

# CASE STUDY

## Learning network on mental wellbeing (Belgium)



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## 1 The story of the case

Ferm voor agrarouwen is an organisation that brings together female farmers for networking and education. Coming together gives female farmers the opportunity to talk about the things they share. Because they all are active in agriculture, the farm, the work at the farm en their concerns about the farm, are often common. Wellbeing is a theme that always has been high on the agenda at Ferm but in recent years, we have noticed that the stress of our (female) farmers has increased enormously. Especially the administrative burden, the negative media coverage of agriculture, uncertain prices and legislation are often mentioned stressors.

Because we noticed that the wellbeing of our female farmers was coming under increasing pressure, we decided to pay extra attention to this topic within our operations. First, we wanted to create a project around wellbeing, focussing on the Triangle of Happiness. The initial idea was to bring female farmers together 4 times to discuss about the 4 components of the Triangle of Happiness: being well surrounded, being able to be yourself, feeling good and things that can throw you off balance. So basically the concept of a learning network. Unfortunately the project didn't receive funds but because we really believed in it and because we had already a group of female farmers that wanted to come together, we decided to come together one time (instead of 4 times) to discuss the different components of the Triangle of Happiness.

At this meeting, one of the female farmers told a story about her husband. She explained the stress her husband had started to feel because of the arrival of the milking robot. Any problem with the robot would send out an alarm on his cell phone, him requiring to keep the phone next to him at all times and being available all times. The other women recognised the problem and spontaneously shared their experiences and possible solutions. And so the seed of the learning network was born.

Thanks to Farmwell, we had the opportunity to set up a real learning network about well-being (as a social innovation) and so we invited those same ladies to a kick-off meeting.

At this kick-off meeting, we presented the concept of the learning network about well-being and we asked the farmers about their own expectations and how they wanted to organise and fill in the learning network themselves. All female farmers present at this first meeting wanted to participate in the learning network and they decided that they wanted to come together 6 times, in the autumn and winter because there is less work to do at the farm in these months.

They also decided that for the next meeting, everyone would bring a book that they themselves found very inspiring. At this next meeting, the harvest of inspiring books and podcasts was enormous and it was very nice to see how excited everyone was.







The exchanged stories between the women were very recognizable for everyone and a topic that came up very often were family relationships. So again, they decided themselves to organise a next meeting about family constellations. That was a very emotional meeting because in a family constellation, you expose yourself to the group and that created a very strong bond between the participants.

That's also the main outcome of a learning network: a strong feeling of connection between the participants and knowing that there are other people with the same issues that can support you. Knowing you are not alone is a huge help in overcoming the many challenges.

An important lesson learned from this social innovation is that sharing problems or worries with colleagues (or family or friends),... helps to deal with them but it is also important that a relationship of trust is first created. Therefore we recommend farmer organisations - and farmers - to install more learning networks about well-being because we think that a small group works better if you want to create a relationship of trust and that's necessary if you want farmers to talk about mental health.

Another lesson learned is that mental health is still a topic that mainly attracts women. Only women took part, both in the learning network (social innovation) and in the inspiration tour (pilot). So we recommend farmer organisations and policy to continue to focus on the theme of well-being so that also male farmers hear about it. If we all together give the signal that



talking about mental health is not weak but strong, we hopefully can break the tabou about mental health.

## 2 The social innovation

### Highlights: The most innovative aspects of the solution

A learning network on mental wellbeing is a new social innovation launched by Ferm voor agravrouwen. There already exist learning networks within farmers organizations and associations but in general, these concern more technical and practical topics such as bookkeeping, genetics ... Including a 'soft' theme such as wellbeing into this methodology is uncharted territory for farmers organizations in Belgium, hence, can be seen as a true social innovation. It's also not a surprise that an organization for female farmers initiates this learning network as previous research shows that female farmers experience less barriers to talk about their wellbeing than men.

### 2.1 Key social challenges addressed & objective of the social innovation

The initial challenges were all the stress factors for farmers that impact their wellbeing: the stress for controls, the feeling of stress when a strange car enters the gate, the stress because of the increasing and not always efficient administrative obligations. Before the learning network existed, a few female farmers developed a training around wellbeing, but it did not draw a lot of colleague female farmers. Then, Ferm wanted to create a project around wellbeing, focussing on the Triangle of Happiness. Although it didn't receive funds, the women involved in the development of this project, got together and one explained the stress her husband had started to feel because of the arrival of the milking robot. Any problem with the robot would send out an alarm on his cell phone, him requiring to keep the phone next to him at all times and being available all times. The other women shared their experiences of the milking robot, recognised the problem. A burden shared is a burden halved. So the first objective of the learning network was to halve the burden by sharing experiences and by learning from each other.

