

Farmers' wellbeing is a concern for all of us

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Farmers face unique challenges and are exposed to a range of pressures that impact their mental, physical and social wellbeing more or differently than other societal groups. An alarming sign of the serious social issues in the farming sector has been the relatively high suicide rate of farmers in some countries.



Globalisation has further increased the agricultural sector's economic, environmental and social pressures, making farmers' lives even tougher. This situation has called for innovative solutions that are adapted to the specific context, challenges and needs of farmers.

FARMWELL was a European Thematic Network project funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme between 2021 and 2023. The project aimed to help overcome the serious social challenges that farmers and farming communities are facing by bringing relevant social innovations closer to farmers.

FARMWELL was coordinated by E40 Group (an international consulting company in rural development) and operated in six partner countries: Belgium/Flanders, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Romania through the collaboration of farm advisory and research organisations. The project had an overarching logic, starting from identifying the most relevant social challenges that farmers are facing today in the specific country contexts (illustrated by the 'problem

tree' shown in Figure 1) and identifying social innovations that help address such challenges (illustrated by the 'solution tree' on the right of Figure 1).

A diverse set of challenges that impact farmers' wellbeing have been identified in the six partner countries, resulting both from external pressures and the nature of the farming profession itself. One of the key vulnerabilities is the relatively low income level in several agricultural sectors compared to national averages (ILVO, 2021). As a consequence, farm businesses aim to minimise their costs, including that of external labour, further increasing the physical workload of farmers. Low income has been one of the key issues that Romanian partners have focused on within the project. The unfavourable situation of farm workers—and, more widely, securing regular work in farm businesses—has been the challenge the Italian partners decided to work on.

Due to low income, farmers need alternative income sources. However, getting involved in new types of activities, such as social farming and collaborating with other farmers, is not always easy.

How to create more effective farmers' cooperations has been a specific issue in many of our partner countries, especially in Hungary, with more specific emphasis on social farming and social farm cooperations (in Hungary and Poland) and energy cooperatives (in Greece).

Lower quality or lack of basic services in rural areas—including access to transport, social security and/or education, healthcare and digital connectivity—has particular negative impacts on farming families. Farming is a physically demanding job (with a higher risk of work accidents), and farmers tend to continue working as long as their physical conditions allow, even if confronted with health problems (ILVO, 2021). The problem is even more pronounced due to the ageing farm population. Furthermore, farmers tend not to ask for help, mostly out of pride, especially when they face mental health issues—called 'minimal help-seeking behaviour' (ILVO, 2021). The lack of healthcare services has been the focus of our work in Poland, whereas partners in Belgium focused on the lack of mental care services adapted to the needs of farmers.

