

Case Study

Learning Network on Mental Well-being (Belgium)



Improving farmers' well-being 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!

Learning Network on Mental Well-being

Ferm voor agrarvrouwen, an organisation uniting women active in farming in Flanders, Belgium, recognised the escalating stress among its members, particularly driven by administrative burdens, negative media coverage, and uncertainties in agriculture. In response, they pioneered a learning network on mental well-being, a groundbreaking social innovation within the realm of farmers' organisations. The Learning Network initiative emerged from a gathering where women active in farming, be it as farm manager or as partner, shared experiences and concerns, leading to the creation of a supportive network focused on mental well-being. FARMWELL provided a platform for this endeavor, and the subsequent pilot involved a bus tour and training courses on making problems more debatable. The case study not only outlines the successful implementation of the learning network but also offers valuable recommendations for policymakers and organisations to destigmatise mental health discussions and enhance farmers' skills through targeted interventions.

How did the **Learning Network idea emerge among women active in farming in the context of FARMWELL?**

How can **learning networks help to overcome the stress** that farmers are facing?

How did the **FARMWELL pilot and other actions** support this process?

How can we measure the potential impact of the learning network and how can we **develop a supportive framework ?**



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 a Learning network of female farmers

Ferm voor agrarvrouwen is an organisation that brings together women in farming (female farmers as well as partners of male farmers) for networking and education. Coming together gives women in f the opportunity to talk about the things they share. Because they are all active in agriculture; the farm, their work at the farm and their concerns about the farm are often common. well-being is a theme that always has been high on the agenda at Ferm but in recent years, we have noticed that the stress of our (female) farmers has increased enormously. Especially the administrative burden, the negative media coverage of agriculture, uncertain prices and legislation are often mentioned stressors

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



Recognizing the escalating challenges to the well-being of our female farmers, we proactively prioritized this aspect within our organization. We convened a group of female farmers to contribute insights for a training program focused on well-being. More specifically, the training delved into the concept of the 'triangle of happiness,' comprising four integral components: 1. being well surrounded, 2. being able to be yourself, 3. feeling good and 4. things that can throw you off balance.



At that meeting, the idea of **starting a learning network about well-being was born.** One of the female farmers told a story about her husband. She explained the stress her husband had started to feel because of the arrival of the milking robot. Any problem with the robot would send out an alarm on his cell phone, requiring him to keep his phone next to him at all times and being available all the time. She shared her concern about her husband and the other female farmers present recognised themselves in her story and showered her with tips on how they themselves would handle this situation.

That is exactly the concept of a learning network: a small group of people who come together on a regular basis to learn from each other and each other's experiences on a certain theme. There is the possibility to invite external speakers, but this is not necessary (the group decides this itself). In this specific case, the learning network consists of female farmers, coming together to strengthen each other in terms of mental wellbeing.



Highlights: The most innovative aspects of the solution

A learning network on mental well-being is a new social innovation launched by Ferm voor agrarvrouwen. Learning networks and associations of farmers' organisations already exist but in general, these concern more technical and practical topics such as bookkeeping, genetics, etc. 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 is also not a surprise that an organisation for women in farming initiates this learning network as previous research shows that female farmers experience less barriers to talk about their well-being than men.

The story of FARMWELL with the learning network

Thanks to FARMWELL, we had the opportunity to set up a real learning network about well-being (as a social innovation) and so we invited those same ladies (6 farmers) to a **kick-off meeting**.

At this kick-off meeting, we presented the concept of the learning network about well-being and we asked the farmers about their own expectations and how they wanted to organise the learning network and what topics they would like to discuss. All female farmers who were present at this first meeting wanted to participate in the learning network and they decided to come together six times, in the autumn and winter (because there is less work to do at the farm in these months).



Photo: At the kick-off meeting, the farmers formulated their own expectations about the learning network (Journey of Change).

In the **FARMWELL 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 to colleagues about mental health issues.



The Social Return on Investment (SROI) methodology was used to forecast the potential impact of the learning network, that started up in 2022. The SROI found that impacts over a forward looking 5-year benefit period (2022-27) are generated for 80 male and female farmers through 13 outcomes across 4 well-being impact pathways. Impacts are dominated by the value created for personal (45%) and relational (44%) well-being, with general knowledge and skills attained through participation in the network having potential for benefits accrued through economic well-being.

The findings of the SROI demonstrate that an estimated €102,000 investment in the learning network represents a potential 314% return to individuals, communities and society with respect to well-being impacts for farmers. This means that 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 case study highlights two main interventions 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.

The first intervention involves - among others - sensitisation and communication about well-being and facilitation of networking. The latter includes the need to optimise and extend the offer of training for farmers and setting up of learning networks for peer-to-peer learning.

Some recommendations emerging from the Learning Network case

- Involve gatekeepers in support activities
- Use testimonials by fellow farmers (simple, recognisable situations)
- Do not put farmers under pressure to talk (positive affirmation approach)
- Organise informal networking events (with food and drinks) for female farmers and their partners
- Engage women who have a pioneer role in the family to discuss problems (men generally prefer to talk about problems 1-1 instead of in a group)
- Bring the mental health theme into small mixed groups of farmers that come together regularly and have already established a circle of trust
- Repeat the message often: "There is no shame in talking about problems."

The detailed case study also highlights the various actions that can be undertaken by policymakers and farmers' organisations to ensure the implementation of these interventions, including stimulating actions through policy that focus on communication about mental health, and providing subsidies for specific trainings and improvement of soft skills.



FIND OUT MORE!

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

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

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