### 2.2 Activities

Ferm organised, despite of the not approved project, a try-out regarding the Triangle of happiness and afterwards invited the participants to join a learning network around wellbeing. Six female farmers said yes and have met four times now. The meetings around different topics are the activity of this social innovation.

The first time they came together they all brought books that inspired them and the second meeting they reflected on what the books, suggested by the others, had brought them. The third time they met they did a session on family constellations which brought out problems





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and communication within a family. The fourth time they met it was during the Farmwell return day, with Mario Haneca, a mentor for changing mindsets and boosting personal growth.

### 2.3 Key stakeholders involved

The six female farmers are the principal stakeholders here. They are working on their own wellbeing, but by sharing experiences not only personal but also work related, this might impact their partners, the male farmers as well. Ferm is another stakeholder, who can see what topics/session generate the most impact on the learning network and taking these topics/learnings from the sessions to further dissemination across their members.

### 2.4 Main outcomes of the activity

The main outcome of this social innovation is a strong feeling of connection between the female farmers. This is a group of people that have really found each other and that support each other.

### 2.5 Main recommendations

The main recommendations toward policy reflects the comments given by farmers in the early practice group meetings: it is necessary to take away/reduce the causes of stress, because they feel that the social innovations to reduce stress are mainly “ a tissue against bleeding”.

All these stress factors have been described in the Action Plan around wellbeing for farmers for the minister of Agriculture. Here we mention two.

It is not healthy that seeing a strange car entering the gate, provokes feelings of stress. The government should work on the way controls take place and improve the efficiency for administrative obligations.

#### **Farmer interview questions**

The interview took place between the journalist/editor of the member magazine Boer&Tuinder (Farmer&Horticulturalist) of farmers organisation Boerenbond, Patrick, and farmer Els, who is part of the learning network on wellbeing.

**Patrick: That learning network can you tell something about that. How did you get into that yourself.**

Els

I joined it because in recent years I've been working within Ferm on the theme of well-being. An action plan on well-being was launched by the former Minister of Agriculture,





Mrs. Crevits. I was part of certain working groups. I found that you really have to try every time to explain what the many policy decisions actually do to people. You can go into it very technically, but it's actually about what it does to you as a human being. There was also a try-out of the happiness triangle and that's how I got into it. What I also notice is that it can mean a lot to me. And I also see the need of colleagues and the need for a link with the emergency services.

**Patrick: Is it a factor that you are the provincial Agra chairman?**

Els

It's both actually. Because that was actually one of the striking things when we had an introduction about the learning network wellness. We were sitting there with a number of ladies together and we all had it in our heads that we wanted to do something with that for our colleagues and for our families. But actually the most important message was: you can do it for yourself for once. We also noticed that this is something that we also feel for ourselves. It's both and there's also an interaction.

**Patrick: In relation to the Learning Network: what is the most important innovation for you in the area of well-being?**

Els

It is with a small group that makes that there is a lot of trust and safety with each other. But it is also important that we, as participants, can actually give our own interpretation. So it is not imposed: now this is going to come and you are going to listen to it. But it's actually your own sensitivities or your own issues that you run into, where you think: wouldn't that be a good theme to bring. It actually grows from the participants themselves. And because it is a process that runs over a period of time, over a year to a year and a half, you also have the feeling that you are walking that path together, that you are going through a certain evolution together. And we find recognition from each other. That also motivates us.

**Patrick: What is the most important challenge that your group is trying to tackle. Can you describe that?**

Els

It's not that there is one challenge. You do have the feeling that you are on the same wavelength, that one is a bit more in this direction and the other in that direction and that we are sufficiently curious and stimulated to also experience firsthand what that can mean for us, and anyway when we are sitting there. As women, we carry that home, to our family, and it's also something that stays with us in contact with colleagues.

**Patrick: Does it benefit farmers? Why do you think it is special/ inspiring?**

Els







It's like they say it's little seeds being planted. By experiencing certain things yourself and that you take that to your family. They talk about that and some things are tried out, like just now with the breathing exercise. It's very small things but it creates a kind of awareness which is also important.

**Patrick: What do you think works well in the learning network?**

Els

It works well because it's a small group and you actually feel that the threshold is very low. That you can expose yourself, make yourself vulnerable and that everything stays within the group. That there is trust and safety. That makes certain things that are difficult for yourself or that you know you won't be able to control because the emotions might take over, that that's all okay. There is also recognition because we are all in agriculture or horticulture. Even though we are all different, there are a lot of recognizable situations.

