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Sticking plaster or real help? Conditions and ways of improvement of farmers' well-being: A qualitative comparative synthesis from six European countries

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Abstract

Despite a substantial body of research and diagnoses, a gap remains in the literature concerning the identification of the pressures and constraints that shape farmers' well-being today across different national and regional contexts in Europe, as well as the assessment of the effects of mechanisms designed to address them. The aim of this article was to identify the challenges and the specific problems that affect farmers' well-being in Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy Poland and Romania, and to explore the social innovations that respond to them. The analysis draws on secondary empirical material – six country mapping reports prepared between 2020 and 2022 – and applies a qualitative approach to identify three overarching challenges and nine specific problems linked to low levels of farmers' well-being. A comparative case synthesis indicates that social innovations that are bottom-up, multi-actor, inclusive and responsive to locally identified needs are associated with positive effects on farmers' well-being, particularly its social dimension.

Keywords: Well-being, social innovation, farmers, comparative case analysis, Europe

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1. Introduction

Well-being is currently attracting growing attention. It is becoming not only an important subject of scholarly inquiry but also a strategic objective in the development of states, regions and local communities (Nyman & Nilsén, 2016; Dalziel et al., 2018; Stiglitz et al., 2018). Well-being is a multidimensional concept encompassing material, psychological, social, environmental, and political dimensions of human existence. Analytical approaches can focus on either subjective or objective components of well-being, or integrate both perspectives (Boarini et al., 2014). Increasingly, however, attention has turned to the social foundations of well-being (VanderWeele, 2019; Mead et al., 2021), which conventional individual-level measures capture only partially.

Examining these relational processes requires a framework that foregrounds the dimensions of need fulfilment and the social relations through which it is achieved. This notwithstanding, levels of well-being vary considerably across space, as well as between the socio-occupational categories of contemporary societies (Polain et al., 2011; Marmot et al., 2012; Hernandez et al., 2018; Herrera Sabillón et al., 2022). It has been observed that in many countries well-being is comparatively low among farmers (Kallioniemi et al., 2016; Truchot & Andela, 2018; Yazd et al., 2019). The reasons for this are complex and are typically associated with the rapid pace of economic transformation in the agricultural sector, the arduous and stressful nature of farm work, and socio-cultural change in rural areas (Van der Ploeg, 2006; Lunner Kolstrup et al., 2013).

The globalisation of agri-food markets and intense competition foster the concentration of productive resources and output (Neuenfeldt et al., 2019; Christiaensen et al., 2021). These tendencies weaken the position of farmers within the food supply chain, particularly those operating small and medium-sized family farms, and result in withdrawal from agricultural activity or in farm exit. At the same time, economic pressure contributes to a deterioration in farmers' psychological well-being, one symptom of which is an elevated rate of mental illness, depression and suicide among those running farms (Milner et al., 2013; Dumitru et al., 2015; Hassard et al., 2017; Steck et al., 2020). Alongside fluctuating market conditions, environmental and weather-related risks constitute a further significant stressor that erodes farmers' well-being. Such risks heighten the unpredictability of farming, arising from the depletion and degradation of natural resources (water, soil) and from climate change (drought and a rising frequency of extreme weather events) (Atkinson et al., 2020; Whitaker, 2024). Farm work is also characterised by high exposure to accidents and contributes to poorer physical health, owing to physically demanding tasks (e.g. chronic musculoskeletal pain) and to contact with chemical substances (respiratory disorders,

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allergies) and animals (zoonotic diseases) (Żukiewicz-Sobczak et al., 2013; Leigh et al., 2014; Krokstad et al., 2023). Structural and social change means that farmers now constitute a minority within the social landscape of the countryside. The distinctive nature of their work and the externalities of agricultural production mean that farmers' goals and interests not infrequently conflict with those of non-farming residents of their localities and of consumers. This inter-group distance and distinctiveness contribute to farmers' social isolation, which in turn affects their well-being (Lobley, 2005; Wheeler et al., 2023).

Given the above, it should be assumed that economic pressure and climate and environmental change are generating increasing problems for farmers' mental and physical health, accompanied by a weakening of cooperation and of social ties both among farmers and within their local communities, which in turn diminishes the social well-being of this group. The market, environmental and social contexts together form an unfavourable configuration of conditions for improving farmers' well-being. There is therefore a need to develop various solutions and mechanisms aimed at enhancing their situation with respect to physical, mental and social well-being (BEPA, 2011; Dudek et al., 2025). One such type of measure is social innovation (Bouchard et al., 2015; Zajda, 2017).

