely et.al. 2020).

The barriers for effective coping have an immediate impact on the 3 main components of wellbeing.

Based on our data gathering, two types of coping have been distinguished. A first can be labelled as 'problem-oriented coping' that tries to look for solutions to problems at the level of farm management. The second type of coping can be labelled as 'emotion-oriented coping' and tries to look for solutions to some of the mental problems farmers/farming families are being confronted with.

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- **Mental wellbeing:**
a large group of farmers tends to avoid professional and external help when confronted with psychological stress, burnouts, anxieties ... As will be described below, the same counts when it comes to informally discuss some of these problems with friends, acquaintances, colleagues ... As a result, there is a risk that many farmers will suffer from these mental issues for a longer time period, or their overall mental condition might even deteriorate.
 - **Physical wellbeing:**
the barriers that exist to search for external aid, also play at the simple level of physical pain, although some of the taboos that play around problems of mental wellbeing are more outspoken. Among the explanations for not immediately visiting your general practitioner in case of, for instance, chronic back pain, are high work pressure and the necessity to be permanently present on the farm. Quite tellingly, 45% of farmers in our survey, indicated that the work exhausts them physically (Messely et.al 2020).
 - **Social wellbeing:**
the capacity to develop meaningful social relations within the farming household, but also within the larger farming and rural community clearly decreases when the capacity for effective coping remains confined. Farmers tend to remain stuck with their problems and, as will be explained below in the section on social relations, farmers being confronted with serious problems tend to socially isolate themselves and refrain from meetings with friends, family and formal membership of farming organizations.

In the section below, we first wish to delve into the barriers for effective coping that have been detected throughout individual interviews and Focus Group Discussions. In the following section, we then will discuss a set of social innovations that can support and reinforce farmers' coping capacity.

4.1. Barriers for coping

4.1.1. Spatial and Temporal Specificities of Farming

Farming activities take place on the same place or at least are located in the near vicinity of where one is living. As a result, there is no clear-cut spatial distinction between the private realm and the professional realm. This is a feature that makes farming a type of profession that can be distinguished from other jobs where the labour activities (in factories, offices, public spaces, business places ...) are spatially separated from private activities. Even in these times where digitalization allows for more work from home, service workers keep on having the option to work from nearby antennas, office spaces ... that are separated from the home. In general, farmers do not have these options.

Second, farming is not a 9 to 5 profession. In general, working hours are high and exceed the regular 8-hour working day. Even more importantly, there is always a chance that something unexpected might happen. There always is that moment when a cow can give birth, when animals can get sick, when natural hazards such as hail storms or late frost destroy (part of) the harvest ... These temporal specificities need to be understood in relation to the spatial characteristics of farming as described above. One farmer explained this as the interconnectedness (*'verwevenheid'*) specific for farming activities that differentiates working on a farm from other professions. As explained straight-away by a female farmer from the Western part of Flanders.

'We work with animals. If we do not feed them, they will die.'

Due to these spatial and temporal specificities, for the majority of the farmers, chances to take some spatial and mental distance from the farm are limited. In the first instance, this significantly reduces the chance to take a few days off or just even to engage in social activities or hobbies located outside the farm. These moments are by many farmers seen as moment of recreation that help in dealing with the physical, mental and



“We work with animals. If we do not feed them, they will die.”



“... no I do not have hobby's. I used to have a hobby though. Just 'switching the button' and look for a challenge somewhere else, such as hiking, skiing ... Something that has nothing to do with farming, something through which you can motivate yourself.”

financial ... pressures that go with managing a viable and economically sustainable farm. In Dutch, these moments are described as a necessary *'uitlaatklep'* (moments to take off stress, literally: 'exhaust pipe' as used in a motorized vehicle) that enable you to keep going.

As explained by one farmer:

'... no I do not have hobby's. I used to have a hobby though. Just 'switching the button' and look for a challenge somewhere else, such as hiking, skiing ... Something that has nothing to do with farming, something through which you can motivate yourself.'