**Patrick: Like that story of those family constellations, which showed that many things are similar?**

Els

The strength of the learning network is that you start with the people sitting around the table and how they are as people. What we noticed in those family constellations is that you automatically end up with the theme of agriculture and around the pressure of generations, around working together with your family, working together with your partner. And also the challenges that come with that. Automatically you come to that. The learning network is very strong in the sense that you start from the human being, the farmer and the farmer's wife, and with that you actually also strengthen yourself and also strengthen your farm or you can transfer that to your children, the future generation. Whereas it is not the other way around that you are given tools to strengthen your farm that you are a farmer and farmer's wife of. It's a different approach.

**Patrick: Are there any things that you think could improve the way the learning network works?**

Els

I'm satisfied with the learning network, in a way because it takes a bit of the worry out of it. It's actually a 'luxury' situation that you are relieved of some of the administrative and financial burden, because the framework is there. And that allows you to really focus fully on the content itself.

**Patrick: What are the main needs of farmers - in the context of the welfare learning network - that need to be addressed through support?**

Els





An important need is that you can indicate that you can talk about your emotions and needs. There is a need to have more language for that and that we can do that for ourselves. That is also a piece of breaking taboos. That the learning network can take a very small step. They say that if you move a small stone in the river the impact can expand. Communication about our well-being is something we are not taught. If we can express more our thoughts and also our positive thoughts, it can give us positive energy.

**Patrick: What do you think needs to happen to bring about similar support actions for farmers?**

Els

Maybe certain role models or testimonials can play a role in that but even then. I think that we in the sector as agriculture and horticulture have such an overloaded agenda of things that need to happen on our farm and that need to be in order and that need to be for certain regulations, that the priority is usually elsewhere. That our sense of responsibility takes precedence over our personal needs. But we're not going to directly change that, I think, with the learning network wellness. But maybe it will help us to be able to have little tools to give our mindset a rest during the day and also some positive nourishment for once.

**Patrick: Who should be the organization/funding or support? Where do you expect support from? Your organization, the Flemish Government, the province, Flanders, Europe? Who would be the most obvious funder?**

Els

I think there should be a commitment from e.g. Europe. The CAP has not been approved yet, but then you can apply for subsidies through Kratos for business advice, for technical issues regarding your business accounting, water management, energy savings. Add to that a tool to do the same for your well-being, for your personal development. That you can make a personal development plan. That you also know who you are yourself, and that you then start from there when you have to make certain choices on your farm or when you are at a crossroads of a new generation. There are certain branches that are not running well that you don't know how to address. That you have enough tools with yourself to do that: who am I as a person? Because if you don't carry yourself as a person, it's not going to work. That's one of the possibilities. And actually the Flemish Government has to help support that.

I have already said that 3 or 4 times and I try to say that on many working groups. I hope that someday that might be picked up. This was also expressed in our activity on family constellations. The strength of that is that you can actually separate your business from your person. Because sometimes we identify so much with our company or with the previous generation that did that company, that in the long run you no longer know what is alive in me, what do I stand for, what do I really want? Because if you're constantly working against yourself to make that happen anyway, at some point it gets stuck. We really





need to make conscious choices about that and maybe include that in education, for the younger generation.

Why didn't I learn that in school? That you know very consciously that you don't just farm because you were born on a farm. I do think that the current generation is aware of that. But then again. You can have the same farm and still have different accents. Just because your father had dairy cattle and did it that way doesn't mean you have to do it that way. Maybe your passion lies elsewhere. Then it's good to know that you can still shape your farm a bit to suit you. It's not because your parents have a farm store that you are the person to manage that and to serve many customers and to work with those products. You may be more the person who loves to be among the animals and to take care of them very well, that makes you the most happy.





### 3 The pilot action: The pilot action: Academy On Tour

#### 3.1 What was the pilot about?

##### 3.1.1 Purpose

Although several services exist where farmers in difficult circumstances can get help, those are not always used because most farmers have difficulty opening up about their problems. The taboo about mental wellness is still very strong. In the pilot, we brought farmers together on a bus for 3 company visits (3 different stories about mental health by farmers) and 3 training courses. The first training was brought by Els Verté, director of Farmers at a Crossroads. She presented the operation of Farmers at a Crossroads and the helpline and gave a presentation about how to make problems debatable. The second course was the learning network of female farmers around wellbeing and the third one was given by a psychologist and was about the different components of happiness (Triangle of Happiness). In this case study we focus on the learning network of female farmers around wellbeing.

