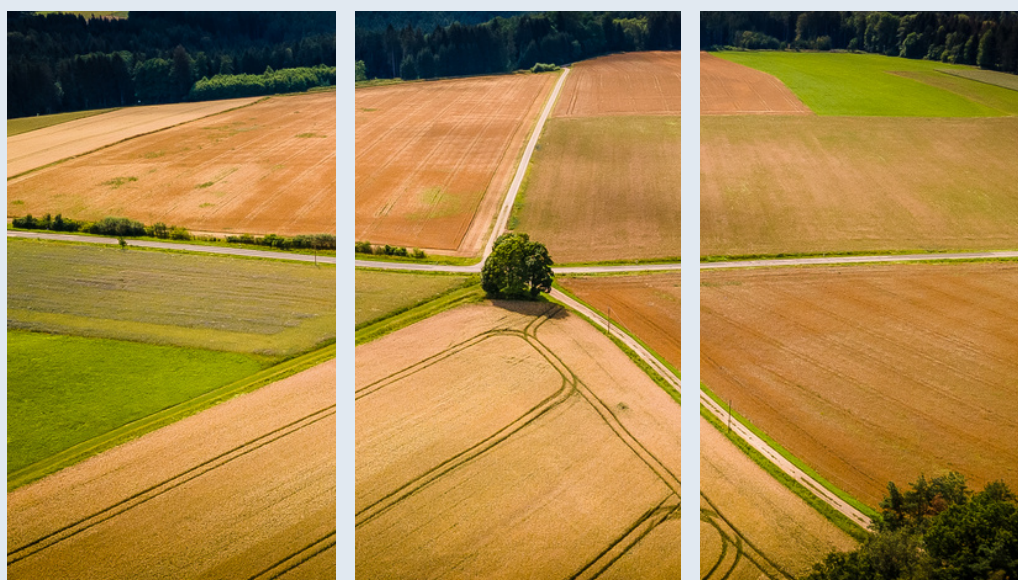


# Case Study

## Farmers at a Crossroads (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.*



# FARMWELL!

## Farmers at a Crossroads

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Being a farmer is sometimes hard, not only due to economic and environmental factors but also due to the nature of farming where work-life balance is harder to achieve. This creates additional stress, leading to mental health issues and often higher suicide rates among farmers than other segments of society. Farmers often do not seek help and coping with everyday problems is getting harder and harder. To address these issues, a social innovation known as Farmers at a Crossroads was initiated 15 years ago, supported by the Flemish Government. It established a helpline and later introduced workshops aimed at making farm-related problems discussable and recognisable, fostering early intervention. This case study talks about this inspiring example and how it was brought closer to farmers in FARMWELL.

Why is farming so stressful and why is it hard for farmers to cope with stress and mental health issues?

How was the "Farmers at a Crossroads" social innovation initiated and how did the initiative evolve towards more attention for mental wellbeing?

What has been the impact of this social innovation on farmers?

What are the crucial lessons and recommendations generated by the "Farmers at a Crossroads" initiative for farmers, farm advisory services, and policymakers?



## GET INSPIRED!

Read the **longer version** of the FARMWELL case study [here!](#)

Watch the 'Let's Talk About It?!' **short documentary** [here!](#)

Check out **other exciting social innovation** cases [here!](#)



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# The story of 'Farmers at a Crossroads'

Being a farmer is a tough job. It is not just economic reasons that keep them running, but also passion for the job and, for some, the obligation to take over the farm from generation to generation.

Already for years we see a decrease in the number of farmers. Those who stay get bigger, also with higher financial risks connected to a more volatile market, changing climate conditions and stricter legislation.

We also recognise that work-life balance seems to be disappearing for the farmers. Work and family have always been interlinked and when difficulty arises, taking distance from the problem is more challenging. Moreover, asking for (social/psychological) help is still seen as a failure in the eyes of the farmers. Farming families tend to keep their issues indoors out of shame or pride. Working harder is still seen as the solution to problems

Therefore, **coping with difficulties in the context of farming** has been identified as one of the key challenges in Belgium

Read the [mapping report on the wellbeing of Belgian farmers and the challenges of the FARMWELL project](#).



**Farmers at a Crossroads** was started 15 years ago in Flanders as a social innovation to **address the challenge of coping**. 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 dealing with different problems linked to farming.

However, we recently noticed that the helpline was mainly used as a “last resort” when farmers really didn’t see any other possibility than to stop farming and/or go bankrupt. Calling the helpdesk was perceived as being at the end of your carrier, looking for a way to sell your farm and only looking at accounting figures and values. At the same time, research showed that the mental wellbeing of farmers was under pressure, with 48% of farmers indicating that their work exhausts them mentally.

**HOE KUNNEN WE JE HELPEN?**

Vzw Boeren op een Kruispunt is een hulporganisatie voor alle Vlaamse boeren en tuinders in nood.

**Bel ons gratis: 0800 99 138**

[Help mij](#)

[Koop hier ons boek '15 verhalen bij 15 jaar Boeren op een Kruispunt'](#)

**IK WIL GRAAG HULP VOOR:**



All this has led to the need of optimising /rethinking the helpline and gave birth to a new and recent 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, at a stage when help can still provide solutions, farmers can still change their business concept, economic and social innovations can still help to overcome problems and have a positive impact on the wellbeing of farmers.

