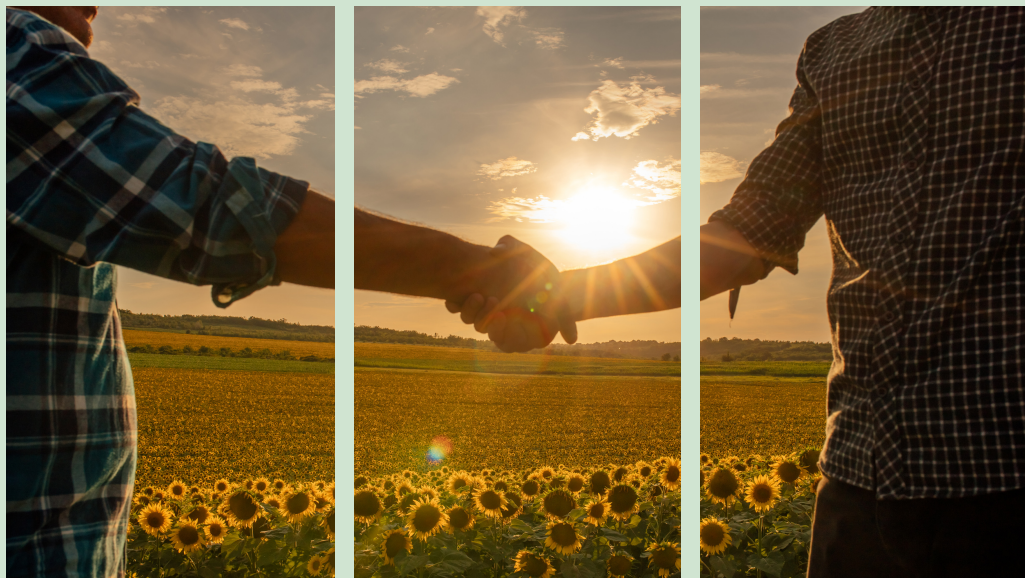


# Policy Case No 2

## SUPPORTING FARMERS' COLLABORATIONS



*Improving farmers' wellbeing through social innovation*



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# The importance of farmers' cooperation

FARMWELL highlighted the **importance of specialist farm networks and collaborations**, among others the Learning network (created by Ferm for female farmers in Belgium), Open Farm Network (Hungary), Women in Olive Oil (Greece), Transylvanian Highlands and Women Neighbourhood Association of Saschiz (Romania) or Stevia Hellas / Myrmidones Energy Community (in Greece). Farmers' cooperations are particularly relevant in the context of empowering women farmers (as in the case of networks and associations identified in Belgium, Greece and Romania), and generally to help farmers in being better represented in the food supply chain and diversifying their activities (e.g. tourism and selling local products) at the same time seeking each other's help in finding solutions to common problems (see for instance Ferm's Learning Network in Belgium, the Open Farm Network in Hungary or Stevia Hellas and Myrmidones in Greece). Overall, networks can help overcoming some key challenges and stressors of farmers, such as dealing with complicated regulations, communication, weak negotiation position and financial insecurity.

Furthermore, effective networks are typically evolving over time, often starting with one pressing problem (e.g. better representation in the market of farmers; or better representation of women farmers) and moving into new areas of cooperation (e.g. energy community to reduce costs, developing a learning network, etc.).

Some of the key networks and collaborations identified as social innovations in FARMWELL include:



- **Ferm** voor agrarvrouwen (organisation for female farmers) is an organisation that brings together female farmers for networking and education. Coming together gives female farmers the opportunity to talk about the things they share. Wellbeing is a theme that always has been high on the agenda at Ferm but in recent years Ferm has noticed that the stress of (female) farmers has increased enormously. The Learning Network of Women farmers – created by Ferm – is a simple social innovation, an example of mutual learning and support among farmers that can help overcome challenges.



*“Therefore, we recommend farmer organisations but also farmers to install more learning networks about wellbeing, because we think a small group works better if you want to create trust.” - Sylvie Decoutere (Ferm)*  
<https://youtu.be/dRvWd8HN2sU>

- **Women in Olive Oil (WIOO) Greece** is an informal group of women working on a voluntarily basis in the framework of social economy within the wider global WIOO network. Women who have olive trees, agronomists, processors, olive oil producers, nutrition scientists share a common interest and love for olive oil as well as their life stories within an extremely competitive global environment. They try to highlight the uniqueness and authenticity of their olive products but also the potential of women's entrepreneurship. This network gives women a voice and a forum in which to articulate the challenge they face but also the opportunities ahead. In the context of FARMWELL, cooperation has also been created between women of WIOO and other women's agricultural/agrotouristic cooperative and especially with WenCoop, the first women's energy community in Greece and in Europe - consisting of 66 women entrepreneurs - that encourages equal participation of women in the energy sector.

## Farmers' networks & associations

- **Transylvanian Highlands** emerged as an initiative that underwent a long process of establishing functional partnerships (active and engaged), starting from raising awareness and educating farmers about the natural values of the area to developing joint economic activities. The network created a meaningful impact in the territories and contributed to creating, maintaining, and promoting the local identity and the natural, cultural and social values of the area with an impact on the wellbeing of farmers communities.