##### 3.1.2 Running the pilot

During the bus ride between the second and third farm visit, Sylvie Decoutere, consultant at Ferm, gave a presentation on the existing learning network of female farmers around wellbeing. Sylvie is the facilitator of the learning network en she told about how it was started, how they are organized, how often they come together, what the meetings are about, how the stay in contact between the meetings (WhatsApp),... She also shared the harvest of inspiring books and podcasts from the first meeting of the learning network to inspire the participants of the inspiration tour. The final slide was about the comments the participants of the learning network send to each other in a WhatsApp-group after a meeting. Above all, gratitude predominates, gratitude for being a member of this wonderful group and the ability to talk about sensitive issues without being judged.

The presentation mainly focused on the benefits experienced by the farmers themselves, in order to inspire others to join a learning network as well

##### 3.1.3 Target group

The target group was all interested Flemish farmers and horticulturists - both male and female - and all interested Farmwell project partners. Also the members of the learning network were invited.

Both Ferm (female farmers organisation) and Boerenbond (largest farmers organisation at Flandres) communicated through newsletters, internal mail and sent invitations to participants of the practice groups and members of their organisation. Also the members of the learning





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network were invited and For Ferm the target group is 100% women. However, since we very much wanted to reach male farmers as well, we adapted the invitation to a male audience: a different picture, mention the possibility to participate as a couple, emphasis on farm visits. The bus was full but despite the many efforts, not a single man was registered.

### 3.2 The main lessons from the pilot

The main lesson learned from the pilot is that mental well-being is still a predominantly female issue. Despite many efforts to include male farmers in the pilot, only female farmers enrolled. Also from the different testimonies of the farmers and the experiences with the learning network, it appears that women talk more easily among themselves about (emotional) problems and well-being.

### 3.3 The main impact of the pilot

By immersing a group of farmers for a day in the theme of well-being, we wanted to provide them with tools for discussing mental health issues. Through a combination of testimonials from fellow farmers, farm visits and training on the bus, we let them see and hear that talking helps.

The testimonies all demonstrated the importance of an organization like Farmers at a Crossroads. Seeing and hearing fellow farmers talk freely about it breaks the taboo of talking about problems and mental wellbeing.

Talking helps! The training course "Take your inner cow by the horns" from Farmers at a Crossroads provides tools to engage in conversation with each other about mental wellbeing.

The presentation on the learning network on well-being shows that women talk more easily about problems and that this greatly enhances their mental well-being.

The mix of testimonies from the field and background information from the presentations made a great impact on the attendees. We are convinced that the experiences gained within the pilot project will encourage participants to talk more easily about problems and mental well-being and to seek help more quickly.





## 4 The Social Return on Investment (SROI)

### 4.1 Exploring change

We had the opportunity to conduct this forecasting journey of change with members of a learning network that is just starting up in 2022. The group consists of farmers, some working fulltime at the farm, others combine this with a job elsewhere. Some of them have a background or are working in the social or health care sector, so they have knowledge about wellbeing as well as the agricultural sector. Since Ferm voor Agravrouwen, an organization for female farmers in Flanders, initiated the start-up of the learning network and will support the group when asked for, also consultants of farmers organizations could be seen as stakeholders. We did the journey of change with 5 members of the learning network (9 in total), of which 4 female farmers and the consultant of Ferm. One of these farmers was also present during one of the practice groups, but besides that this exercise was done in no relation to the practice groups.

We did this journey of change exercise at the first meeting of the learning network, which was very much appreciated by everyone, because it was a very good way to think and talk about everyone's expectations of this learning network.

This forecasting journey of change has been strictly guided by the SROI methodology as developed by UGLOS within the framework of the Farmwell project. With this purpose in mind, a reworking of the standard template has been made, translating the English terms in Dutch. We used posters to have a clear overview on the exercise. Throughout this journey of change we have mapped all the possible changes or outcomes a learning network about wellbeing can generate. To start we let everyone write down on post-its what their expectations are for this learning network, what possible outcomes there could be for themselves, the group and possibly others. During the focus group discussion everyone shared and discussed the things they wrote down. This discussion also was guided by questions put forward by the SROI methodology as these were centered around the expected changes, the time frame of these changes and possible barriers and enablers. We ended the meeting by listing some concrete ideas and practical agreements for the next meeting(s).





The journey of change was experienced as a positive way to learn together, to map expectations, to let you think out of the box about possible outcomes, to clarify the goal and to identify measurable parameters for an evaluation. This could be used at the start of a new idea, project or activity as well as an evaluation of an existing activity.

