

CASE STUDY

Learning network on mental wellbeing (Belgium)



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1 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 agrarvrouwen (female farmers). There already exist learning networks within farmers organisations and associations but in general, these concern more technical and practical topics such as bookkeeping, genetics, ... Including a 'soft' theme such as well-being into this methodology is uncharted territory for farmers organisations in Belgium, hence, can be seen as a true social innovation. It's also not a surprise that an organisation for female farmers initiates this learning network as previous research shows that female farmers experience less barriers to talk about their well-being than men.

1.1 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.

Although it is generally known that talking about concerns helps, within the agricultural sector it is not easy to talk about problems and mental health with colleagues (or with care providers). The chance that a farmer is the only one with a certain problem or concern is very small and yet it is very difficult within the sector to consult colleagues.

The main objective of this social innovation is to bring (female) farmers together to talk about mental health, to discuss common concerns, to learn from each other's approaches and to find support in each other. A burden shared is a burden halved.

1.2 Activities

The learning network on well-being consists of 6 female farmers. They decided to come together 6 times, in the autumn and winter because there is less work to do at the farm in these months. The meetings around different topics are the activity of this social innovation.

At the **first meeting**, each participant of the learning network brought a book that they themselves found very inspiring. The harvest of inspiring books - but also podcasts - was enormous and it was very nice to see how excited everyone was to talk about why everyone should read their brought book(s). At the end of the 1st meeting, books were exchanged and it was agreed to discuss it further at the 2nd meeting.





Photo: The harvest of inspiring books at the first meeting of the learning network.

During the **2nd meeting**, everyone shared their findings about a borrowed book. One of the recurring conversation topics was the sometimes difficult family relationships on a farm, especially with in-laws. Therefore the learning network decided to go deeper into family relationships at the 3rd meeting. A member of the learning network was also very enthusiastic about a Mario Haneca (a mentor for changing mindsets and boosting personal growth) podcast and suggested inviting him to a next meeting (see below, 4th meeting).

At the **3rd meeting**, Hendrik Rebry, a specialist in family constellations, was invited. A family constellation is a therapeutic session in which a participant brings in an issue that he or she wants to gain clarity about. For the main players in that issue, often family members of the person who introduces the issue, other participants are selected as 'representatives'. The questioning participant places them in the room relative to the other participants, assisted in part by the therapist.

In contrast to the previous meetings, which always took place in the evening, this meeting took place during the day. The main reason was that a family constellation has a great emotional impact on the participants and it takes time to process this (together). Hendrik Rebry guided a total of 4 family constellations, 2 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon.

The **4th time** the learning network met, it was during the FARMWELL return day, with Mario Haneca, a mentor for changing mindsets and boosting personal growth. We contacted Mario Haneca for this day on the recommendation of one of the members of the learning network (see above).



Photo: Maria Haneco performs a breathing exercise with one of the participants of the FARMWELL return day.

One of the members of the learning network is a dance therapist and will lead a dance session at the **5th meeting**.

At the **6th meeting**, an evaluation of the learning network is planned where we will see whether the expectations of the group have been met.

Afterwards, the group decides whether they want to meet further and under what circumstances.

Key stakeholders involved

The six female farmers are the principal stakeholders here. They are working on their own well-being, but by sharing experiences not only personal but also work related, this might impact their partners, the male farmers as well.

Farm is another stakeholder, by hearing and experiencing which topics have the greatest impact on the well-being of the members of the learning network. This information is very valuable to develop a support offer tailored to their target audience: female farmers.

A third stakeholder is the agricultural sector itself. All farmers (male and female) benefit from keeping mental wellbeing on the agenda.



1.3 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 that really supports each other. Knowing that there are other people with the same issues that WILL support you (knowing you are not alone) is a huge help in dealing with stress and overcoming mental problems.

The exchanged stories between the women were very recognizable for everyone and a topic that came up very often were family relationships. The agricultural sector often involves collaboration across generations and **intra-familial communication** is often difficult. Therefore, focusing on communication skills is an important point of attention if we want to work on the well-being of farmers.

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 taboo about mental health.

1.4 Main recommendations

An important lesson learned from this social innovation is that sharing problems or concerns 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.

Because mental health is still a topic that mainly concerns women, 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 taboo about mental health.

In order to be able to continue to focus on the theme of well-being and to set up and try out new initiatives, financial support is very important, both structural and project-based.