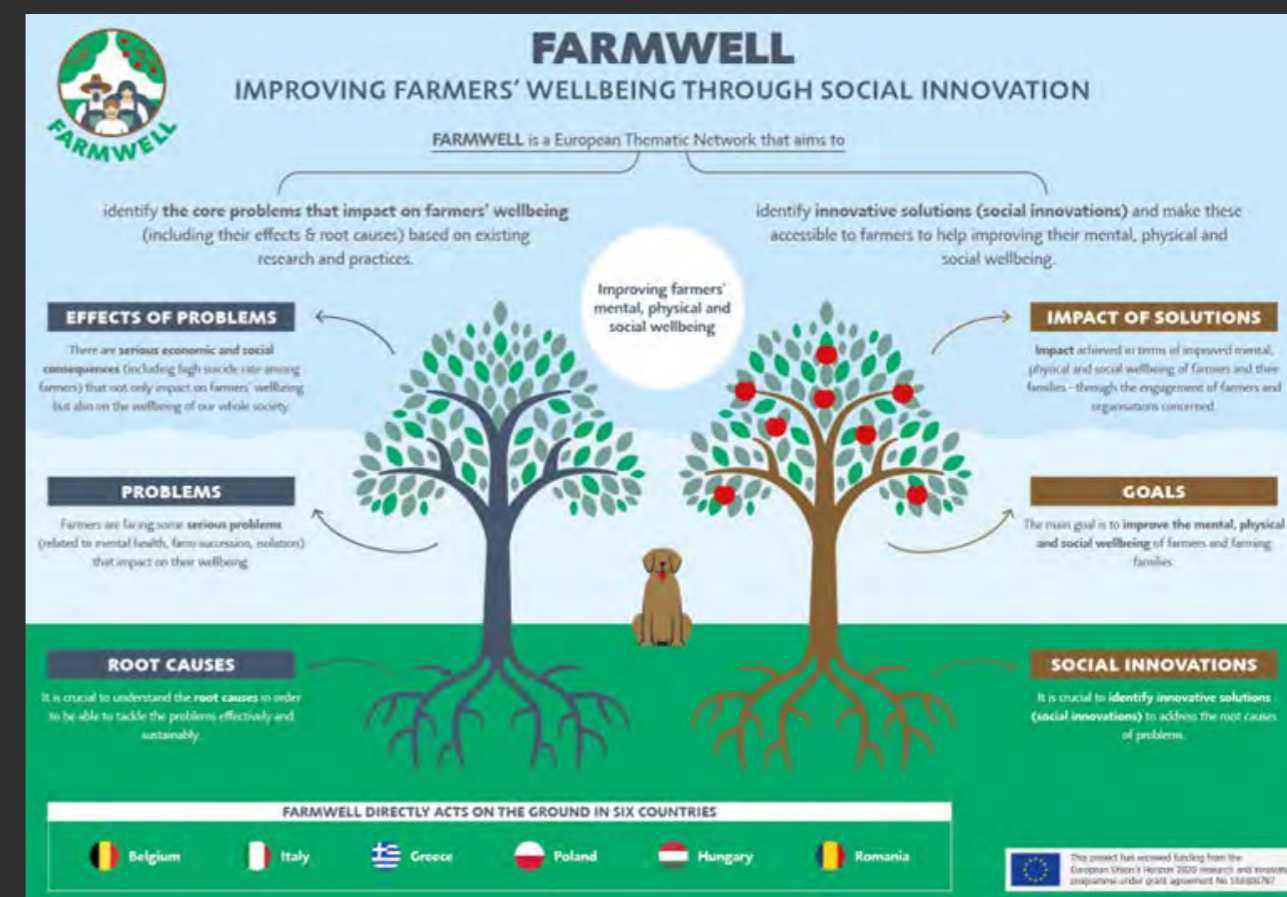


Figure 1: FARMWELL infographic.



Several of these and similar challenges are often present simultaneously, aggravating farmers' mental, physical and social wellbeing. See also the animation video developed by FARMWELL partner New Heroes (the Netherlands) that aims to generate discussions about farmers' problems.

The problems cannot be solved by farmers on their own; they call for collaborative solutions, engaging different types of stakeholders. Especially, there is a need for support from people who are in regular contact with farmers and whom farmers trust (most of all other farmers but also veterinarians, counsellors, farm advisory services, etc.), as well as specialist service providers (e.g. therapists and mental healthcare providers). This means that social innovations in FARMWELL address social issues but are also most commonly generated through social processes.

The working definition of social innovation used by FARMWELL: "Social innovations are innovative practices with the purpose of improving the social, physical and mental wellbeing of farmers and farming families resulting, in particular, in:

- i. improved capacity of farmers and their family members to recognise and act upon social challenges
- ii. improved social environment and services for farmers and farming families
- iii. improved linkages between farmers and other (local) societal actors."

FARMWELL has elaborated on 12 social innovations (see Table 1) in-depth. These examples have been presented in detailed case studies, including background information on the innovation, lessons from the practical actions in FARMWELL that aimed to bring social innovations closer to farmers, the impact of the social innovations on farmers and other stakeholders and recommendations and policy lessons. A documentary film series has also told the story of six cases in the six partner countries in a creative way.

A unique feature of FARMWELL was the social cost-benefit assessment carried out for the 12 case studies under the guidance of the University of Gloucestershire using the Social Return on Investment (SROI)

FARMWELL social innovations in focus	
Country	Title and purpose of the social innovations
Belgium	Farmers at a crossroads: Workshops and helpline to identify and support farmers at risk. Making discussion on mental health issues more acceptable.
Belgium	Learning network on mental wellbeing: Ferm voor agrarvrouwen brings together female farmers for networking and education.
Hungary	Zala Valley Open Farms: Improving financial sustainability and social recognition of small-scale farming through farm and food producer cooperation.
Hungary	Hungarian Social Farm Association: Social inclusion of people with mental disabilities, support small producers and enhance local communities.
Italy	Humus Job: Managing a contractual network among farmers, offering solution for farmers to recruit workers regularly and opportunity for workers to have more stable jobs.
Italy	Ghetto Out-Casa Sankara: A voluntary organisation led by a group of African migrants to create an alternative reality to the ghetto, planning a legal, economic and social integration path.
Poland	Independently (not alone): Care farming. Social care and therapeutic services for mentally rural people with disabilities.
Poland	Home hospice: Provides healthcare services for elderly, terminally, and chronically ill rural people of five municipalities in the Podlaskie region.
Greece	Myrmidones Energy Community: Enhancing cooperation of Stevia Hellas farmers into new areas.
Greece	Women's Energy Community: Meets Women in Olive Oil and women's agricultural/agrotouristic cooperatives: Empowering women in new sectors such as energy.
Romania	Women's Neighbourhood of Saschiz Association: Empowering women in farming communities.
Romania	Transylvanian Highlands: Area wide sustainable rural development; promoting eco-tourism destination.