Innovation can undoubtedly play a crucial role in mitigating mental health challenges in agriculture (Deipenbrock et al., 2015). Its relevance extends beyond technological dimensions such as new equipment, automation, reduced pesticide use and fewer injuries: it is equally important to attend to social innovation within the farming sector (Younker & Radunovich, 2022). Understood as a set of initiatives that seek to improve well-being and address societal challenges by reconfiguring social practices (Ravazzoli et al., 2021; Polman et al., 2017), social innovation constitutes a vital means of enhancing farmers' well-being and of responding to technological, social and mental-health challenges alike (Richez-Battesti et al., 2012; Bouchard et al., 2015).

The gap remains in the literature concerning the identification of the challenges and problems that shape farmers' well-being today across different national and regional contexts in Europe, as well as the assessment of the effects of mechanisms designed to address them (Herrera Sabillón et al., 2022; Whitaker, 2024). Research is particularly scarce in respect of multidisciplinary and comparative studies at the inter-regional and cross-national level that link farmers' well-being with the demand side of social innovation (Neumeier, 2012; Herrera Sabillón et al., 2022; Adam et al., 2024). The present study seeks to fill this gap and to offer several recommendations for public policy.

The aim of this article was to identify the challenges and the specific problems that affect farmers' well-being in European countries, and to identify the social innovations that respond to them. The study addresses three research questions:

1. Which challenges and specific problems shaped farmers' well-being in the European countries?
2. Through what means and mechanisms did social innovations address the identified challenges and problems, and how did they contribute to improving farmers' well-being?
3. With which dimensions of farmers' well-being were the social innovations associated, and what conclusions for public policy follow from these effects?

The working hypothesis adopted for further analysis posits that social innovations may constitute an effective response to the challenges that contribute to low levels of farmers' well-being.

2. Research framework and empirical material

The study's aim and research questions called for taking into account the considerable spatial heterogeneity of the economic, social and environmental-climatic conditions that shape farming activity in Europe. The analysis therefore draws on empirical material from six countries: Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Romania gathered for the realisation of the Farmwell project[1]. The selection of the materials and documents for this article was purposive on the basis of three criteria: 1) the Farmwell project's design; 2) representativeness of distinct EU agricultural structures (comprising both old and new EU member states, northern and southern European farming systems, and varying shares of family versus large-scale agriculture)[2] ; and 3) availability of comparable data and information generated through the standardised data collection instruments. Accordingly, the study drew on three types of empirical material, each of which constituted a basic unit of the analysis:

1. Mapping reports on the social challenges affecting farmers' well-being, compiled for each of the six countries (Adam, 2021; Adam & Messely, 2021; Bálint et al., 2021; Barbu, 2021; Brunori et al., 2021; Partalidou & Nastis, 2021; Czarnecki et al., 2021);
2. Case-study reports documenting social innovations implemented in each country to improve farmers' well-being (Messely et al., 2023; Partalidou, 2023; Magócs, 2023; Palmioli, 2023; Czarnecki et al., 2023; Ion et al., 2023); and
3. Database of social innovations containing information on these initiatives (https://farmwell-h2020.eu/social-innovations/).

The mapping reports (1) provided the basis for identifying the challenges and specific problems affecting farmers' well-being. In each country, the reports had been prepared using a range of methods (desk research, content analysis, statistical analysis) and various data sources (Tab. 1), comprising secondary data, official statistics and the relevant literature, as well as primary data gathered through individual and group interviews with farmers (individual in-depth interview – IDI, focus group interview – FGI, Practice Group discussions – PG[3]) and with representatives of the agricultural administration, civil-society organisations, local authorities, and academic and expert institutions (Adam, 2021). The time spans of the secondary data, the range of methods employed and the number of interviewees (including farmers) differed considerably across countries. However, the period of data collection, mainly individual and group interviews, and their analysis were broadly comparable, falling within 2020–2022.

For the purpose of this article, the mapping reports were analysed by means of thematic content analysis. Drawing on a range of methods and data sources (Tab. 1), the reports had

[1] The Farmwell (Improving Farmers' Well-being through Social Innovation) project was funded by the EU under Horizon 2020 programme and was aimed at improving the quality of life of farmers, their families and farming communities in Europe (grant agreement no 101000797). The initiative was implemented in 2020–2023 by sixteen scientific, social and public entities and organisations from Belgium, Greece, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands and Romania.