Therefore, Farmers at a Crossroads developed a workshop making problems at the farm recognisable and debatable among gatekeepers – i.e. people who are in touch with farmers on a daily basis - helping them to start the debate, pushing the farmer gently towards using the helpline when there is still time. At the same time a workshop is developed for farmers making them more open for discussing and speaking about their problems with fellow farmers, partners and/or gatekeepers. Calling the helpline must be seen as inscribing for a management course, calling a specific farmer advisor for help and/or talking to another farmer for professional advice, without any limitation on the topic, and without shame but as a proof of business concern and professionalism. Farmers at a Crossroads provides coaching throughout the whole journey of change and invites advisors/consultants where needed.

After this innovation we now see an enormous increase (doubling each year, reaching 300 in 2022) in calls, making it necessary to upgrade the service with extra consultants. An increase of budget from the Flemish Government has been approved due to the need for this social innovation demonstrated by the latest impact figures.

## The story of FARMWELL

Given the challenges - coping of farmers with problems - identified in the Belgian context, Farmers at a Crossroads was an obvious invitee for **the meetings with stakeholders within the FARMWELL project** (the so-called FARMWELL “practice group”). During these meetings the taboo regarding talking about problems came up, as well as Farmers at a Crossroads’ training to make problems debatable was highlighted as an innovative solution to the challenges identified.

It was clear from the beginning that this was a very sensitive topic. Therefore, Farmers at a Crossroads until then only gave training to farmers as part of other events organised on other themes, in order not to scare farmers off participating.



**Inspiratietoer**  
**Welbevinden loont: vat je innerlijke koe bij de horens**

Maandag 14 november, ganse dag  
Bustoeur langs 3 heel verschillende  
bedrijven met 3 heel persoonlijke  
verhalen in West- en Oost-  
Vlaanderen

Investeren doet op termijn opleveren. Maar wat is ook dat investeren in jezelf? Chateau de Boverat aan de rand van de Ardennen heeft het antwoord. Het is een heel mooi verhaal over de overwinning van het team de slag geven met je eigen welzijn. De bus bezoeken een 3 bedrijven die concreet vertellen hoe zij de stress van alledag aanpakken en hoe hun houding hieraan optimaal. Naast de presentatoren krijg je ook theoretische achtergrond. Ervarren wat het van buitenaf is om te horen van mensen die je heel begrijpen met je veldje doelen. Wat op het einde van de rit is dat belangrijk: praten werkt.

**Programma**  
Bezoek aan de Boerenbond in Melle, België.  
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De inspiratietoer vindt plaats onder de vorm van een busreis. Aangezien de theorie op de bus zal worden gegeven, is het sterk aangewezen om de bus mee te nemen. Opleveren kan op zaterdagochtend. Aankomst in Melle en vertrek op de Boerenbond in Melle.

**Inschrijven en kosten**  
Toespraak gratis, maar wordt het...  
Inschrijven en kosten van de bus...  
Inschrijven en kosten van de bus...  
Inschrijven en kosten van de bus...

Maar waarom?  
Makende van rust...  
Maakende van rust...  
Maakende van rust...

**BOEREN BOND**

**ILVO**

In the Flemish FARMWELL team, we felt that this was a very relevant social innovation to add to the project and, therefore, we chose this social innovation also for piloting. We were bold in our approach: **the inspirational “academy on tour” involved visiting - with a bus full of farmers - 3 different farms and providing training on the bus for farmers to work on their own wellbeing issues.** We were wondering whether we would get any response to our invitations sent out by partners Boerenbond (see invitation below) and by Ferm. For Boerenbond this was a very explicit invitation regarding the theme of wellbeing. To our surprise and great satisfaction, the bus was full! However, despite our efforts to attract male farmers (technical explanations during farm visits, a sturdy cow on the invitation, our suggestion to participate as a couple) it was the wives who participated, but at least they were many.



While the effectiveness of Farmers at a Crossroads – reflected in the increase popularity of the service – has been evident, valuing the real impact of such social innovation (also for farm advisors and decisionmakers) has been much more challenging. FARMWELL tested the Social Return on Investment (SROI) method to better understand and demonstrate the wellbeing impact of this social innovation.

**The findings of the SROI has shown that the investment in the 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 has improved.

**282% return on investment**

**Check out how the SROI method works!**



Just over half of this value is associated with relational – including 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. In addition to personal and relational wellbeing, the programme has proved successful in generating social and community wellbeing impacts, with farmers feeling a greater sense of connection, trust and belonging to their local community.



**The Farmers at a Crossroads Helpline & Training has also brought important lessons for farmers, farm advisory services and policymakers, including recommendations on how to ...**

- remove barriers to cope with problems and ask for help, making mental health and problems debatable;
- optimise the help offered to farmers;
- facilitate and improve the access to help;
- enhance farmers skills through after-school education;
- enhance skills through tailor-made guidance or advice;
- address stressors, limiting risks and strive for a better work-life balance.

**[Read policy recommendations here!](#)**



## **FIND OUT MORE!**

Check out the full case study: [here!](#)

Check out the FARMWELL Toolkit for more information & inspiration [here!](#)

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