

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## ‘Farmers at a Crossroads’ (Belgium)





## 1 Implications for policy and farming support

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

#### Farmers at a crossroads helpline

The main challenge is the fact that less than half of the farmers in Flanders tend to seek help when problems arise at their farm. 44% of farmers prefer the strategy of working harder to secure production during hard times. When they do seek external help, farmers are more likely to do so for problems on the farm (41%) than for personal problems (24%). It is noteworthy that only about a third of the farmers in Flanders indicate that they can easily find the right help (for farm problems and personal problems).

Several reasons lie at the base of this:

- Farmers 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.
- Farmers indicate that the cost of possible help and information channels is too expensive.
- 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.
- Farmers feel that traditional social welfare or wellbeing organisations are not in touch with the working and living situation on a farm. They feel that there is insufficient knowledge and understanding of their needs.

#### Training how to make problems debatable

The main challenge is that it's difficult for most farmers to talk about or cope with their feelings or mental problems. 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.

### 1.2 Support framework – What is needed?

#### Farmers at a Crossroads helpline

Two main interventions are needed to address the challenge that less than half of the farmers tend to seek help when they encounter problems:

- optimise the help offered to farmers
- facilitate and improve the access to help

#### *Optimise the help offered to farmers*

Farmers need a **single accessible and discrete point of contact** that can help them quickly or refer them to the right person or organisation. When they take the step to ask for help or





support, it is 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.

In order to provide a sustainable and qualitative service, a lot of progress can be made when the **agricultural and health care** 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 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.

#### *Facilitate and improve the access to help*

A **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.

People in the direct social circle of farmers, like family, friends, but also gatekeepers are often the people farmers have a trusting relationship with. They can play an important part in **guiding farmers 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 those that do not find a way to help yet.

#### Training how to make problems debatable

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.

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

#### Farmers at a Crossroads helpline

- policy makers have to (continue to) financially support the (set-up of the) organisation to maintain the central, accessible, independent and discrete point of contact for farmers looking for help and support
- farmers' organisations should refer their members to Farmers at a Crossroads helpline and take action to guide farmers to help
- farmers' organisation Boerenbond (in collaboration with female farmers' organisation Ferm, and the organic farmers' and the young farmers' organisations, **Farmers at a Crossroads** and a health care organisation started a demonstration project with financial support by the Flemish government to improve wellbeing for farmers in Flanders. The goal of the project is to
  - get existing knowledge and skills around mental resilience to farmers
  - make farmers more resilient by learning how to manage stress
  - addressing stress factors (based on the research by ILVO) by improving their management skills through training

This project is called Boerenverstand, Rust in je hoofd.

Translated it says : Farmers' common sense, calmth in your head, <https://www.boerenbond.be/projecten/boerenverstand-rust-je-hoofd>, and it will run for 2 years, until December 2024. The project consists of a number of training sessions for farmers, given by experts and partners.

#### Training how to make problems debatable

- policy makers have to stimulate and support actions that focus on communication about mental health and the available help services
- 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 we recently kicked off a new project, called a demonstration project with funding from the Flemish government in which Boerenbond, Ferm and other farmer organisations work together with the healthcare and wellbeing sector. This project is described above.





- farmer's 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 Farm female farmers and their partners, networking event with food and drinks
  - woman in a pioneer role in the family to discuss problems
  - bringing theme 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.

### Address root causes

When we presented a selection of social innovations to the farmers in the practice group they indicated that social innovations have its use, but many problems regarding wellbeing would be solved if the causes for stress would be taken away. For example it is not healthy that seeing a strange car entering the gate, already provokes feelings of stress. The government should work on the way controls take place and improve the efficiency for administrative obligations.

The farmers in the practice groups saw the presented social innovations mainly as "tissues against bleeding", not as pulling out the root causes of stress. This is exactly what FARMWELL wants to aim at: getting to the root causes.