Clearly, many farmers are missing these types of leisurely activities that would definitely help in better dealing with the many challenges they are being confronted with. Too often, farmers have the feeling of being stuck in their profession and on their farm and seeing no way out.

These temporal and spatial specificities of farming also have their impact on access to aid. Many farmers indicate that they have a busy schedule; hence, they attempt to spend not too much of their working time on issues such as counseling, self-help groups, therapeutic talks ... Too often, these are considered as a waste of time and other, more urgent business related activities, need to be finished first.

4.1.2. Closed Talking Culture

Throughout interviews, it was remarkable that many farmers complained about a closed talking culture at the level of the individual farmer, farming household and larger farming community. A remark often made was that discussing problems by fellow farmers, could potentially be perceived as a sign of weakness or failure. Part of the explanation for this so-called closed talking culture thus lays in the fact that farmers operate in a competitive environment where access to production factors, in particular agricultural land, is scarce. A latent fear

hereby existed that asking for outside help or merely admitting that one is being confronted with some problems, could give the impression to a fellow farmer/competitor, that land would become for sale or the farm could be taken over. As explicitly stated by one farmer:

'... if you admit that you are having problems, they will go to the owner to take over your land and start renting it.'

4.1.3. Social Networks

The capacity to cope cannot just be understood at the individual level, but is strongly social and relational. The spatial and temporal specificities of farming as described above are inextricably linked to the ability to develop social contacts and networks outside the farming context. Developing friendships, engaging in social networks and organizations, meeting people with interests other than farming ... were understood as adding to the overall quality of life and allowing to deal with the many social challenges farmers have to face. Importantly, many farmers confessed that they witnessed how fellow colleagues who were confronted with serious financial, mental or other problems often gradually retreated from informal friendship circles or more formal organizations and became totally isolated. Unfortunately, many indicated that there simply was no time to develop true, high-quality relationships. As stated by a farming couple:

'Everything is quite full, except for the social aspect. There simply is not enough time to meet up with friends.'

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned in this regard is the specific and profound knowledge farmers often claim to have about their farm. In the words of one farmer: *'...every farm is different ...'* Farmers know their animals and their specific needs, farmers know their buildings, soil, weather conditions... This is a type of knowledge that has been developed over the years and that differentiates farming from other professional activities wherein labour is easier to replace. Because every





“If we could have a back-up and my husband would be open for external help, then things would be better. In particularly for dairy cows, this is not evident. We need someone we can trust and people to pass (our knowledge) to. Those people are almost impossible to find.”

farm is different, it is difficult to give the control away to help-outs, replacements or so-called business support (what is referred to as *'bedrijfs hulp'* in Dutch). In Flanders, some farming organisations have elaborate systems wherein help-outs are being offered that allow farmers to take up some holiday or simply spend time outside of the farm. Whilst this is for some farmers very welcome, others remain more sceptical and prefer to stay the year around on their farm. The idea that something could possibly go wrong with irrevocable consequences is one of the main reasons why leisurely activities and the development of strong social networks and friendships remains limited but also why approaching aid mechanisms is only seen as a very last resort.

As explained by a female farmer:

'If we could have a back-up and my husband would be open for external help, then things would be better. In particularly for dairy cows, this is not evident. We need someone we can trust and people to pass (our knowledge) to. Those people are almost impossible to find.'

It is also here that a particular role lays for different farmers' organizations. For obvious reasons, these organizations organize trainings, inform farmers about changing legislation, organize trips to agricultural fairs where new technologies or other innovations are presented ... However, apart from these professional purposes, many farmers indicate that these events are above all an opportunity to talk, socialize, share concerns and frustrations ... with fellow minded people who truly understand their fate and concerns.

A last word needs to be said about the development of meaningful social relations, not just outside the farm or farming household, but also within the farming household. Those farmers that can be considered as resilient and being able to deal with the challenges they are facing tended to have a good relationship with their partner and/or children. These observations point at the importance of the farming household/

family as the most immediate social network wherein certain mental or other problems can be detected and discussed. In some cases, members of farming households even developed fixed meetings. As explained by a female farmer.

