



FARMRes European Report

Farmers Assistance Resources for Mental Health

European young farmers social and labour situation and its relationship with mental health and wellbeing

European NGOs. Project N°: 101049292

18th July 2022

Authors:

Alice Minichini (European Council of Young Farmers)

Mario Béjar Fuentes (European Council of Young Farmers)

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Mental health in agriculture: the EU perspective

This report deals with the topic of mental health in the farming sector, from the perspective of European policies and initiatives. It has been produced in the context of FARMRes, an Erasmus+ project led by the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) aimed to raise awareness and offer strategies to farmers to cope with mental health issues. This introductory paper elaborates upon the factors affecting mental health of farmers, initiatives to support mental health and the current state of European policy making on the topic. It is based on desktop research and interviews with political representatives and experts of the field.

Contents

1. Introduction: mental health issues in the EU agricultural sector.....	3
2. Factors impacting the mental health of farmers	4
3. Mental health in the EU policy making: agenda-setting initiatives	7
4. Strategies and initiatives to improve farmers' mental health.....	9
5. Conclusion	12
6. Sources	13

1. Introduction: mental health issues in the EU agricultural sector

Good mental health is a vital condition for people to thrive. According to the report “Health at a Glance: Europe 2020: State of Health in the EU Cycle” (OECD/European Union, 2020), in 2018, **one in nine adults** on average across EU countries had symptoms of **psychological distress**.

Without effective support, mental health problems can increase the **risk of dying from suicide**. In 2017, over 48 000 people died of suicide across EU countries. The most frequent number of suicides were amongst men aged 45 and over. Gender differences in suicidal behavior are significant, with men representing over three-quarters of suicides in EU countries.

The **COVID-19** pandemic is negatively impacting the mental wellbeing, especially amongst people with lower-economic status and young people, showing an increased risk of suicidal behaviour (Eurofound, 2021).

When it comes to the **agricultural sector**, there is a lack of comprehensive studies and statistics on the incidence of mental health issues in the farming sector in the EU. There are mainly country related-statistics and studies, proving the existence of the problematic in many EU countries.

Many studies in EU member states show that **suicide rates among farmers are higher than in the general population**. For example, the Mutualité Sociale Agricole (MSA) in France consulted its statistics to get a broader picture of the phenomenon: compared to the 40 million people covered by the social security system in 2015 (for 4,991 suicides recorded that same year), members of the agricultural scheme have "a 12.6% higher risk". And this propensity is even "more pronounced among agricultural workers" (18.4%).

On the other hand, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI), in its report "The Big Farming Survey. The health and wellbeing of the farming community in England and Wales in the 2020s" highlighted that almost half of the farming community is experiencing **anxiety** and that **young farmers are more likely to feel lonely**.

An attempt to conduct an EU-wide survey has been done by **FARMRes** project. Conducted in 2021, the vast majority of respondents (75%) declared to have encountered farmers with mental health issues over the previous three years (237 respondents from 11 EU countries, mainly farmers).

2. Factors impacting the mental health of farmers

Those working in the agricultural sector are particularly exposed to **psychological distress symptoms**. In order to be able to assess them, indicators are divided into two well-being variables: the dependent variable – which includes issues such as personal characteristics, farm or economic situation - and independent variable - based on different proxies such as suicide or depression rates.

This section dives into the **dependent variables** affecting the mental health of farmers in Europe. That is to say, the factors that have a direct impact on mental health. They are grouped in three categories: sector and context-related; relation to self; relation to others.



Figure 1: Factors impacting farmers' mental health

Sector and context-related

- *Financial uncertainties*

Price fluctuations of agricultural products and costs for investment are on the rise, further adding to financial insecurity and high degrees of indebtedness. As price-takers, farmers have low bargaining power. The rise of extreme weather events, climate change and of diseases/pest calamities affects the financial stability of farmers and impacts their ability to plan. This significantly adds to uncertainty and stress.

- *Administrative burden*

Regulation and administration are increasingly complex and rapidly changing. This is a source of frustration and anxieties for farmers.

- *Poor access to mental health support services*

Mental health support services are often very rare and placed in isolated areas. In addition to this, there is a lack of specialist mental care services.

- *Unique nature of farming profession*

Farming is a profession unique in nature: farmers work in isolated rural environments, often only with family members and with little possibility of social contacts with externals. It's characterized by a poor work-life balance, high workload and a low possibility of replacement or time-off (interview with Jeroen Adam). Under these conditions, speaking about mental health problematics can be badly perceived and is a taboo topic. This can exacerbate situations of fragility, leading to stress and anxiety.

