

Policy Case No 1

SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF FARMERS (Belgium)



Improving farmers' wellbeing through social innovation



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101000797.



The social challenges & social innovations

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).

“I have one brother who continued the business. He ended his life at the end of 2016. That’s why I think it’s so important that men start the conversation.”

Lut D’Hondt (Farmer)



Farmers at a Crossroads was started 15 years ago in Flanders as a social innovation to address the challenge of coping with problems on the farm.

Thanks to financial help of the Flemish Government a helpline was installed, easy to use and easy to reach 24/24 and 7/7. This helpline is open for all farmers, free of charge and deals with different problems linked to farming. After contacting the helpline, farmers can call on advisors of Farmers at a Crossroads who assist them in the search for solutions tailored to the problems on their farm.

However, the recognition that the helpline and the holistic guidance of farmers was mainly used as a “last resort” when farmers really didn’t see any other possibility than to stop farming and/or go bankrupt led to the need to optimise / rethink the helpline. This gave birth to a new social innovation, **a workshop on learning a language to make problems debatable and recognisable**. All this with the purpose of reaching out and connecting to farmers before it’s too late.

The **estimated social impact of the helpline is considerable**, the investment in ‘Farming at the Crossroads’ represents a **282% return to individuals, communities and society** with respect to wellbeing impacts for farmers. This means that, over the 2017-22 period, the overall return for each euro invested has been 2.82 euros as the health, wellbeing, happiness and sense of belonging in society for farmers have improved. Just over half of this value is associated with relational – including an increase in access to support and willingness of farmers to seek support – and personal wellbeing impacts – including reduced anxiety and depression, greater optimism and engagement and improved life satisfaction.

Services like Farmers at Crossroads recognise the **need to optimise the help offered to farmers (including specific training on soft skills) and to facilitate and improve the access to help** (including improved communication on farmers’ wellbeing).

“Farmers at Crossroads is a quite unique concept in Europe. It’s paid by the Flemish Government 100% subsidised and they see that this is really needed. They still added more money for the coming years, because we see a big increase in asking for help in their business model to increase the economic business, but also their wellbeing or how they feel about farming.” – explains Patrick Pasgang (BoerenBond) in the [Toolbox video](#).

“So we assist farmers if they have questions about their farms. If there are debts, how can we address that? We also provide employment assistance. When it’s about animal welfare we offer help. But in addition we also check whether psychological help is needed.” – Els Verté (Director of Farmers at a Crossroads).

A similarly inspiring initiative, **DPJ Foundation** was set up in July 2016 following the death of farmer Daniel Picton-Jones, whose widow Emma decided to set up the foundation to support the mental health of those in the farming sector. The DPJ Foundation delivers Mental Health Awareness Training and talks to groups to challenge the stigma around poor mental health in agriculture. To read more about DJP and other similar practices, visit [FARMWELL’s social innovations database](#).

Farmers organisations are key to providing such services or collaborate with initiatives like Farmers at Crossroads. FARMWELL partners Boerenbond and Ferm for example run two demonstration projects with funding from the Flemish government in which Boerenbond, Ferm and other farmer organisations work together with the healthcare sector.

Farmers' organisations supporting mental health

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. Inspired by the FARMWELL bus-on-tour pilot, Boerenbond is currently especially looking for initiatives that can realise a mindset shift for male farmers to talk more freely in case of problems.

Ferm coordinates 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. 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. Ferm developed a specific training for farmers about intrafamilial communication skills and one about working together on a farm.

Policy dialogue on mental health

In October 2019, **ILVO** released research findings regarding the well-being of farmers in Flanders through a press release. Following this, ILVO conducted further research on the impact of COVID-19 on farmers, including their well-being. Among others, the study identified seven groups of stressors:

- Regulation
- Financial insecurity
- Occupational risks
- Weak negotiation position
- Uncertain future prospects
- Performance drive and appreciation
- Demanding profession