'Due to the start of a fodder business, we started to talk. Each month, we go to our meeting space with our son, daughter in law, husband and myself and we hold a meeting. That moment, we put everything on the table in terms of planning, problems ... Everything that according to one of us is not right. ... Everybody says what is our their liver. This works. It takes some practice though and it did feel a little strange in the beginning.'

4.1.4. Perception of psycho-social help⁷

In general, a rather negative perception of psycho-social help dominates among farmers that helps explaining why only 24% of farmers indicate that they consider seeking psycho-social help. First of all, a strong conviction exists that these types of aid organizations or individual counselors miss a feeling with the daily complexities of running a farm. In other words, whether or not being the case, there exists a strong feeling that these structures are not in touch with the realities of the farming sector. For instance, one female farmer who was experiencing some mental problems explicitly stated that she refused to go to a psychologist who does not have a clue about farming. In case there would be a psychologists with a certain 'feeling' with the agricultural sector, this would at least be a barrier less to pay a visit. In short, there exists a strong perception that the farming sector has certain specific needs that are not adequately covered by the wide array of psycho-social aid mechanisms.

In general, a rather negative perception of psycho-social help dominates among farmers that helps explaining why only 24% of farmers indicate that they consider seeking psycho-social help.

⁷ It is important to keep in mind that this analysis is solely written from a farmers' perspective and the barriers that they are experiencing. This does not take into account the barriers that certain aid organizations are experiencing when attempting to get in touch with farmers and/or farming organizations.

4.1.5. Work Ethic

A second perception that seemed to circulate is that certain forms of psycho-social help, but also other forms of more problem-oriented aid mechanisms, are a sign of weakness and failure. A signal that one is not capable of taking care of the farm and/or oneself. As one female farmer recounted when she visited once a self-help group to discuss mental issues:

'That was too vulgar for me, as if I cannot help myself. I did not feel at home there. There were people who were seriously ill and who had problems that could not be solved ...'

Among many farmers, there exists a particular pride wherein one does not wish to be associated with needy or aid-dependent people and wherein the overall relevance and effectiveness of emotion-oriented aid mechanisms is openly discussed. Another female farmer narrates:

'We have a son in law who committed suicide and my daughter started visiting those self-help groups and read self-help books. Those things do not work. We got angry at her and told her that she needed to discuss these matters within the family. In those self-help groups, people are stuck in a victim role. There is too much of a negative atmosphere, they keep on turning in circles.'

Among many farmers, there exists a particular pride wherein one does not wish to be associated with needy or aid-dependent people and wherein the overall relevance and effectiveness of emotion-oriented aid mechanisms is openly discussed.

These remarks need to be understood in relation to a remarkable work ethic that seems to prevail among many of the farmers interviewed. Indeed, a deep-rooted notion seems to exist wherein one simply continues with the hard work if one is confronted with problems. In some cases, this also counts for mere physical needs and wherein a visit to the doctor is often postponed or simply called off. As recounted by one farmer:

'Yes, somebody from 'Boeren op een Kruispunt' (Flemish aid organization, red.) passed by but I did not accept the offer. I prefer to solve these things on my own. Those people cannot resolve my situation. I have to learn to live with it. Putting things in perspective and simply continuing, let your mind go blank (verstand op nul) and just continue. In the end, it (asking help, red.) will change nothing to the situation.'

4.1.6. Knowledge of Aid Channels

Individual interviews and focus group discussions revealed that not everybody is familiar with the many aid organizations/channels that are available to farmers. While most know the regular farmers organisations and their particular services that they are offering, this is much less the case for individuals and organizations involved in psycho-social services. Often, it is the regular doctor who is most known and, potentially, can refer people to more specialized services. This limited knowledge, in combination with a certain taboo that rests on some of these services, is one of the main explanation why so little farmers find their way to emotion-oriented aid services.

4.2. Relevant social innovations

This discussion about coping capacity and barriers to aid have constituted the starting point for different online discussions that have been organized with farmers and farming organizations in the beginning of 2021 (see section 2: Methodology/data gathering for more details). The overall logic behind these online discussions was to think about potential actions for improvement in dealing with these problems.

