

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Zala Valley Open Farm Network (Hungary)





## 1 Implications for policy and farming support

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

Identifying the key challenges and needs, we drew on the findings of the Journey of Change as well as the results of the pilot action and the relevant workshop of the 3rd European Thematic Meeting. For the sake of transparency, we have classified the challenges and needs into six logical groups:

#### Society:

- poor cooperation culture among farmers, isolated struggle for survival;
- weak social relationships and lack of trust;
- increasing frequency of allergic diseases due to dietary causes;
- weak health awareness, consumer ignorance, consumption of mass products;
- risk of local values being lost, such as traditional production methods;
- quality and healthy food, preserving traditions and natural values - are known, accepted and affordable to a limited audience.

#### Environment:

- low environmental awareness;
- underutilized or overexploited resources, uncultivated domains;
- in the case of Chamber-tour Association the most burning concrete need for farmers' cooperation was the significantly declining groundwater levels and desertification of the region.

#### Governance:

- low citizen involvement;
- institutions operating on the principle of authority and power - vulnerability and lack of trust towards institutions.

#### Economy:

- precarious farm income, economic uncertainty for small - scale farmers;
- small market (few solvent consumers).

#### Policy:

- the added value of these or similar initiatives is not or hardly recognised in the national CAP implementation;
- future uncertainty of LEADER support / the existence of most of the network(s) depend on external funding;
- only few LEADER LAG has the knowledge and the capacity to undertake strategically thought-out, long-term territorial animation;
- support for multi-actor developments (cooperations) is difficult or not possible (at least in LEADER);
- the legal regulation on small-scale production and marketing is too complicated;
- lack of legal background for the sale of each other's products;





- lack of adequate advisory, mentoring or facilitation services.

Essential local conditions for success:

- well defined shared goals, values, and vision;
- commonly set rules and roles – democratic and transparent procedures;
- transparent and good management/leadership;
- benchmarking;
- motivation - ownership – own issue;
- “give and take” approach;
- “friendly type” quality assurance system;
- respect and trust.

## 1.2 Support framework – What is needed?

During FARMWELL implementation, typically during the preparation of the SROI JOC and the implementation of the pilot action, participants have in many cases articulated how the network helps to address the problems summarized in the previous chapter. In response to the challenges listed under "society" and “environment”, the operation of such network is an effective tool as it activates and empowers the membership and the wider local community to act on their shared values such as preserving local traditions, raising awareness on healthy food consumption as well as environmental issues. It strengthens the culture of cooperation and thus reduces the isolation of the individual small scale businesses. As members stated, being part of a community builds self-confidence by showing that „others are not perfect either”. It was highlighted that sharing knowledge, problems, work, and resources reduces burdens. Sense of belonging to a community with shared values and goals improves quality of life.

Concerning the challenges listed under “governance” participants mentioned that a professionally credible and accepted network has stronger influence on professional issues than the individual members. Moreover, the vulnerability of individual farmers towards institutions is significantly reduced by discussing common questions and problems and through active formal and informal contacts. Concerning the economic challenges, as a result of the network activities, economy of scale and more effective marketing reduces the economic vulnerability of small-scale farms.

Professionally exciting environment, knowledge transfer, learning from external experts as well as from each-other „enables to think out of the box”, increases problem solving and creativity.

Zala Valley Open Farm network has achieved all that is listed in the previous chapter under “essential local conditions for success”.

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

This chapter reflects on the challenges listed under “policy”. Since the LEADER LAG plays key role in the initiation and operation of the Zala Valley Open Farm network, part of the proposals relates to the implementation of the LEADER intervention.





**As for the implementation rules of LEADER or other rural development measure** providing the possibility and simple implementation procedures for collaborative developments would be essential for promoting cooperations. LEADER LAGs should not only be allowed but motivated (awards, financial incentives etc.) to finance their own, area-based initiatives and take active facilitation in order to increase their interest in initiating and implementing area based cooperative solutions.

In general, the simplification of processing rural development applications (administrative and time requirements) is a real need which was mentioned by many stakeholders.

**Capacity building and knowledge transfer** is essential for increasing local animation capacity and the number of LAGs or other local actors that are capable and willing to carry out effective animation and network building as well as better contribution to the growth of social capital. This can be encouraged by the National Rural Networks through organising knowledge transfer focusing on the animation role and skills of the local actors as well as other topics and issues arising at local level. Few examples were mentioned during the pilot action such as brand building, civic organisation business model development, facilitation and communication.

As for the knowledge transfer networks can learn from each other (similarly to Belgian learning network) by being encouraged to

- mentoring scientific issues,
- organise exchange visits, spending time together,
- apply digital tools– trainings,
- organise living labs,
- provide agro coach service (Belgium).