[2] Nonetheless, from the standpoint of research on farmers' well-being, it covered a substantial share of EU farmers and reflected the structural and production-related diversity of the family-farming segment: from the small-scale, often subsistence farming of Romania, through the relatively numerous small and multifunctional holdings of Greece, Italy, Hungary and Poland (frequently specialising in crop production, including arable farming, horticulture and vegetable growing), to the larger and more intensive farms of Belgium, where livestock rearing is widespread. Together, these countries encompass approximately 67% of EU farms and 54% of agricultural labour input (Eurostat, 2024).

[3] Practice Groups (PGs) – broad stakeholder forums comprising farmers together with representatives of the agricultural administration, civil-society organisations, local authorities, and academic and expert institutions.

Country	Primary data (type; no of participants/farmers; years)	Secondary data (source; years)	Research methods**
Belgium	1. Survey; 650 farmers; 2018–2019 2. IDI; 30 farmers; 2018–2019 3. FGI; 30 farmers; 2018–2019 4. IDI; 13 representatives of agricultural organisations focused on farmers' well-being; 2021 5. Digital consultations with 27 representatives of agricultural organisations; 2021	1. Government reports and public statistics data on the state of agriculture; 2020 2. Literature of the subject; 2018–2020	1. Analysis of survey results 2. Content analysis of IDIs and FGIs 3. Literature review
Greece	1. IDI; 24 farmers; 2021 2. FGI; 25 participants/11 farmers; 2021	1. National Hellenic Statistical Authority; 2016 2. Eurostat; 2018 3. Academic papers, reports, books; 1993–2021 4. Newspapers, websites, blogs; 2020–2021	1. Systematic literature review 2. Content analysis of issues identified at the level of public discourse in the country 3. Analysis of IDIs and FGIs 4. Statistical analysis 5. Desk research
Hungary	1. FGI and online survey; 19 participants/10 farmers; 2021 2. IDI; 14 participants/10 farmers; 2021	1. Central Statistical Office: Microcensus on subjective well-being (5000 farmers); 2016 2. Agricultural Census; 2020 3. Farm Level Indicators for New Topics (FLINT) data on working conditions and quality of life; 1957 farmers; 2016 4. Literature on the subject; 2009–2020	1. Statistical analysis of data 2. Desk research 3. Content analysis of IDIs and FGIs 4. Literature review
Italy	1. IDI; 11 experts; 2021 2. PG Discussions; 36 participants/27 farmers; 2021	1. Papers, white and grey literature on the subject	1. Desk research 2. Literature review 3. Content analysis of IDIs and PG discussions
Poland	1. FGI; 6 farmers; 2021 2. FGI; 15 key stakeholders (non-farmers); 2021 3. PG discussions; 14 participants/13 farmers; 2021	1. Statistics Poland; 2017–2020 2. Literature of the subject, reports, press releases, internet sources; 2008–2020	1. Desk research 2. Literature review 3. Content analysis of FGIs
Romania	1. IDI; 10 participants/6 farmers; 2021 2. PG discussions; 8 participants/4 farmers; 2021	1. Data from National Statistical Institute and Eurostat; 2016–2021 2. Literature (studies, papers, reports) on the subject; 2003–2021	1. Desk research 2. Literature review 3. Content analysis of IDIs and PG discussions

*Tab. 1: Data and methods used in mapping reports for identification of challenges and specific problems in six European countries**
** The selection of countries for the study stemmed from the design and implementation of the Farmwell project. The conclusions drawn from the analysis are not representative. Instead, the country category serves in each instance as an analytical unit to categorise and organise diverse empirical material from national, regional, and local levels*
*** The analyses were carried out in 2020–2022.*
Source: Own elaboration based on Mapping Reports on Challenges for Belgium, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Greece and Poland (Adam & Messely, 2021; Bálint et al., 2021; Barbu, 2021; Brunori et al., 2021; Partalidou & Nastis, 2021; Czarnecki et al., 2021)

identified – across the six countries – a series of issues bearing on farmers' well-being. Our analysis proceeded in two stages. Coding was carried out by the authors, who first analysed each mapping report separately, inductively grouping and coding these issues into categories for each country individually, and then jointly compared and consolidated the codes, reducing them to a smaller number of cross-cutting categories. This yielded three broad challenges, encompassing macrostructural factors and trends, and nine specific problems, denoting their concrete manifestations affecting well-being at various levels – national, regional, local and individual. The assignment of a given issue to a particular challenge and specific problem, and the merging of issues, thus emerged from the authors' qualitative analysis and assessment of relevance, and reflected the findings of the mapping reports.