The following observations are hereby of particular relevance. First, it was consistently mentioned that farmers were missing a systematic and coherent overview of the different aid channels that exist. Second, it was regularly stated that some sort of central point of contact (be it physical, through telephone ...) that could systematically refer the farmer to relevant aid channels would be a true added value and potentially overcome the barriers that are still existing today. A third and recurrent point that was systematically mentioned is the need for more permanent training, refresher courses, systematic career counseling ... after the farmer graduated from school. These types of actions were mentioned both in relation to problem-oriented coping, as well as emotion-oriented coping. The larger logic is that permanent training in terms of new farming

While most know the regular farmers organisations and their particular services that they are offering, this is much less the case for individuals and organizations involved in psycho-social services.

techniques, updates on regulation ... will help in preventing farmers from being confronted with financial problems; hence, this will have a positive impact on overall wellbeing. Second, forms of more permanent training and counseling are also relevant as emotion-oriented coping as this can help in detecting some mental issues in an earlier stage and support the individual farmer in a process of self-reflection about certain mental needs and psychological problems.

Based on the outcomes of these conversations, a decision was made to select two social innovations for the Practice Groups that explicitly aim at tackling some of the problems mentioned above and might provide an answer to the suggestions put forward by the farmers.

4.2.1. Agro-Zorgwijzer

A first social innovation that was selected for further discussion in the 2 Practice Groups that were organized on June 22 and June 24, is the so-called Agro-Zorgwijzer. This is a digital tool that has been developed by the Dutch organization 'Boer en Tuinder' and that aims at channeling farmers and people coming into contact with farmers to the right aid channels, hereby overcoming the barriers that many farmers still experience in accessing aid. This is done in 2 manners. First, there is a standardized QandA that guides you to different aid organizations. Second, there is a so-called Agro-Zorg netwerkkaart (Agro-Zorg network map) that provides an exhaustive overview of the different aid mechanisms/organizations for farmers. In our Practice Groups, this tool has been introduced by Christel van Raaij, who was the driving force behind this initiative.

4.2.2. Competentieverkenner

The second social innovation that has been introduced is the so-called 'competentieverkenner' (competence scout). This digital tool has been developed by Kenniscentrum Bedrijfsopvolging (Boerenbond) and aims at scanning the necessary competences that farmers need when they wish to enter the business. Based