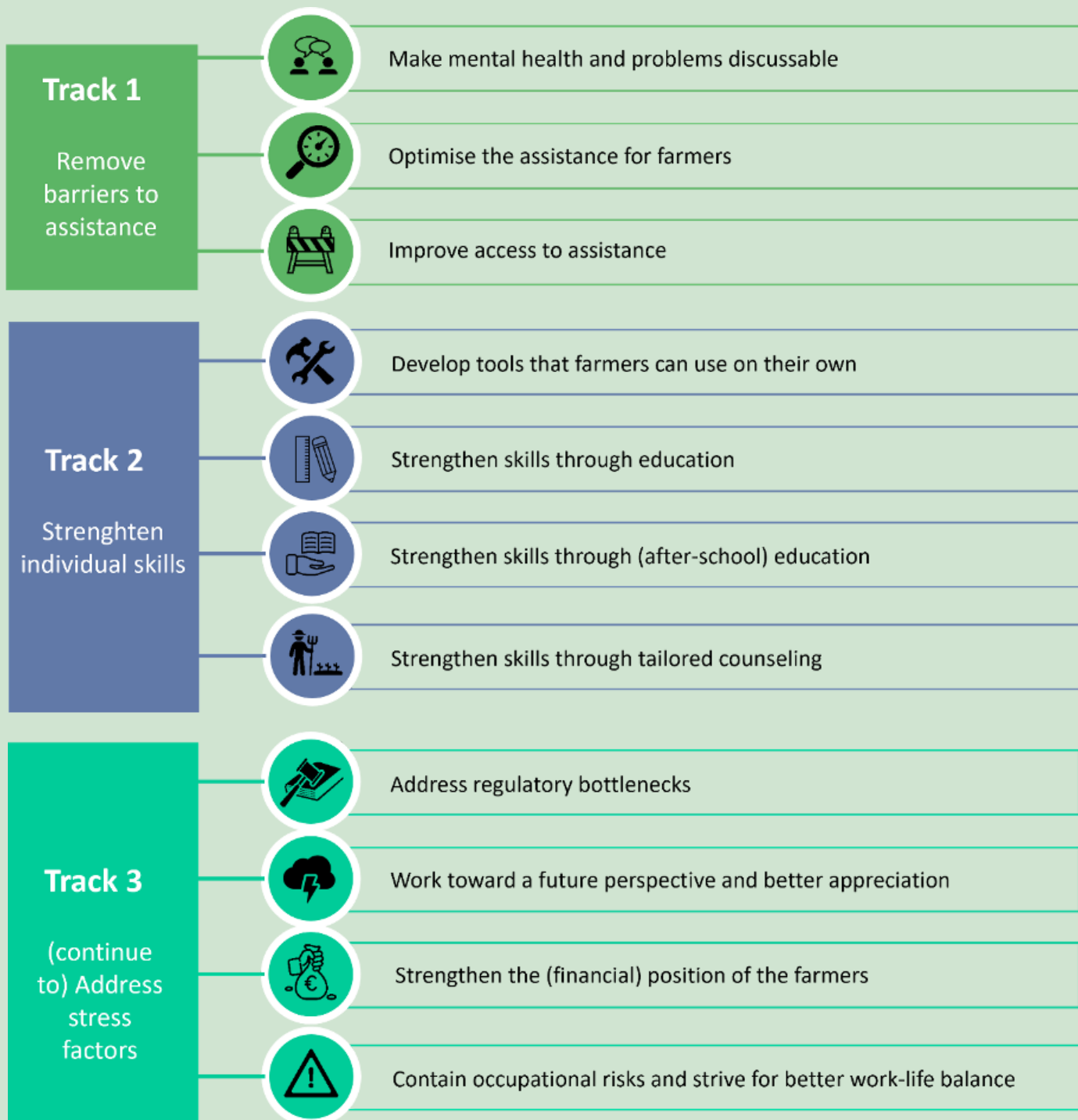
In response to this work, the Minister of Agriculture requested ILVO and the Department of Agriculture to facilitate a round table discussion focused on farmers' wellbeing. During this round table discussion, the idea of **an integrated strategy (action plan) aimed at improving farmers' wellbeing in Flanders was launched**. The action plan is, hence, the culmination of an intensive participatory process involving farmers, the Flemish government, farming organisations, and entities beyond the agricultural sector.

This round table discussion marked the beginning of a participatory process to collaboratively formulate an action plan for farmers' wellbeing. Central to the action plan is an integrated approach to enhance the well-being of Flemish farmers, with three major tracks:

- Removing barriers to assistance
- Strengthening the skills of individual farmers and horticulturists,
- Addressing stress factors.

Each track (see next page) includes specific strategies to implement the primary objective, along with a compilation of commitments specifying who will be involved, what actions will be taken, and when they will be implemented.





The **action plan** was officially launched and presented by the Minister of Agriculture in May 2022. The Department of Agriculture hosts an annual networking event for all stakeholders who have made commitments.



Further information

Contact partners: ILVO, BoerenBond, Ferm
<https://farmwell-h2020.eu/partner-countries/belgium/>
 Check out FARMWELL website: www.farmwell-h2020.eu
 Check out FARMWELL toolbox: <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/toolbox/>
 Illustrations are from @ILVO & @Canva



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