Relation to self

- *Attitude of passive durability of farmers*

Many farmers have a strong outspoken professional attitude of endurance. When moments of difficulty come, many don't speak about their problems to family members or access aid, which is perceived as a waste of time or as a sign of fragility (interview with Jeroen Adam). Many studies point at similar issues regarding the stigma and supposedly 'strong attitudes about being self-reliant and independent' among rural communities raising barriers to mental health care (Magnus A.M. and Advincula P, 2020: 40).

- *Traditional male stereotypes*

A question of gender subjectivity comes to the table. The common stereotype of traditional masculinity, quite spread among the male farming community, contributes to exacerbate the taboo over mental health issues.

Relation to others

- *Societal pressure*

Farming is a sector of low prestige. The hard work of farmers, those producing the food and protecting the environment, is often not valued by society. In some cases, the societal pressure to step up to environmental standards degenerates to extreme episodes of violence.

- *Stigma over mental health issues*

The societal stigma associated to problems of mental health creates a taboo in those suffering, including farmers.

- *Competitive attitude among farmers*

Working in a sector characterized by a difficult access to agricultural land, farmers compete over land. When a farmer is confronted to moments of fragility, neighboring farmers might take advantage of the situation, to access to his lands and properties. Therefore, this competitive attitude block discussions over personal problems and mental health issues.

- *Attitude of distrust towards institutions*

In many cases, farmers most at need of help are the ones that have an attitude of distrust towards institutions (State, European Union, public institutes). This prevents them from tacking action and asking help to overcome mental health issues (interview with Jeroen Adam).

3. Mental health in the EU policy making: agenda-setting initiatives

In the last years, many European countries have started to draw up **national strategies** and to strengthen their policies to support mental health. According to the report “Mental health in all policies: scoping review of national developments (2017 – 2019)” (Mental Health Europe, 2019), 20 countries have recently taken important steps to improve or update their national legislation or policies in relation to mental health.

As Elena Schubert (Policy Officer and Deputy Equality Coordinator for DG AGRI) mentioned in the final conference of the Rural Mental Health project, we are at an exceptional moment where mental health occupies a privileged place in the public debate and, of course, also **in the European Union**. Despite the lack of a defined strategy, this issue is becoming a cross-cutting one in all its new policies.

Looking at the **initiatives from the European Commission**, the European Commission has launched the **Healthier together – EU Non-Communicable Diseases Initiative** (EU NCD Initiative) to support EU countries in identifying and implementing effective policies and actions to reduce the burden of major non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and improve citizens’ health and well-being. Some of the priorities in mental health are the support to favorable conditions for mental health and increasing resilience; implementing mental health in all policies; or the protection of rights, enhancing social inclusion, and tackling stigma associated with mental health problems. Always in the European Commission, **DG SANTE** has set up a dedicated network space on its Health Policy Platform for health and social stakeholder organisations to exchange specific mental health practice and knowledge related to COVID-19.

On the other hand, the **European Parliament** focuses more on advocacy than on the development of mental health policies.

In 2012, some members of the European Parliament established the **Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing**. It is a platform of like-minded MEPs amplifying the voices of people with mental health problems and advocating for a coordinated response to address the most pressing determinants of mental health.

Similarly, there is the **MEP Alliance for Mental Health** (established in 2009 as the European Parliament's Interest Group on Mental Health, Well-being and Brain Disorders), which aims to bring together MEPs and relevant stakeholders to advocate for the development of strong EU policies that contribute to the prevention of mental ill-health and ensure appropriate, high-quality services and person-centered care, empowering those affected.

The socialists in the European Parliament have supported this initiative. Among them, Estrella Durá Ferrandis, member of the European Parliament from the Spanish Socialist delegation and of the Committee of Employment and Social Affairs, called for an EU strategy on mental health.

In addition to her, other MEPs such as Maria Walsh, as part of this alliance, are lobbying hard to establish 2023 as the European Year of Mental Health.

Recent times saw an increase of calls for **an integrated approach to mental health**, taking into account health, social, welfare and youth policies. They have flourished in Europe and at member state level. For example, the OECD Council Recommendation on Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policy (OECD, 2018) called on governments to promote the provision of early and fully integrated services in order to improve social and labour market outcomes for people suffering from psychological distress symptoms.