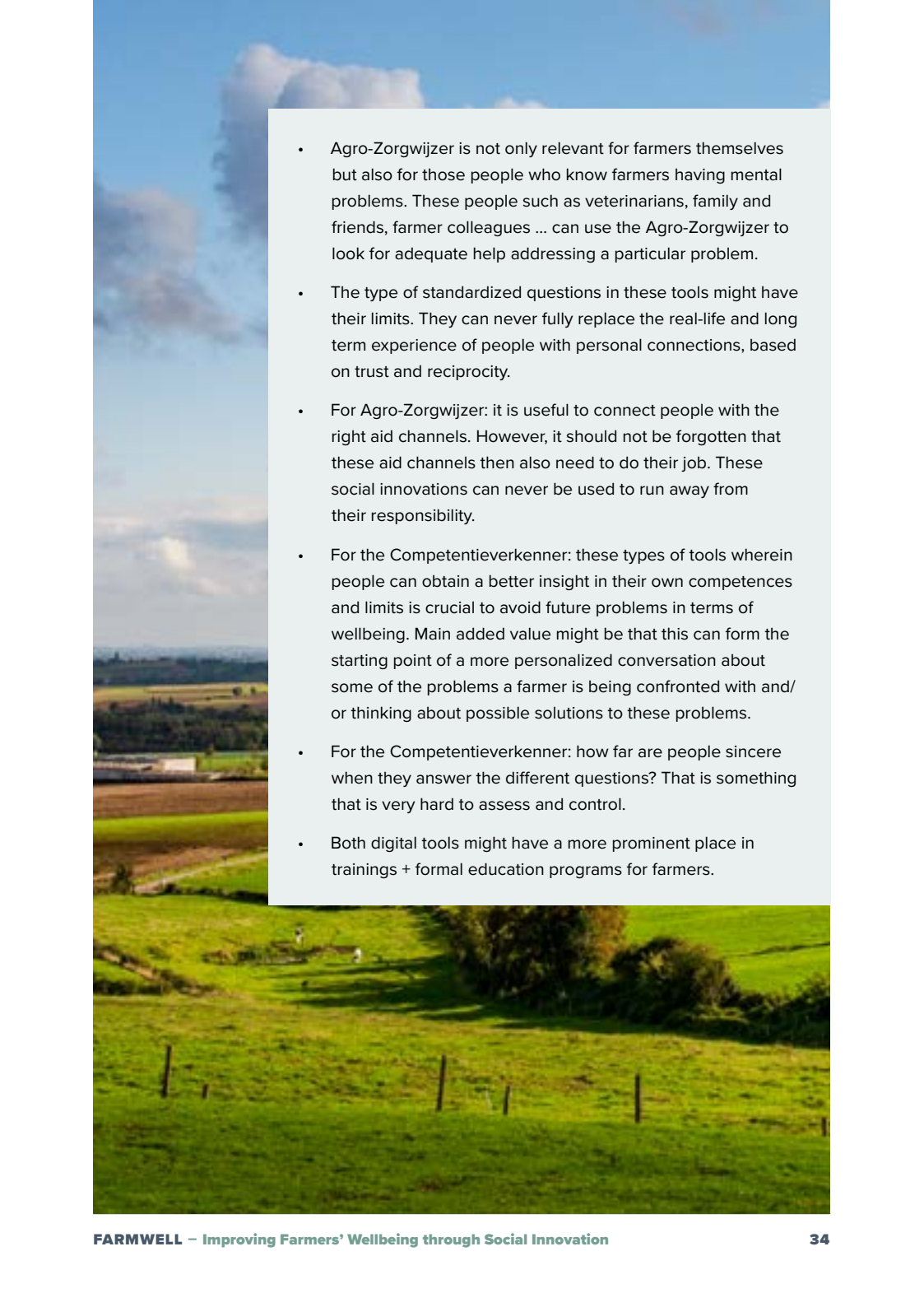
on this assessment, the farmer is being informed about certain skills that might need further development and training. Whilst explicitly developed for people entering the farming business, the main question that has guided the Practice Group is whether this type of digital selfscan can also be deployed for farmers who are already involved in the business and whether questions could also include aspects of mental wellbeing.

4.2.3. Outcomes

After the introduction of these 2 tools to the members of the Practice Groups, an open discussion was facilitated that can be summed up through the following points:

- Overall, both tools/social innovations were understood to be relevant, necessary and providing a real added value to improve the overall wellbeing of farmers
- Questions were being put forward how these types of social innovations can be made more well-known among farmers. Different participants expressed their fear that a substantial part of the farming population is not familiar with tools such as these, despite their relevance. Participants mentioned particularly older farmers in this regard.
- People who are confronted with serious problems often are not able to express their need for help. Farmers sometimes also do not wish to openly admit that they have certain problems. These types of digital innovations will have problems reaching out to these people. Therefore, digital social innovations such as these always need to be accompanied by a more personal approach.
- These are relevant tools for farmers who are in need of immediate help. Indeed, it is important to focus on larger structural issues, yet: we also need help right now at this very moment for people in need. It is always important to find a balance between social innovations addressing more structural, long-term problems and social innovations addressing more immediate, short-term challenges.

People who are confronted with serious problems often are not able to express their need for help. Farmers sometimes also do not wish to openly admit that they have certain problems.