*Transylvanian Highlands landscape, credit Jenő Major*

- A series of enabling conditions led to the formalisation of the **Women's Neighbourhood Association of Saschiz** in 2015 (in Romania). Since then, the Women's Neighbourhood Association moved from informally gathering around coffee and rhubarb pie to an emerging social innovation initiative that illustrates how collective action and community engagement can breathe new life into rural areas. It wasn't always easy to get things going in Saschiz, but coming together the Women's Association managed to become a voice in the community and a serious partner for the Local Administration. They created a space for themselves where they could talk about different issues (personal or professional), receive advice and discuss new ways of farming or adding value to their products. The activities implemented through the Association for the community of Saschiz are being done voluntarily, and this makes them proud of the work they do, as well as being proud of their village. The work done by them contributed to (1) bringing new people (tourists) to Saschiz, who eventually ended up staying/buying a house in the village, (2) creating new opportunities for small farmers to be seen and to sell their produce, (3) increasing the local economy by organizing different festivals and (4) raising awareness of the importance of medical care needed in rural areas through the Health Fairs organised.
- Sixteen founding members signed the **Zala Valley Open Farm Cooperation** Agreement in 2017, and based on this, the Open Farms short food supply chain group was created in 2018, in Hungary. The network, which by the end of 2023 has extended its membership to 35 members, is an important source of information and knowledge by regularly organised meetings and professional programmes with invited speakers. The knowledge, values, and the attitude that the network members gain through the various joint activities (trainings, study trips and lectures, educational programmes, product demonstrations, cultural acts, open hours etc.) contribute greatly to the wellbeing of the farmers involved, and their family members, as well as that of the wider society.

### The role of LEADER

The LEADER community (Zala Thermal Valley Association) has long been committed to help local producers and encourage the consumption of local products. Years of conscious animation activity has resulted in the accumulation of considerable knowledge and social capital in the community. The operation of Zala Valley Open Farms network is supported by the staff of the Zala Thermal Valley LEADER Association, and network members' small-scale investments are financed from the local LEADER fund through application.

## Social impact & key lessons

These cooperations and networks not only support the economic wellbeing of farmers (e.g. addressing low income through diversification/ additional income) but also considerably contribute to the social wellbeing of farmers: sharing and solving problems together, i.e. “a burden shared is a burden halved”. **This has been demonstrated by the social return on investment analysis carried out within the FARMWELL project**, that demonstrated that every euro invested in these networks generates between 2,70 and 4,23 euro of social, economic and environmental benefit.

Social innovation cooperation / network	Investment/ benefit ratio
Saschiz Women Association (Romania)	1 : 2,70
Zala Valley Network (Hungary)	1 : 4,23
Learning Network by Ferm (Belgium)	1 : 3,14
Myrmidones Energy Cooperative (Greece)	1 : 3,49
Women in Olive Oil in Renewable Energy (Greece)	1 : 3,64

One of the key challenges identified is **lack of longer-term funding** to support the work of such networks and associations. While these networks bring considerable economic and social benefits to their farming members, their financial sustainability is often threatened. In some cases, certain regulations – e.g. small scale production and marketing – are too complicated to be handled by small farmers.

In the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy framework, **social innovation has most commonly been associated in the past with LEADER** and – in principle - remains a key building block of innovation support within the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans.

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. LAGs – identified as an issue in Romania– in some cases include ‘social measures’ in their strategies in order to satisfy the strategy selection criteria, and then to show very little commitment to implementing relevant actions.

Much closer alignment of the implementation of LEADER with the EIP-AGRI would also be needed. There is great potential for more direct interaction between LEADER Local Action Groups and EIP-AGRI Operational Groups at the local level.

This can be encouraged by the **National Rural Networks / CAP 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 of key themes of support were mentioned during the FARMWELL pilot actions, such as brand building, civic organisation business model development, facilitation and communication.

LAGs are potentially also very useful for **channelling relevant funding from other EU programmes (e.g. ESF and ERDF)**. For instance in Romania, one of the most successful has been the LAG Napoca Porolissum (<https://napocaporolissum.ro/>) that (amongst many other achievements) established an award-winning[1] Centre for Social Inclusion in the village of Gilău in north-west Romania. This Centre offered a space for young people from the local community, including many from farming families, to interact and benefit from a variety of integrated social services such as social counselling, health education, healthy lifestyles and parenting skills.



### Further information

Contact partners: AKI (Hungary), Ferm (Belgium), Stevia Hellas Cooperative & AUTH (Greece), HCC (Romania). <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/partner-countries/belgium/>

Check out FARMWELL website: [www.farmwell-h2020.eu](http://www.farmwell-h2020.eu)

Check out FARMWELL toolbox: <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/toolbox/>

Illustrations are from @Canva & @Jeno Major



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[1] Winner of the 'Socially Inclusive & Innovative Futures' category of the 2022 Rural Inspirations Award organised by the European Network for Rural Development: [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/project/attachments/social-centre-for-social-inclusion\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/project/attachments/social-centre-for-social-inclusion_0.pdf)