Information on the social innovations[4] (empirical material 2 and 3), in particular on how they addressed well-being-related challenges and problems, and on the means and mechanisms of improvement, was drawn from the case-study reports and the database of social innovations. In the article, six innovations were analysed thematically. They were selected from a pool of 64 cases in three steps, shaped largely by the organisational and subject-related assumptions of the Farmwell project. First, the project teams in each country, in consultation with experts and informants, shortlisted at least ten innovations, which were then presented to the PGs. Second, each country selected the two innovations most pertinent to the project's themes and objectives. Third, from these two, for further analysis, the authors selected one social innovation per country, guided by the volume of available information and data and by own assessment of each case's relevance to the identified challenges and problems of farmers' well-being and of its potential for implementation in other regions and countries. The effect of each innovation on the well-being dimensions under consideration was assessed qualitatively, on the basis of the outcomes recorded during the analysis of the empirical material. A comparative case analysis of social innovation was conducted following the scheme: the identified challenge and the specific problem faced by farmers – the aim of the social innovation – the mechanism through which the social innovation addressed the challenges and problems – the impact on the well-being dimension – the limitations of implemented social innovations.

Notwithstanding the structural and context-related disparities, the study adopted a multidimensional approach to farmers' well-being. Considering that well-being may be defined in various ways, generally, as a state associated with feelings of satisfaction and happiness and with the capacity to shape one's life as one sees fit, and following the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1946), the study understood it in terms of three dimensions[5]:

[4] The article adopted the broad definition of social innovation proposed by Phills (2009), whereby it is "any novel and useful solution to a need or problem that is better than existing approaches (i.e. more effective, efficient, sustainable or equitable) and for which the value (benefits) created accrue primarily to society as a whole rather than to individuals."

[5] Despite this categorisation, the three dimensions should be treated as mutually interpenetrating and interdependent.

- Mental well-being, the ability to realise one's own potential unhindered by mental health problems;
- Physical well-being, the ability to maintain a healthy quality of life; and
- Social well-being, the ability to develop meaningful relationships with others.

The term 'farmer' is used in this article as an umbrella designation for a heterogeneous group. It encompasses the categories foregrounded in the respective mapping reports: farm holders and managers, including women farmers, members of family-farm households, particularly those working full-time, part-time or occasionally on the farm, and farm workers and labourers, including migrant workers in irregular or undocumented employment.

3. Results

3.1 Challenges and specific problems impacting the well-being of farmers in six European countries

The analysis of the collected materials revealed that in Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy Poland and Romania, the macro trends most consequential for farmers' well-being comprised three interrelated socio-economic challenges: increasing pressure on farms (C1), the ageing process (C2) and the depopulation of rural areas (C3). In each of the countries studied, the challenges farmers face manifest themselves in somewhat different ways across nine specific problems: health issues (P1), a slowing pace of generational renewal (P2), limited access to services (health, education, digital), (P3), social isolation, unrecognition and weak cooperation (P4), poor working conditions and limited labour availability (P5), low incomes (P6), a high administrative burden (P7), a weak position in the food supply chain (P8) and poor living conditions (P9). These problems reflect, to some extent, each country's distinctive social, economic and cultural landscape, yet they also share several similarities, most notably their adverse impact on the various dimensions of farmers' well-being (Tab. 2).

The most important challenge to farmers' well-being, present in all of the countries, was the increasing pressure on farms (C1). Farmers, including women, who usually run small in size family agricultural holdings, constituted a substantial share of all farmers in Romania, Greece, Italy, Poland and Hungary. With weak bargaining power in food supply chains, they were typically being in a weaker position in competition with large farms, which steadily increased their market share through growing capital endowment and economies of scale (P8). The limited competitiveness of small family farms constrained their capacity to earn satisfactory incomes from farming which was associated, in the reports, with poor living conditions (P6 and P9). In Romania and Greece, the position of farmers, and of women in particular, was constrained by cultural norms and an attachment to tradition: female farmers were often not regarded as full-fledged farmers, whether within the household or in agricultural organisations and public initiatives (P4). In the latter country, unsatisfactory farm profitability was further affected by high production costs, including energy inputs (P6). In Belgium, the scope for relieving pressure on farms was narrow, owing to limited prospects for business expansion caused, among other things, by high land prices. In Italy, securing legal employment (e.g. for migrant workers) poses a challenge for farmers because of the associated costs, which are not only financial but also involve overcoming the monopoly that criminal organisations hold over labour intermediation (P5). In both Belgium and Italy, farmers experienced a growing administrative burden, arising in part from the expanding scope of the environmental and climate-related regulations of agricultural policy (P7). Economic and regulatory pressure was reported mainly alongside in a deterioration of farmers' mental and physical well-being (Tab. 2). Their capacity to address this situation was limited, both by the 'cultural' taboo against seeking psychological or medical help and by the low availability of medical services in rural areas (P3). The need to focus on competition and to manage price-cost squeezes drew farmers away from cooperation with other farmers (limited trust, a deficit of cooperative skills and experience), as well as from social