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- Agro-Zorgwijzer is not only relevant for farmers themselves but also for those people who know farmers having mental problems. These people such as veterinarians, family and friends, farmer colleagues ... can use the Agro-Zorgwijzer to look for adequate help addressing a particular problem.
 - The type of standardized questions in these tools might have their limits. They can never fully replace the real-life and long term experience of people with personal connections, based on trust and reciprocity.
 - For Agro-Zorgwijzer: it is useful to connect people with the right aid channels. However, it should not be forgotten that these aid channels then also need to do their job. These social innovations can never be used to run away from their responsibility.
 - For the Competentieverkenner: these types of tools wherein people can obtain a better insight in their own competences and limits is crucial to avoid future problems in terms of wellbeing. Main added value might be that this can form the starting point of a more personalized conversation about some of the problems a farmer is being confronted with and/or thinking about possible solutions to these problems.
 - For the Competentieverkenner: how far are people sincere when they answer the different questions? That is something that is very hard to assess and control.
 - Both digital tools might have a more prominent place in trainings + formal education programs for farmers.

5.

Conclusion

There are 4 large sections in this mapping paper: a) general introduction to the main socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the farming sector in Belgium, b) overview of the main stress factors the farming population in Belgium is being confronted with, c) a discussion about coping capacity in dealing with social challenges farmers are being confronted with, and d) insights into 2 social innovations that might support farmers in improving their coping capacity.

When discussing these different sections more in detail, the following points are important.

- In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, the farming sector in Belgium on average is ageing, male and declining. There also is a problem with farm succession as few young people still wish to enter the agricultural sector. This is also one of the reasons why farming in Belgium has ultimately become a rather marginal economic sector. Despite this decreasing economic importance, the overall acreage devoted to farming has remained remarkably stable the past decades. This can be explained by the increase in average farm size. A last word should be said about the sharp increase in the price of land and the observation that despite huge varieties between different sectors in terms of family income, a considerable part of farmers and farming families are confronted with financial difficulties and outright poverty.
- When discussing the stress factors farmers are being confronted with in Belgium and that clearly have a negative impact on their overall wellbeing, the following 7 points have been detected: 1) regulation and administrative burdens, 2) professional risks, 3) financial uncertainties, 4) weak negotiating position in a large commodity chain, 5) uncertain future perspective, 6) (Dis) respect and Performance, 7) demanding profession with long working hours

- For more specific in-depth analysis, a decision has been made to delve into 1 general theme: coping capacity. Overall, research has indicated that farmers have difficulties coping with the problems they are being confronted with and experience multiple barriers to access aid mechanisms. The reasons for these problems for effective coping and the reasons why aid is not systematically tapped into, the following points are crucial: 1) spatial and temporal specificities of farming wherein farmers are tied to the farm with limited time outside, 2) closed talking culture, 3) the limited development of meaningful social networks, 4) a rather negative perception of psycho-social aid, 5) a particular work ethic wherein one just keeps going on, and 5) a limited knowledge of certain aid channels.
- The last section then delved deeper into certain social innovations that can positively influence the overall coping capacity of farmers. Through online focus group discussions conducted in the beginning of 2021, farmers expressed that the following points could add to their coping capacity and reduce certain barriers to aid: 1) a coherent overview of different aid channels, 2) a central point of contact that can transfer farmers to relevant aid organizations, 3) more emphasis on more permanent training and counselling. Based on these observations, 2 social innovations have been selected for further discussion and feedback in 2 Practice Groups with farmers and farmers representatives that were organized in June 2021. The following social innovations have been selected: Agro-Zorgwijzer; an online digital tool that attempts to provide a coherent overview of aid mechanisms for farmers and the Competentieverkenner, a digital tool that is used for more permanent counselling for farmers. Based on the discussion that followed, the following points should be stressed: 1) these types of digital tools are useful and address a real need, 2) these tools might have problems in reaching those people who are confronted with the most pressing social challenges, 3) these types of digital tools are preferably accompanied by a more personalized interaction.

Overall, research has indicated that farmers have difficulties coping with the problems they are being confronted with and experience multiple barriers to access aid mechanisms.

6.

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Annex:

Social Innovations Table

This annex provides an overview of 10 relevant social innovations and national organizations in farming.