Another lesson learned about the process of the journey of change, was that it is not easy to categorize the changes in time, the speed with which some things will happen differ for each person, so possible outcomes couldn't always be categorized at one specific time.



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Also before starting the journey of change some of the participants felt a bit guilty the learning network was for personal 'gain' through its prime focus on the in-group members. Most of them really would like to find a way to also do something meaningful for other farmers. There was general agreement that, despite the learning network mainly focusses on learning from each other, the outcomes can also include initiatives targeting farmers outside the network. This was more about the concept of the learning network than about the process of the journey of change.

A presentation about the learning network was incorporated in the pilot, an inspiration tour on wellbeing by bus. During this day we did 3 field visits with testimonies from farmers and a few social innovations were presented to the participants. 26 female farmers took part on this bustour.

## 4.2 Evidencing change

The initial questions for the learning network were very good, the only thing we did was add 2 open questions to the prospective questionnaire:

- To which questions/needs could a learning network provide an answer according to you?
- What should you still need or what would stimulate you to join a learning network?

During the pilot the participants had to fill out 4 different questionnaires (pen and paper): one long one at the beginning of the day where we combined the questionnaires of 2 social innovations (training & learning network) about the situation now, a second prospective one after they had the training on how to make problems debatable, a third prospective one after they got information about the learning network on wellbeing and a last one at the end of the day to evaluate the bustour. So two of these questionnaires were about the learning network. The day that was planned was very interesting, but the program was also very full with 3 field visits, 3 information sessions on the bus and filling out the questionnaires. We noticed there was a need but not a lot of time for smalltalk. We knew the questionnaires were the least 'fun' or 'interesting' part of the day, but it had to be done. There was not always a lot of time left between other parts of the program to do this and we had the impression not everyone was motivated to fill out all these questionnaires or rather spent this time talking to each other. So we can imagine that not everyone thought about it well when answering the questions, this will probably have an impact on the quality of the data.

The retrospective questionnaire (pen and paper) was done on a later date in february, this was during an activity where the participants of the bustour as well as the members of the learning network were invited. A key note speaker was invited, experiences were exchanged and there was a brainstorm on how to let men talk about their feelings/problems. Again all participants were women. 7 (out of 9) women that are members of the learning network were present.







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Having only 9 people that are a member of a learning network about wellbeing, our data set for this last questionnaire is quite small.

### 4.3 Valuing change

The data and results will be useful for farmers and organizations that want to set up a learning network about wellbeing. The journey of change exercise was considered as very valuable in the start-up phase of the learning network





## 5 Implications for policy and farming support

### 5.1 The Challenge & Needs – What is the situation?

The basis of this selection lays in the key social challenge that has been identified in the Farmwell mapping paper for Belgium and previous research conducted by ILVO; that is: farmers facing challenges in terms of wellbeing indicate they lack coping capacity in dealing with these challenges. With this social challenge we wish to point attention to the fact that it's difficult for most farmers to talk about or cope with their feelings or mental problems.

- Most of the farmers in Flanders indicate that among farmers, as well as within the sector (farmers organizations, education, associations) there is little openness to talk about personal or sensitive topics. Talking about their feelings is often a taboo. Farmers also state that they are confronted with feelings of shame, anxiety or powerlessness when trying to discuss mental problems.
- Farmers tend to take pride in their independence and autonomy. They see personal and farm related problems as their own responsibility. Seeking help is too often seen as a loss of autonomy or a sign of weakness.
- Work at the farm often goes at the expense of time for family, leisure and relaxation. Farmers, mostly living at the farm, experience a very thin line between work and life. Finding a good work-life balance seems to be a big challenge.
- A lot of farmers and their families feel they are living in a stressful situation (regulation, administration, financial uncertainties, risks ...). Some of them are convinced they cannot change their situation and that seeking help and support is a useless undertaking. They also have the feeling other people do not understand their situation.

#### More info about the research

Flemish farmers and their families are facing diverse and complex challenges that have a direct impact on their well-being. Less than half of the farmers tend to look for help when they are confronted with problems. And when they do ask for help, many encounter barriers that prevent them from getting the right help. Adequate support requires an integrated approach that is aimed at the entire agricultural sector, using different strategies and including multiple organizations. This integrated approach simultaneously addresses stress factors, removes barriers to coping and promotes mental health. Both (Farmers') organizations as well as policy actors can play a central role in this by working on a well-being action plan for Flemish agriculture and horticulture. (A participative process was carried out in 2020-2021, relevant strategies of the action plan are found in section 5.3 recommendations).