Country	Dimension of well-being*	Challenges and specific problems**								
		pressure on farms (C1)				ageing process (C2)		depopulation of rural areas (C3)		
Belgium	PW	P1	P3			P1		P3	P1	
	MW	P8	P6	P3	P7	P2				
	SW	P4				P2				
Greece	PW					P1	P2	P3	P5	
	MW	P4								
	SW	P4	P6	P3	P8	P2		P4	P3	P5
Hungary	PW	P3				P1		P3		
	MW	P9	P7							
	SW	P8	P3	P4	P6	P2				
Italy	PW	P5	P1	P3	P9			P5		
	MW	P9								
	SW	P5	P4	P1	P3	P2		P4	P5	
Poland	PW	P6	P3			P1	P2	P3	P1	
	MW	P7								
	SW	P4	P8			P2		P4		
Romania	PW									
	MW	P6	P4			P2				
	SW	P4	P8			P2		P4	P3	

Tab. 2: Relations between challenges and specific problems and dimensions of farmers' well-being in European countries
** Notes: Well-being dimensions are coded as follows: PW: physical well-being, MW: mental well-being, SW: social well-being*
*** Specific problems are coded as follows: P1: health issues, P2: a slowing pace of generational renewal, P3: limited access to services (health, education, digital), P4: social isolation, unrecognition and weak cooperation, P5: poor working conditions and limited labour availability, P6: low incomes, P7: a high administrative burden, P8: a weak position in the food supply chain, P9: poor living conditions. A blank cell indicates that the problem was not identified as salient or examined in depth in the mapping reports. Hence, its absence from the table does not imply that the phenomenon is non-existent or was intentionally excluded from the analysis.*
Source: Own elaboration based on Mapping Reports on Challenges for Belgium, Hungary, Romania, Italy, Greece and Poland (Adam & Messely, 2021; Bálint et al., 2021; Barbu, 2021; Brunori et al., 2021; Partalidou & Nastis, 2021; Czarnecki et al., 2021)

and economic ties with the local community (a shrinking of social capital). This deepened isolation and loneliness, with negative consequences for their social and mental well-being.

The challenge of an ageing population, and the problems associated with it, were significant in all of the countries examined (C2). Compared with other socio-occupational groups, farmers were older. Combined with the burden of physical labour and stress, older age increased the risk of illness and accidents, adversely affecting physical well-being (Tab. 2). Moreover, the consequences of ageing are far-reaching for farmers, since they affect how the farm is managed and are bound up with the problem of succession. Farms run by older farmers may display lower viability and income, as such farmers tend to have weaker or inadequate digital skills, a relatively lower propensity to innovate and to adapt to market requirements, and less willingness to broaden their educational and professional competencies. In Hungary, Romania and Poland, the reluctance of older farmers to hand over the farm, together with the constraints imposed by an attachment to tradition, has been identified as an important factor inhibiting generational renewal in agriculture (P2). Intergenerational tensions, a growing administrative load, lower incomes, low public prestige and a heavy workload relative to other occupations all contribute to declining interest among young people in pursuing a career in agriculture.