4. Strategies and initiatives to improve farmers’ mental health

Social innovation is key to find solutions to mental health problems and open up the public debate on the topic. It is important to identify **strategies for the farming community** to normalise conversations around mental health in order to help reduce stigma as a barrier to help-seeking behaviour (University of Reading, 2022). Examples of existing strategies are:

Educational and peer-to-peer learning strategies for farmers	Train farm gatekeepers to detect and face problems of mental health among farmers	Increasing mental health literacy among farmers (e.g. young ones)
<p>Open discussion circles</p> <p>Open days and tours to immerse in farmer’s everyday life. E.g.: Hungary</p> <p>Learning networks to incentivize peer-to-peer learning. E.g.: Belgium</p>	<p>DJP Foundation Mental Health Support - Farmwell</p>	<p>Development of course material about mental health literacy for agriculture higher education institutions. E.g.: Belgium</p>

Other strategies worth to be explored are:

Artistic methods to destigmatize mental health problems among farmers	Appoint local champions: charismatic farmers to open communication on the topic.
<p>Theatre of the Oppressed, invented by Augusto Boal</p> <p>An existing initiative in Ireland – TEAGASC</p>	<p>Locally-embedded skilled intermediaries offer an incredible resource that can be utilised to reach farmers.</p>

Below, a prospectus of **existing initiatives** to tackle mental health issues in agriculture:

Initiative	Level	Description	Key take-aways	Main sources
Farmwell	European Union	European Thematic Network project funded by Horizon 2020. The project aims to improve farmers' mental, physical and social wellbeing through social innovations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Many barriers exist in mental health support. - Need to offer support through digital tools accompanied by a more personalized interaction. 	Farmwell website
Rural Mental Health	European Union	Erasmus+ project that aims to redress the inequality and imbalance between mental health provision in rural areas compared to urban ones. The main purpose of this project is to improve awareness and prevention of serious mental health issue occurrences.	e-Training, case studies and event about mental health	RMH website
ENRD Contact Point	European Union	Supports the operation of the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)	It coordinates thematic and analytic work, facilitates networking and exchange, and communicates the work and voices of the network. ENRD developed projects related to mental health.	ENRD CP website
Agrokompas (Compass for Farmers)	National: Belgium	Online reference scheme through which farmers have an overview of all relevant (aid) organizations or channels, linked to the wide array of social challenges farmers are being confronted with	Connect farmers with the right (aid) organizations & channels	Agrokompas website

Mental Health Literacy for Farm Gatekeepers	National: Belgium	Providing training to farm gatekeepers in order to detect certain problems in an early stage	Tackling mental and economic & business problems in an early stage	MHL website
Make the Moove – Farmers Matter	National: Ireland	Workshop developed in a community-based response to positive health and well-being for farming men in their rural communities in a new joint initiative.	Challenging farmers to think about how they approach their work, their own well-being and their personal lives.	Social media

Zoom-in: Make the Moove – Farmers Matter

Created by **Macra na Feirne**, Make the Moove is a farmer-driven, farmer-led program promoting positive mental health among farmers and rural people with the ultimate goal of a nationwide network/service.



We interviewed John Keane, President of Macra na Ferine and creator of the initiative.

The main reason that led them to create this programme was the **high suicide rate** in their community in the Midlands (Ireland): in summer 2018, it reached high levels to the point of being the number one problem in their community at the time.

In this sense, they started a **public consultation** with people in their area to gather ideas; they did this through two questions:

1. What are the main issues that are affecting you in your life today?
2. What solutions would you like to see implemented to help you address those issues?

From spring 2019, they began to **open up the debate and encourage conversation** about mental health, managing to speak to over 400 farmers. As a result of their success, they sought to take the programme beyond their region, conducting the same consultation in other counties in Ireland during November 2021, the results of which reinforced the first research.

In terms of their **training methodology**, in the first part they identified the most sociable tools for their people, and in which their volunteers could participate. Thus, they conducted a first piece on **self-care and self-awareness** and a second piece to **facilitate conversation** around mental health.

A second part of the training was the development of a programme of **farm champions/rural ambassadors**: the aim was for these ambassadors to be the reference people for farmers to feel confident talking about mental health.

Finally, the **barriers** they encountered were related to the language used when talking about mental health, as this determined whether people wanted to get involved or not. You have to take into account that scientific language and rural language are different and develop a **farmer-friendly language** in the training.

5. Conclusion

This report highlighted the following key messages, ideally targeting policy makers committed to the cause:

- Mental health problems are on the rise and, according to the fragmented statistics reviewed, **farmers are at greater risk of mental health issues.**
- There is a **need for updated statistical evidence** on the incidence of mental health issues in the farming sector at European level;
- Although good steps are beginning to be taken, there is still a **need for an integrated strategy on mental health at European level**, tackling several policy dimensions, such as work, education, agriculture, youth, etc.;
- There is urgency to **raise societal attention** on mental health, to destigmatize the taboo, through targeted communication and campaigns. The Covid-19 pandemics offers a window of opportunity to raise awareness on mental health.
- There is the need to **raise political attention** on mental health. In this direction, the FARMRes consortium welcomes the initiative by MEP Maria Walsh of a petition to establish 2023 as the European Year of Mental Health. In order to raise political and societal visibility, FARMRes consortium aim to organize a final dissemination conference in the European Parliament in Brussels in autumn 2024.
- There is a need to **support research and innovation** on initiatives aiming to help farmers coping with mental health issues. As many social innovation initiatives come from the civil society and farming sector, it is essential to offer targeted economic support to them.
- There is the strong need to integrate mental health and psychological sensibilization in the **curricula of agricultural students and farmers** at early age. This is a first yet essential step for building a society more sensitive to mental health issues.