Title of social innovation	Coordinator (lead partner) <i>Keywords:</i> <i>type of organisation</i>	Country (of the coordinator)	Objective (Which social challenge does the innovation attempt to tackle?)	Activities	Key target group(s)
COMPETENTIE-VERKENNER (competence scan)	Kenniscentrum Bedrijfsopvolging (Knowledge Center Farm Succession) Type: farm succession, generational renewal	Belgium	Social wellbeing: Farm succession/generational renewal Mental wellbeing: in general	Through an online questionnaire, beginning farmers come to know their competences and aptitude to start of take over a farming business	Farmers at the start of their career
AGRO-ZORGIJZER	Stichting Zorg om Boer en Tuinder Type: social services, mental wellbeing, farm continuity	Netherlands	Mental wellbeing: in general	The Agro-Zorgwijzer is a digital tool that aims at pointing farmers at the right type of aid they need, with a special attention for farmers being confronted with mental problems	Farmers in general, facing different types of social challenges, with a particular emphasis on mental wellbeing
LANDELIJK INFOPUNT VOOR VROUWEN (LIV) National contact point for Women	Landelijk Infopunt voor Vrouwen (LIV) Type: women organisation support women in farming/farming households	Belgium	Social wellbeing: gender relations + position of women farmers more in general	LiV was established in 2016 with the explicit objective to be a contact point for women in farming. Activities include: first-line phone service, digital information guides, counseling, transfer to other aid agencies	Women farmers
FIT IN JE HOOFD (Healthy in your head)	Vlaams Instituut Gezond Leven (Flemish Institute Healthy Living) Type: governmental organization working on mental wellbeing	Belgium	Mental wellbeing	An online test wherein one is able to check how one is feeling mentally. The online platform also directs people to aid organizations	Farming population in general

Title of social innovation	Coordinator (lead partner) <i>Keywords:</i> <i>type of organisation</i>	Country (of the coordinator)	Objective (Which social challenge does the innovation attempt to tackle?)	Activities	Key target group(s)
ONDER-NEMERS-SCAN (Entrepreneurial Scan)	Innovatie-steunpunt Type: farmers organization working on training and innovation	Belgium	Mental wellbeing + social wellbeing	Through a self-test, farmers come to know their skills and weaknesses. The idea is hereby to open up a conversation with farmers where to improve in order to have a sustainable farm.	Farmers in general
ZORG OM BOER EN TUINDER (care for farmer and gardener)	Zorg om Boer en Tuinder: Type: Organization specifically set up with the aim to improve mental wellbeing among farmers. Also has to objective to remove the taboos that still exist around issues of mental wellbeing	Netherlands	Mental wellbeing	National organization working on awareness of mental problems in farming. Includes a wide diversity of activities.	Farmers and farming families in general
PREVENTAGRI	PreventAgri Type: farmers organization working to reduce the number of work accidents in farming	Belgium	Physical wellbeing	National organization raising awareness around work accidents in farming + providing legal assistance to farmers confronted with work accident of physical pain	Farmers in general
JUNIOR CLASSES	Groene Kring Type: Farmers organization specifically focused on young farmers	Belgium	Mental + social wellbeing	Trainings specifically focusing on young farmers with the objective to obtain better insight in competences and weaknesses + develop your networks within the sector	Young farmers
BOEREN OP EEN KRUISPUNT (BoeK)- (Farmers at a Crossroads)	Boeren op een Kruispunt Type: economic advice and mental support at the level of the company, household and individual	Belgium	Mental wellbeing: in general + specialised psycho-social support for farmers Economic advice: specialized advisers scanning the economic performance of the company + giving specialized advice	BoeK has been established in ... by the Flemish government with the specific aim to support farmers in need. Activities include farm visits, trainings, first-line phone service, farmer reunions, counseling ...	Farmers in general, with a specific emphasis on farmers being confronted with serious financial and mental problems
BOERENTROTS (Farmers Pride)	Boerenbond in collaboration with Groene Kring Type: Boerenbond; general service provider to farmers Groene Kring; general service provider to young farmers	Belgium	Social wellbeing: reinforcing linkages between farmers/farming household to the larger (rural) community Mental wellbeing: reconfidence among farmers	Initiative that aims improving the societal image of farmers by establishing stronger farmer-society linkages Activities include: Online platform where farmers can blog, testify ... on their daily activities; television program on the daily reality of farming	Farmers more in general Larger (rural) community