Table 1: List of elaborated FARMWELL social innovations.

methodology. SROI aimed to estimate the monetary value of—the often intangible—social benefits of innovations for farmers and other stakeholders and compare this to the investment side to define the social rate of return on investment. SROI can help to inform financing decisions for policymakers and other decision-makers.

Social innovations evolve (from the idea, through testing, to implementation) to the point of being effective and possibly upscaled. This long process does not happen from one day to another. It is very hard to draw universal recommendations on supporting and scaling up innovations. However, some common findings have emerged that organisations concerned with farmers' wellbeing should consider (E40a, 2023).

Initial seed funding is crucial in almost all cases, and a business case takes much longer to develop. Social innovators are most often struggling with sustaining funding in an ongoing way, which results in social innovations ceasing from one day to another, leaving all of a sudden,

many segments of society—especially the most vulnerable ones (e.g. disabled people and their families, elderly people, migrant workers)—without the stability of effective services. While project-based funding is important, it is not sufficient to ensure the sustainability and growth of small-scale innovations.

Raising awareness about farmers' wellbeing is important at all levels: Farmers need to be more aware of the support services available to them. Organisations that support farmers need to be more aware of the challenges that impact farmers' wellbeing. The wider society needs to be more aware of the social challenges that farmers are facing to overcome negative societal perceptions.

There is a need to organise specialised capacity-building and training activities both for farmers and for other stakeholders, including on how to:

- i. cope with mental health problems
- ii. better integrate into the labour market (e.g. language and agricultural skills) for migrant workers

iii. set up and run a care/social farm and how to work with people with disabilities

iv. set up an energy community.

Several social innovations identified the complicated and uncertain legal environment and regulations as one of the main stress factors for farmers. Very often, smaller refinements to existing legislative rules and regulations can make a large impact, including in areas such as social farm legislation, regular farm work (housing, employment, etc.), local healthcare and social service provision, and small-scale food production, marketing and sales.

The importance of cross-sectoral and cross-ministerial cooperation has been stressed in a number of contexts, especially for the cooperation of the agricultural, employment and social services sectors and departments.

Addressing mental health issues is an increasingly important concern of EU decision-makers. In 2022: "Members of the European Parliament's agriculture committee (AGRI) have called for concerted efforts to support mental health for EU farmers" (Euractiv, 2022), also with reference to a report of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work on 'Review on the future of Agriculture and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)' (EU-OSHA, 2020). The report identified stress and psychosocial

issues as one of "the major emerging risks in the [agricultural] sector that either have not been adequately managed or have been underestimated owing to lack of accurate data over the years" (EU-OSHA, 2020, p.3).

The recent Communication of the European Commission on a comprehensive approach to mental health (EC, 2023) highlights that "People living in rural or remote areas, such as farmers, have particular mental health challenges associated with the risk of disconnection and lack of access to mental health services." (EC, 2023, p.15).

In particular, policymakers should consider supporting social innovations to improve farmers' wellbeing under relevant interventions and project calls of the Common Agricultural Policy Strategic Plans (CAP SPs), in particular 'Cooperation' interventions such as LEADER and EIP-AGRI other Knowledge Exchange interventions. 'Social conditionality' within the 2023–2027 CAP might impose further positive pressure on the farming sector to respect the social rights of farmers and farm workers.

FARMWELL provided practical tools (FARMWELL, 2023b), policy recommendations (E40, 2023a), and inspiration that can help farm advisers, policymakers and others to improve their support. Farmers' wellbeing is a concern for all of us; therefore, it is time to act.

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PROJECT SUMMARY

FARMWELL is a European Thematic Network project supported by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme between 2021 and 2023. The project aimed at improving the mental, physical and social wellbeing of farmers through bringing relevant social innovations closer to farmers and making practical information on social innovations more accessible.

PROJECT PARTNERS

FARMWELL worked with three 'cross-cutting partners': E40 Group (coordinator & communication), New Heroes (creative products) and University of Gloucestershire (SROI) and six national partnerships bringing together research and farming organisations in Belgium (ILVO, Boerenbond and Ferm), Italy (UNIPI and Coldiretti), Greece (Aristotle University and STEVIA), Hungary (AKI and MSZFSZ), Poland (IRWiR and KPODR) and Romania (Highclere Consulting and LAG Tinutul Brsei).

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

E40 is an international consultancy company. Its core mission is to bring policies and research closer to stakeholders and practice. E40 works on EU-wide projects, including technical support, networking and communication, mostly in the fields of rural development and stakeholder engagement. Its core expertise also includes social inclusion, social innovation and Smart Villages.

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