6. Sources

Bibliographic references

Dampney, P., Winter, M. and Jones, D., 2001. DEFRA Project KTO107: Communicating methods to persuade agricultural land managers to adopt practices that will benefit environmental protection and conservation management (AgriComms). Final report to DEFRA Farm Management Improvement Division

Eurofound (2021), Living, working and COVID-19 (Update April 2021): Mental health and trust decline across EU as pandemic enters another year, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, available at: Living, working and COVID-19 (Update April 2021): Mental health and (europa.eu)

EU-OSHA Report. The future of agriculture and forestry: implications for managing worker safety and health (2020), available at: The future of agriculture and forestry: implications for managing worker safety and health | Safety and health at work EU-OSHA (europa.eu)

FARMRes Needs Analysis Survey, FARMRes partners, 2021.

FARMWELL Report “Mapping report on challenges, Belgium”, 2021. Available at: https://farmwell-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/D-2.3_BELGIUM.pdf

Hagen et.al. (2019), Research Trends in Farmers’ Mental Health: a Scoping Review of Mental Health Outcomes and Interventions among Farming Populations Worldwide, Plos ONE, 14 (2) Research trends in farmers’ mental health: A scoping review of mental health outcomes and interventions among farming populations worldwide | PLOS ONE

Health at a Glance: Europe 2020: State of Health in the EU Cycle” (OECD/European Union, 2020), available at: 2020_healthatglance_rep_en_o.pdf (europa.eu)

Magnus, A.M. and Advincula, P. (2020), Those Who Go Without: an Ethnographic Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Rural Mental Health and Healthcare Infrastructure, Journal of Rural Studies, 83: 37-49.

Mental health in all policies: scoping review of national developments (2017 – 2019)” (Mental Health Europe, 2019), available at: MHAP_Scoping_review_2017_2019_final.pdf (mhe-sme.org)

OECD Council Recommendation on Integrated Mental Health, Skills and Work Policy, OECD, 2018. Available at: Flyer_MHW Council Recommendation.pdf (oecd.org)

OECD/European Union (2020), Health at a Glance: Europe 2020: State of Health in the EU Cycle, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/82129230-en>.

Preparation of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council session on 9 December 2019, Council of the European Union, 2019, note, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14303-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

RABI. The Big Farming Survey. The health and wellbeing of the farming community in England and Wales in the 2020s. Available at: <https://rabi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/RABI-Big-Farming-Survey-FINAL-single-pages-No-embargo-APP-min.pdf>

Supporting Mental Health of Vulnerable Groups during COVID-19: Early Findings and Recommendations from the RESPOND Project (RESPOND, 2022). Policy brief. Available at: RESPOND_D6.6_Policy-Brief-4.pdf (respond-project.eu)

WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health, 2021 – 2025. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/344609/WHO-EURO-2021-3147-42905-59865-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Sitography

A mental-health strategy for Europe – Estrella Durá Ferrandis and Cristina Helena Lago (socialeurope.eu)

Coalition for Mental Health and Wellbeing – Stand up for positive mental health, advancement of care and human rights (mental-health-coalition.com)

Healthier together – EU Non-Communicable Diseases Initiative (https://health.ec.europa.eu/latest-updates/healthier-together-commissions-launches-eu156-million-initiative-non-communicable-diseases-europe-2022-06-22_en)

Impact of Covid on farmers' mental health explored in new study - <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/impact-covid-farmers-mental-health-explored-new-study>

[Our MEP supporters | GAMIAN-Europe](#)

Suicide des agriculteurs : des élus veulent pallier les insuffisances (Liberation) (https://www.liberation.fr/terre/2021/01/14/suicide-des-agriculteurs-des-elus-veulent-pallier-les-insuffisances_1810843/)

The Pan-European Mental Health Coalition (who.int)

Interviews carried out:

Interview with Jeroen Adam, Associate Professor & Project Coordinator, Coordinator of FARMWELL project, 10 June 2022, online

Interview with MEP Estrella Durà Ferrandis, member of the Spanish Socialist delegation and of the Committee of Employment and Social Affairs, 16 June 2022, online (*informal*)

Interview with John Keane, President of Macra na Feirme, 13 June 2022, online