A (general) recurring recommendation towards policy is the need to address the stressors themselves rather than ameliorate their symptoms. Farmers now feel that social innovations are just a band-aid and that the root causes are not addressed.

Farmer interview questions





The interview took place between Patrick Pasgang (Senior Advisor at Boerenbond) and Els Vanneste (female farmer, part of the learning network on well-being).

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. You really have to explain over and over what policy decisions actually do to people, to farmers as a human being.

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

Els

There is a great sense of trust and security within the learning network. It is also important that we, as participants, can decide ourselves what we want to talk about. It's not: now this is going to happen and you are going to listen to that. It actually grows from the participants themselves. Because the learning network runs over a longer period, you also have the feeling that you are walking that path together. 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 a very small thing 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. You can expose yourself, make yourself vulnerable and everything stays within the group. There is trust and safety. 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

What we noticed in those family constellations is that the pressure of generations, working together with your family, working together with your partner and the challenges that come with that, are similar. The learning network is very strong in that sense that you start from the human being, the farmer and the farmer's wife.

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

Els

I'm pleased with the learning network as it is. It's actually a 'luxury' situation that you are relieved of the administrative and financial burden, because the framework is provided by Ferm voor agrarvrouwen (support) and FARMWELL (financial resources). That allows us to really focus 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 to be able to talk about emotions and concerns and for doing that, we need more language. That is also a piece of breaking the taboo. The learning network can help with that. 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. In the agriculture and horticulture sector, we have such an overloaded agenda of things that need to be done on our farm that the priority is usually elsewhere. Our sense of responsibility often takes precedence over our personal needs. We're not going to directly change that





with the learning network about well-being but maybe it will help us to be able to have little tools to give our mindset a rest during the day and some positive nourishment.

Patrick: Who should be the organisation/funding or support? Where do you expect support from? Your organisation, 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 first start from who you are and what you want as a person and from there make a plan for your company, when you have to make certain choices on your farm or when you are at a crossroads of a new generation. That's one of the possibilities and I also think that the Flemish Government has to help support that.

The strength of that is that you can actually separate your business from your person. Sometimes we identify so much with our company or with the previous generation that in the long run we no longer know what is alive in ourselves, what do I stand for, what do I really want? 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.





2 The pilot action: Academy On Tour

2.1 What was the pilot about?

2.1.1 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. One of the courses was about the learning network and the main purpose was to **inspire** the participants of the pilot **to open up themselves** to colleagues about mental health issues.

2.1.2 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 well-being. Sylvie is the facilitator of the learning network and she told about how it started, how they are organised, the topics they are talking about (for example the harvest of inspiring books at the first meeting), how they stay in touch between the meetings, ...

The final slide was about the comments the participants of the learning network send to each other in the WhatsAppgroup after the first 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 members of the learning network themselves**, in order to inspire others to join a learning network as well.

2.1.3 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 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, mentioning 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.





2.2 The main lessons from the pilot

The main lesson learned from the pilot is that women feel positively supported when they can talk about mental health issues in a safe environment.

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.

2.3 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 organisation like Farmers at a Crossroads. Seeing and hearing fellow farmers talk freely about it breaks the taboo of talking about problems and mental well-being.

Talking helps! 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.





3 The Social Return on Investment (SROI)

3.1 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 the farmers 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 organisation 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.

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.





3.2 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. One of the key lessons from the data collection has been that dedicated time and support is needed when asking participants to fill out longer questionnaires. Clear motivation should be provided, e.g. discussion on why the outcomes of the survey will be useful and relevant also for the target stakeholders. This has been a challenge in the case of the Learning Network surveying as the programme on the 'academy on tour' has been too dense and participants often did not have the energy to complete the questionnaire in this intense working environment. 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. Key note speaker Mario Haneca was invited, he talked about changing mindsets, 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. Having only 9 people that are a member of a learning network about wellbeing, our data set for this last questionnaire is quite small.

3.3 Valuing change

The summative SROI Impact Map for the Learning Network Social Innovation is given in the Table below. Impacts over a forward looking 5-year benefit period (2022-27) are generated for 80 male and female farmers through 13 outcomes across 4 wellbeing impact pathways. Impacts are dominated by the value created for personal (45%) and relational (44%) wellbeing, with general knowledge and skills attained through participation in the network having potential for benefits accrued through economic wellbeing.

