

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Learning network on mental wellbeing (Belgium)





## 1 Implications for policy and farming support

### 1.1 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 organisations, 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 organisations. This integrated approach simultaneously addresses stress factors, removes barriers to coping and promotes mental health. Both (Farmers') organisations 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).

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.

- **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 organise in order to strengthen their market position. Many also express their dissatisfaction with the way in which agricultural organisations 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 organisation, financial






management and physical health. When thinking about addressing stress factors among farmers, it is important to include other actors and organisations that influence stress factors and thus play 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.

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 <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 organisations, education, associations) to talk about personal and sensitive topics.
Competition among farmers	Judgement is mainly based on outward appearance. There is social pressure to present oneself as successful.
Ineffective advocacy	Many farmers feel unable to organise themselves and defend their interests. In addition, many feel inadequately represented by advocacy organisations.
 <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.
Institutionalisation 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 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.:
<b>Physical impact</b>	<b>45%</b> of farmers report that their work physically exhausts them	Illness, pain, migraines, fatigue, exhaustion
<b>Mental impact</b>	<b>48%</b> 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
<b>Impact on work-life balance</b>	<b>42%</b> 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
	<b>29%</b> 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
<b>Financial impact</b>	<b>49%</b> 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





## 1.2 Support framework – What is needed?

Two main interventions are needed to address the challenge that most farmers don't talk about or cope with their feelings or mental problems:

- make mental health and problems debatable
- improve farmers' skills

### *Make mental health and problems debatable*

**Sensitize and communicate** about wellbeing to farmers through different channels. Sharing personal stories and testimonials can spark recognition and get farmers to start talking about mental health. Sensitising and communicating can also have a preventive role.

**Facilitate networks** of farmers to widen their social circle and create time and space for informal conversations after an activity or course.

### *Improve farmers' skills*

**Optimise and extend the offer of training** for farmers, with practical and hands-on courses on communication, management, resilience and mental health. 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 diverse topics can improve farmers' wellbeing. 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, organisation widens the social circle of farmers. Sharing experiences is a good way to sensitise farmers and let them learn from each other.

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

Different actions can be undertaken to ensure the implementation of the interventions mentioned above:







- policy makers have to stimulate and support actions that focus on communication about mental health and the available help services
- policy makers can provide subsidies for specific trainings on soft skills for farmers or for supporting learning networks of farmers
- farmers' organisation can involve gatekeepers and make them more aware of the problems, provide trainings to gatekeepers and farming families to detect problems and make them debatable, provide trainings on soft skills and start up learning networks
- Boerenbond and Ferm already work on many of those recommendations, for example in 2 demonstration projects with funding from the Flemish government in which Boerenbond, Ferm and other farmer organisations work together with the healthcare and wellbeing sector.
- Ferm coördinates the project "To develop a future strategy (for farmers) in a changing (challenging) context" that is financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The focus of the project is on mentally supporting farmers in making strategic decisions about the future of their farm.

One of the initiatives within the project is the start-up of 6 learning networks on the theme of change (in agriculture and horticulture). For this, Ferm works together with other farmer's organisations as Boerenbond, but also with Farmers at a Crossroads and 2 psychologists with experience in agriculture.

We also let many farmers speak for themselves (testimonials) to inspire other farmers. The main message of the project is: change is not necessarily bad, it also offers opportunities.

- Ferm developed a specific training for farmers about intrafamilial communication skills and one about working together on a farm.
- Farmers' organisation Boerenbond is currently coordinating a Flemish 2-year demonstration project regarding coping with stress to make farmers more resilient. The project consists of a number of trainings, looking at coping with stress from different angles.
- Farmers' organisation Boerenbond is currently especially looking for initiatives that can realise a mindset shift in the male farmers to talk more freely in case of problems. A number of ideas came up during the return day of the Farmwell inspiration tour:
  - testimonials by fellow farmers/ simple recognisable situations
  - do not put them under pressure to talk, positive affirmation
  - approach: you can do nothing for once, "change your oil preventively" (like you do with the tractor)
  - date night for Ferm female farmers and their partners, networking event with food and drinks
  - woman in a pioneer role in the family to discuss problems





- bringing them in small mixed groups of farmers that come together regularly and have established a circle of trust
- men prefer to talk about problems 1-1 instead of in a group
- repeat the message often: there is no shame in talking about problems
- involve education

We are currently working on and testing some of these ideas.