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In 2018-2019 ILVO has taken the initiative to further scientifically substantiate the problems of stress, well-being and resilience among farmers in Flanders via a survey, focus group discussions and interviews. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data gathering allowed to collect additional figures on the problem, as well as unravel the stories and explanations behind the figures. During this period, a survey was administered to farmers (n=285), 24 in-depth interviews were conducted and 9 focus groups were organized with farmers from all sectors from all over Flanders. In total, 375 agricultural and horticultural farmers were involved through the survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

*Stressors*

The study defines seven groups of related stressors. Some stressors are explicitly addressed in all interviews such as regulations and financial uncertainties. Other stressors are more sector and/or age specific such as risk and uncertain future prospects. Stress factors may also have been discussed more implicitly such as the challenge of fulfilling more and more roles as a farmer or the urge to perform on the farm. Below is a brief explanation of the stress factors.

- Regulation: Although the majority of farmers indicate that they understand the need for control and strict regulations, the cause of stress because of regulation lies mainly in the rapidly changing, complex and increasingly stringent regulations, causing more and more administrative burdens. Many farmers experience a growing gap between practice and policy makers at municipal, Flemish and European level. A major source of stress for most farmers are the inspections, which are perceived as too strict, too frequent, and too intrusive.
- Financial insecurity: The majority of the farmers face financial uncertainties on the farm, mainly caused by the low and strongly fluctuating price they receive for their products. Although good and bad periods alternate, farmers indicate that there are more and more bad years. Low incomes are offset by rising costs such as staff, costs for farm advisers, such as vets or consultants, and large investments. Investments in machinery, buildings or land require a lot of capital that gets tied up, sometimes for generations. There is often a considerable time lag between income and major expenditure, resulting in negative cash flows.
- Occupational risks: A farmer has to deal with a lot of uncertainties and risks over which he/she has no control, such as bad weather conditions, diseases and pests. It is the task of the farmer(s) to assess and manage these risks as best as possible. However, climate change is increasing the risks and the likelihood of major damage through droughts, floods... It is also noteworthy that farmers run great risks to their own health and safety on their farms. Because production cannot be halted at any time, many farmers also experience difficulties when they have to temporarily stop working due to an accident or illness.





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- Weak negotiation position: Most farmers experience frustration due to their weak position in the value chain, where they are subordinate(?) price takers. More and more other chain actors and dynamics determine the ins and outs of the agricultural business, which decreases the sense of independence of many. Many farmers also mention that they are left with too little fellow farmers to collectively organize in order to strengthen their market position. Many also express their dissatisfaction with the way in which agricultural organizations represent their interests.
- Uncertain future prospects: The majority of farmers feel the need to adapt - mostly to expand - the business in order to arm themselves against risks and financial uncertainties. Many farmers experience external pressure to scale up and intensify, which in combination with difficult access to land causes stress and uncertainty. Only a minority of farms deliberately stay small. Almost all farmers experience stress due to the lack of a clear perspective for the farm. They struggle with possible takeovers, if there is a successor, the start-up is difficult, and expanding or broadening the farm is a big quest. Often there are also conflicting visions (with regard to growth or investments) for the same company, which is accompanied by a (generational) conflict.
- Performance drive and appreciation: The majority of the consulted farmers show great (professional) pride. They are proud of their hard work, quality products and always want to perform as good as possible on their farm. If things do not go as planned, this is a major source of stress. Many farmers go to extremes in this regard: never taking a vacation, no breaks, putting the farm ahead of family, .... Appreciation and recognition for all this hard work are important to farmers. For a large part of the participants, the negative image that agriculture(st)ers have in the media and society is a major source of frustration. Many agriculture(st)ers feel - compared to other sectors and companies - that they have been put in a negative limelight in the climate debate.
- Demanding profession: Farmers have to take on more and more roles and tasks: as entrepreneurs, accountants, animal caretakers, etc. Most agricultural workers indicate that the work never stops and that there is no time for breaks or vacations, which often reinforces the feeling of being socially isolated. In a farming family, different roles sometimes conflict with each other. Father and son and/or the spouses are in many cases also each other's colleagues. Reconciling farm and family life in a balanced way is a challenge.