The findings of the SROI demonstrate that an estimated €102K investment in the learning network represents a potential 314% return to individuals, communities and society with respect to wellbeing impacts for farmers. Over the benefit period the overall return for each





Euro invested is projected to be 3.14 Euros as farmers are estimated to benefit from increased agency, competence, skills and confidence as a result of participating in the network.

The SROI estimates indicate the potential that the learning network has to induce changes to the personal and professional lives of the farmers who join it. Relational wellbeing impacts relate to changes in the way that they relate to and are supported by others with respect to their wellbeing, as well as the transference of knowledge to others in the network, with the most significant impact relating an improved sense of having others to rely on in times of difficulty.

Personal wellbeing impacts which impact on the resilience, self-awareness and positive functioning of network members, relate principally to those that are felt by individuals in the network but also their family members, including the mental wellbeing and emotional awareness of children. In this sense the wider impacts of the learning network may be underestimated by the model over the longer term, as a greater cohort of individuals may benefit, especially if the network grows at a faster rate than is currently forecast.





Table: Belgium-Flanders Forecast SROI Impact Map (SI: Learning Network)

Impact Pathway	Outcome	Stakeholders (No.)	Indicator/s of Change	Outcome Change (%)	Financial proxy (Value €/Unit)	Present Value (€)	Present Value (%)
Relational Wellbeing	Improved sense of having others to rely on in times of difficulty	Male and female farmers (80)	I always seek help from other people if I need it	66%	(4) Value to an individual (25-45) of feeling like they belong in their neighbourhood € 3,418 per person)	€ 88,671	44%
	Improved access to wellbeing advice and information	Male and female farmers (80)	I find it easy to obtain help, advice or support in relation to personal matters	72%	(1) Unit cost of approved social worker (ASW) for community social care (€ 2,241 per person p.a)	€ 31,547	
	Transference of knowledge and insight to others	Male and female farmers (80)	I am able to impart my knowledge and insights around wellbeing support to others	70%	(9) Cost of employability skills training in regular sessions with counsellor / coach (€ 877 per person p.a)	€ 22,657	
Personal Wellbeing	Increased competence, engagement and purpose	Male and female farmers (80)	I feel that I am making a difference in my life	63%	(3) Value attributed to positive functioning volunteers based on additional median wages earned (€ 4,589 per person)	€ 57,686	45%
	Improved resilience and self esteem	Male and female farmers (80)	When things go wrong in my life it generally takes me a long time to get back to normal; in general I feel very positive about myself	55%	(6) Cost of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to build psychological resilience and self-esteem (€ 2,104 per person p.a)	€ 22,748	
	Increased sense of agency and empowerment	Male and female farmers (80)	I feel I am in full control of what I do; I feel empowered to make changes in my life	65%	(3) Cost of Empowerment (for Women) coaching programme (€ 736 per person)	€ 24,635	





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	Increased self-awareness	Male and female farmers (80)	I feel I am the kind of person I want to be today	67%	(10) Cost of leadership management training course (€ 1,188 per person)	€ 15,537	
	Improved mental wellbeing	Male and female farmers (80)	The wellbeing of my family is generally very good	64%	(26) Mental health service costs per individual (anxiety and depression) (€ 682 per person p.a)	€ 5,326	
	Improved self-awareness and emotions in family	Male and female farmers (80)	I am able to proactively build self-awareness and positive emotions in my children	72%	(10) Cost of leadership management training course (€ 1,188 per person)	€ 4,349	
	Improved confidence and motivation	Male and female farmers (80)	I will try something even if there is a chance it might not work	63%	(10) Cost of leadership management training course (€ 1,188 per person)	€ 14,610	
Economic Wellbeing	Improved knowledge and skills	Male and female farmers (80)	I have a wide range of skills and knowledge to help me at work or in my daily life	72%	(9) Cost of employability skills training in regular sessions with counsellor / coach (€ 2,474 per person)	€ 35,010	11%
Total Benefits						€ 322,776	100%
Total Investment						€ 102,850	
Benefit-Investment Ratio (BIR)						€ 3.14 : 1	





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 channels¹. 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.

 Barriers on personal and family level	
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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 Barriers in agricultural sector	
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.
 Societal barriers	

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.:
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





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:





Case study: Learning network on mental wellbeing

- 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





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- 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.