Adaptability and the widespread diffusion of these models can be promoted by

- encourage demonstrating activities,
- real stories from farmer to farmer – communication channels tailored to the target groups (e.g. podcast, best practices in an easily digestible form),
- the LEADER cooperation measure, which is a suitable tool, e.g. online intercultural conferences.

There is a need for improving efficiency of the national rural networks by different ways of knowledge transfer, e.g. “tea group” for NRNs on the subject.

Evaluators should apply methodologies like SROI for identifying and presenting intangible outcomes and results. These results should be better communicated at the local, national and EU level. To make such results visible at local/regional level, it is recommended to enable and encourage the use of such evaluation practices even at local level.

Further simplification of the national legislation on small-scale production and marketing by setting out only the principles in legislation, disseminate the details in clear guidance and advice.





Integrate the issue of collaborative methods, social entrepreneurship and quality of life into agricultural higher education and vocational training.

In the rural development policy making the use of collaborative problem-solving approaches and multi actor pilot programmes such as the Sandbanks target programme should be broadened. This includes providing resources, expertise (including facilitation and communication) and time to solve a certain problem with the involvement of the ones affected. Good communication and dissemination of the results is crucial.

### Farmer interview questions

**Q:** What are the main needs of farmers – in the context of the social innovation – that should be addressed through support?

**A:** Innovation needs to fit in with the current regulatory and financial environment, so it would be good if this environment (taxation, legal regulation, support opportunities etc.) would not change too often.

Other important message, which I think needs to be disseminated in Hungary, is that strength has a multiple meaning. When we talk about a strong person, a strong farmer, it means they do not ask for help, they do not speak about their problems and of course they would not speak about their problems publicly. There should be a change of mindset in this regard. Once we visited a pig farmer in Austria who spoke openly about his problems he faced during COVID as well as other difficult periods. He mentioned that he was offered professional mental health assistance paid by the state. We were so much touched by his openness that after the visit, at our dinner table we (12-14 network members) started to talk about our feelings under COVID and other crisis. To have a role model who shows strength in being open and honest about mental challenges, encourages people to think that being strong is not only hiding feelings and pretending strength when using the last energy to survive but being able to face with it. This meeting had a long lasting impact on us, we were still talking about it six months later. The Belgian “Farmers on a crossroad” initiative can be taken as an example; in this case the package of mental healthcare is embedded in a professional advisory service for agriculture. People wouldn't go directly to a psychologist or a coach to discuss mental issues and difficulties in running their farm, but if it is attached to a professional problem and someone is there who is able to reflect from the professional as well as the human side, it could make a difference. Our society is just not prepared to talk about mental problems or any kind of problem. This should somehow be changed.

Our Association applied for a short food supply chain project few years ago. The assessment process has taken so long that prices have changed significantly, and many people have lost motivation due to changing circumstances or have been forced to implement their plans on their own. Therefore, we could not implement the application.

Short supply chain is a good initiation, an innovation in Hungary, but its delivery is burdened with a number of difficulties. It should be handled as an innovation. Lots of flexibility is required if we want it to be successful.

**Q:** What do you think should happen to make similar support actions available to farmers/ social innovations a reality?





**A:** Small scale farmers are short of time. They do the farming, processing, packaging, they deliver, or go to the market, they do marketing and PR, they do the finances and so on. We should consider it when talking about social innovation. If people are willing to put energy into social action, there should be support to substitute their work, so farmers should not have to choose between earning income or contributing to social innovation. People are so much under pressure of earning income that priorities for daily survival are stronger than long term priorities. A small subsidy for substitution would solve part of the problem.

**Q:** Who should be the organisation / funding or supporting it?

**A:** There are many suitable funding schemes already set under CAP (exchange programs, LEADER etc.) but almost all are too bureaucratic. Their administration requires way too much time than it should be necessary. For example, the study tour I mentioned... our association was the only one that claimed this grant and we have two persons, extremely competent in the administration of grants as well as payment claims and they have already spent hundreds of hours on the application and the payment claim and I don't think this scale of administration is really necessary. Because if it is required, many organisations and cooperations are excluded. We are lucky, we have these two people who have this expertise and offer their services pro bono, but many others have no such luck. On the other hand, I do not think it is fair to expect from our colleagues such input for free.

There are many individuals in the administration who are helpful, who assist you to solve your problem and believes that problems are there to be solved and not to be a reason for sanctioning. These people also struggle in the system. Somehow I feel that there is much good intention pushed in a strange box where these good intentions disappear and cannot spread because the system does not allow. The culture of the implementation system should be changed.