A number of the stress factors mentioned are beyond the control of individual farmers. For example, agricultural policy is made at the European level and translated into legislation by the Flemish government; the prices of agricultural products are partly determined by the world market, and buyers and processors impose certain production standards. On the other hand, farmers themselves have more control over their work organization, financial management and physical health. When thinking about addressing stress factors among farmers, it is important to include other actors and organizations that influence stress factors and thus play






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a role in the well-being of farmers. We could state it is the multiplicity of factors that causes farmers as a professional group to perceive their situation as unsustainable. They are intertwined and are in constant interaction on a farm. It is often the combination of different stress factors that can weigh heavily with the result that farmers feel mentally, physically, financially and/or socially exhausted. It is therefore important to take the whole context of a farm into account when one wants to work on the well-being and resilience of farming families. An approach in which only one stress factor is addressed, for example, will not succeed in structural improvement.

*Barriers for effective coping*

The study identifies a number of important barriers that explain why farmers tend to avoid problems and/or do not call on external help and information channels<sup>1</sup>. This is important information from which future policy and research can depart. The barriers are situated at three levels (Figure 6): 1) barriers at personal and family level, 2) barriers in the agricultural sector, and 3) societal barriers. These barriers are explained in Table 1.

 <b>Barriers on personal and family level</b>	
Learned helplessness	Many farming families suffer from their stressful work situation and are convinced that they are not in a position to change anything about their situation. In other words, they exhibit helpless behavior. They also assume that other people do not understand them.
Spartan mentality	Hard work is a virtue for many agricultural workers; they take pride in their independence. Personal and business problems are their own responsibility. Asking for help therefore means a loss of autonomy and is consequently refused.
Leaving no room for feelings	In some farming families there is still a big taboo on talking about feelings. As a result, members of the family are often unable to express themselves due to feelings of shame, fear or powerlessness.
Feeling isolated from the social environment	Farmers confess that they do not know where to turn to with their problems because they do not know which aid channels are available or because they feel socially isolated (i.e. social circles, help and information channels).
Cost of help and information channels	Farmers indicate that the cost of possible help and information channels is too expensive.

<sup>1</sup>







 <b>Barriers in agricultural sector</b>	
Closed talking culture	The majority of farmers indicate that there is little openness in agricultural circles and throughout the agricultural sector (including advocacy organizations, education, associations) to talk about personal and sensitive topics.
Competition among farmers	Judgment is mainly based on outward appearance. There is social pressure to present oneself as successful.
Ineffective advocacy	Many farmers feel unable to organize themselves and defend their interests. In addition, many feel inadequately represented by advocacy organizations.
 <b>Societal barriers</b>	

Image of help and information channels	A group of farmers find the quality of help and information channels inadequate, find some of them inaccessible, or have a poor image of them.
Institutionalization of theme "well-being."	The possible external help and information channels are insufficiently identified and supported. Only Farmers at a Crossroads is known to most farmers.
Lack of knowledge and feel for the sector	Farmers feel that society is no longer in touch with the working and living situation on a farm. They feel that there is insufficient knowledge and understanding of their needs.
Powerlessness in the face of existing structures	Many farmers indicate that existing power relations and system structures force them into a certain (problematic) business situation.

### Impact

Well-being represents the extent to which a person feels good physically, mentally, and socially. Despite the many stressors, for many the profession of farming remains utmost rewarding. Three out of four farmers in the survey say they are generally satisfied with their lives. For most, the many stress factors do not (yet) outweigh the satisfaction of running their own business. Some respondents indicated that they see a challenge in the many stress factors: the hard work challenges them, the prospect of relaxation or release motivates them. Farmers appreciate their freedom to decide what happens when and the fact that





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there is always someone at home to take on a caring role for parents or children. Working with nature is perceived as positive and is never boring or predictable.

Whether in fruit farming, arable farming, horticulture or cattle farming, the impact of various stress factors on the well-being of individuals and families is felt in all sectors. Moreover, this also applies to companies that are setting up broadening activities, such as short chain companies and CSA companies. Based on the research we distinguish four forms of impact: 1) physical impact, 2) mental impact, 3) impact on work-life balance and 4) financial constraints (Figure 7 and Table 2). These four interact in a mutually reinforcing way.

Impact of the business on well-being	Number from survey	Manifested in, a.o.:
Physical impact	45% of farmers report that their work physically exhausts them	Illness, pain, migraines, fatigue, exhaustion
Mental impact	48% of farmers report that their work mentally exhausts them	Stress, irritability, frustration, anger, insomnia, anxiety, loss of self-confidence, fear, shame, discouragement, lethargy, gloom, burnout, depression, thoughts of suicide, feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, fatalism, loss of job satisfaction, forgetfulness, inability to relax, sense of inadequacy
Impact on work-life balance	42% of farmers report that their work has a negative impact on their social life	Lack of time and energy for social activities, wanting to be left alone, feeling of social isolation, few contacts outside the agricultural sector, loss of willingness and helpfulness towards colleagues, negative attitude towards community life, being approached negatively by surroundings
	29% of farmers report that their work has a negative impact on their family	Little time for family, absence at important family moments, no time for family activities and outings, family members are (unintentionally) part of the company, having to stop working outside the home, collegial instead of family contact with family members, undesired cohabitation with in-laws
Financial impact	49% of farmers are not satisfied with their income	Low to no income, unable to meet basic family needs (food, clothing, transportation, etc.), material shortcomings, deferring expenses, debt, unable to take out a loan, forced to work outside the home, no or rare leisure activities





## 5.2 Support framework – What is needed?

A social network to fall back on can be one important aspect in lifting this barrier. Having hobbies, taking part in meetings, activities, being part of a group, association, organization widens the social circle of farmers. Sharing experiences is a good way to sensitize farmers and let them learn from each other.

## 5.3 Recommendations – What needs to be done to realise the support needed?

### 1 Remove barriers to cope with problems and ask for help

#### 1.1 Make mental health and problems debatable

- Sensitize and communicate:

It's important that information about wellbeing gets to farmers through different channels. Sharing personal stories and testimonials can spark recognition and gets farmers to start talking about mental health. Sensitize and communicate can also have a preventive role.

- Facilitate building networks:

Farmers often spend a lot of time alone at their farm. Having hobbies, taking part in meetings, activities, being part of a group, association, organization widens the social circle of farmers. Creating time and space for informal conversations after an activity or course could also help this.

- Stimulate openness to talk about personal or sensitive topics:

The agricultural sector has a very closed of culture when it's about talking about problems or mental health. There is a need for accessible ways or other ways in to talk about wellbeing. Future farmers should be familiarised talking about these 'difficult' topics early on, for example through their upbringing, education, organizing activities ...

#### 1.2 Optimize the help offered to farmers

- Farmers at a Crossroads as a central point of contact with a broad supply of services:

Farmers ask for one accessible and discrete point of contact that can help them or refer them to the right person/organization. When they ask for help it's important that they get to the right person quickly. It's necessary to offer farmers a sustainable and qualitative service and refer them in a personal way.

- Connect the agricultural sector with the health care and wellbeing sector:

A lot of progress can be made when these sectors become more familiar with each other and work together. On the one side the health care and wellbeing sector needs to be more informed about the specific context in which farmers operate and the







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specific help Farmers at a Crossroads offers, on the other side the agricultural sector can learn from the possibilities and methodologies used in health care and wellbeing to offer help and support.

### 1.3 Facilitate and improve the access to help

- Communication about the available help services:

Clear and visible communication about the available help services can improve the access farmers have to them. Farmers should easily find information on where they can go or who to contact for help and support.

- Lead people towards help:

People in the direct social circle of farmers, like family, friends, but also gate keepers are often the people farmers have a trusting relationship with. They can play an important part in guiding farmer to help or support. It's important to provide context and tools for them to recognise signals, make problems debatable and help farmers to take the step to help services. Extra efforts are needed to reach as many farmers as possible, especially they that do not find the way to help yet.

## 2 Enhance farmers skills

### 2.1 Enhance skills through after-school education

- Optimize the offer of trainings:

Improving the quality and the content of the training as well as the development of courses about specific skills can contribute to a training that better fits the farmers' needs.

- Learning networks:

When farmers are brought together they can exchange experiences in which all aspects of wellbeing could come forward, directly or indirectly. A learning network is more than exchanging knowledge and experiences, it also connects people. Looking for ways to bring farmers together and exchange information on divers topics can improve farmers' wellbeing.

### 2.2 Enhance skills through tailor-made guidance or advice

- Tailor-made advice services:

Farmers need independent advice that is aligned with their needs and interests. When they are in a complex or stressful situation, a supporting service could offer help.

## 3 Address stressors

### 3.1 Limit risks and strive for a better work-life balance

- Create possibilities to rest and relax:





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Work on a farm never ends. Family members are often also colleagues from each other. It's a challenge to balance work and family. Projects and initiatives that have a positive impact on the work-life balance of farmers contribute to a better wellbeing.

Additionally, it would be important to increase the production of Riaccolto tomato sauce. This would have two main benefits: the first is to provide more revenue to Casa Sankara; the second one would be to bring attention to the reality of an ethical supply chain, contributing to draw potential solutions to the problem. To do this, there is a need for land, which could be provided by municipalities near Casa Sankara. In addition, it would be important for the region or some private entity to provide the association with technological means to increase efficiency in production.