The low attractiveness of farming as an occupation is linked to the trend of rural depopulation (C3). European villages are experiencing depopulation as a result of out-migration to cities or abroad. For instance, a heightened rural youth exodus has been observed in Romania. It should be borne in mind that this process does not affect all regions equally, and that its intensity is positively correlated with the risk of social exclusion in a given area. Depopulation, in turn, reduced the accessibility and quality of public services and infrastructure investment (P3), rendering these areas even less attractive to farmers and young people (P2). In Romania, Poland, Hungary and Belgium particular attention was drawn to the temporal and spatial availability of health and educational services, which is inadequate in many areas. This situation most severely affects the physical and mental well-being of farmers who, by the nature of their occupation, are 'condemned' to live in peripheral areas, and of elderly people who, for various reasons, choose not to migrate (Tab. 2). For farmers, restricted access to medical care is compounded by occupational hazards such as exposure to chemicals, a heightened risk of accidents and zoonotic diseases. In addition, the difficulty of finding replacements to carry out farm tasks leads to a reluctance to take sick leave or to undergo long-term treatment. Rural depopulation also creates problems for the farm labour supply (P5). This issue was raised in the reports from Italy and Greece, where growing numbers of migrants from Africa and Asia are employed in agriculture. In this context, integrating migrant workers into the socio-cultural life of the village and ensuring their housing and legal employment pose significant challenges for local rural communities (P9). Promoting legal forms of employment is important in order to improve the physical well-being of foreign workers and to bring them into the social and healthcare systems.

Farmers in the European countries analysed sought to meet the challenges and specific problems that adversely affected their well-being. Among important solutions for improving farmers' physical and mental well-being identified in the mapping reports was support from family and the local community, which took the form of emotional, material and expert, advisory assistance from neighbours (in Belgium, Poland and Romania). A sense of meaning found in farm work also played a significant role in coping with the challenges and specific problems considered. Contact with nature, passion for and engagement in farm activities and the autonomy to make one's own decisions were all emphasised as factors that, to some extent, eased the physical and mental hardships of the occupation (Hungary, Belgium, Poland). It is worth noting, however, that these individual strategies were undertaken on an ad hoc basis, were informal in nature and did not constitute a sustainable solution to the well-being problems encountered, which originate in the macro-level challenges currently affecting rural areas. It is therefore important to seek institutionalised and innovative initiatives, engaging not only farmers but also rural actors representing organisations of various levels and profiles that are aimed at improving farmers' health and their physical and social circumstances. The next section of the article focuses on analysing ways of responding to the challenges and specific problems identified, and on uncovering the mechanisms and conditions that enable effective intervention across the various dimensions of farmers' well-being.

3.2 Social innovations and farmers' well-being: mechanisms, dimensions and limitations

The innovations implemented in response to the challenges and specific problems identified comprised the following six initiatives (Fig. 1): "Farmers at a Crossroads" (FC) in Belgium (Flanders), which provides a comprehensive support service to farmers in need, particularly in coping with stress; Myrmidones, an energy cooperative in Central Greece bringing together farmers, including women farmers, with the aim of transforming them from mere consumers of energy into producers; a network of open farms in the Zala Valley in Transdanubia in Hungary, directed towards shortening the food chain and strengthening cooperation among farmers; Ghetto Out–Casa Sankara, an association in Puglia region, in Italy that supports migrants in improving their living and working conditions and in achieving social and economic independence; the "Independently (not) alone – supporting people with disabilities" ("Independently…") project in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region in Poland, which offered a comprehensive package of support for people with intellectual disabilities, with the key involvement of farmers operating care farms; and the Saschiz Women Neighbourhood Association (SWNA) in Transylvania Romania, an organisation bringing together women farmers and rural women that sought, through various joint undertakings, to strengthen their agency in the social and economic spheres.

In Belgium (Flanders), strong economic pressure on farms manifested itself in a psychosocial and cultural problem among farmers. Accumulated stress arising from excessive regulation, financial insecurity and the ethos of the "good farmer" co-occurred with a taboo on discussing personal difficulties and a low propensity to seek help (C1, P1, P4). FC innovation operated by providing support to farmers experiencing psychological difficulties through a network of specialised helplines involving advisers, psychologists and local gatekeepers (Tab. 3). By lowering the cultural and systemic barriers to accessing psychological services and enabling the early detection of problems, the innovation directly addressed, and significantly improved, farmers' social well-being (by creating opportunities to talk about personal problems) and mental well-being (by reducing stress and depression).

In Central Greece, cost pressures on farmers stemming from volatile energy prices, compounded by low incomes, together with barriers to cooperation and to the agency of women farmers (C1, P4, P6), were addressed through the establishment of the Myrmidones cooperative, which transformed farmers from energy consumers into collective energy producers. The innovation operated by initiating activities aimed at regaining control over a key production cost on the basis of cooperative principles and trust, and by enabling women to engage in activities traditionally regarded as a male domain. It enhanced farmers' social well-being by improving their reputation and the sense of trust among community members, fostering greater involvement in community activities and raising the visibility of women farmers within the

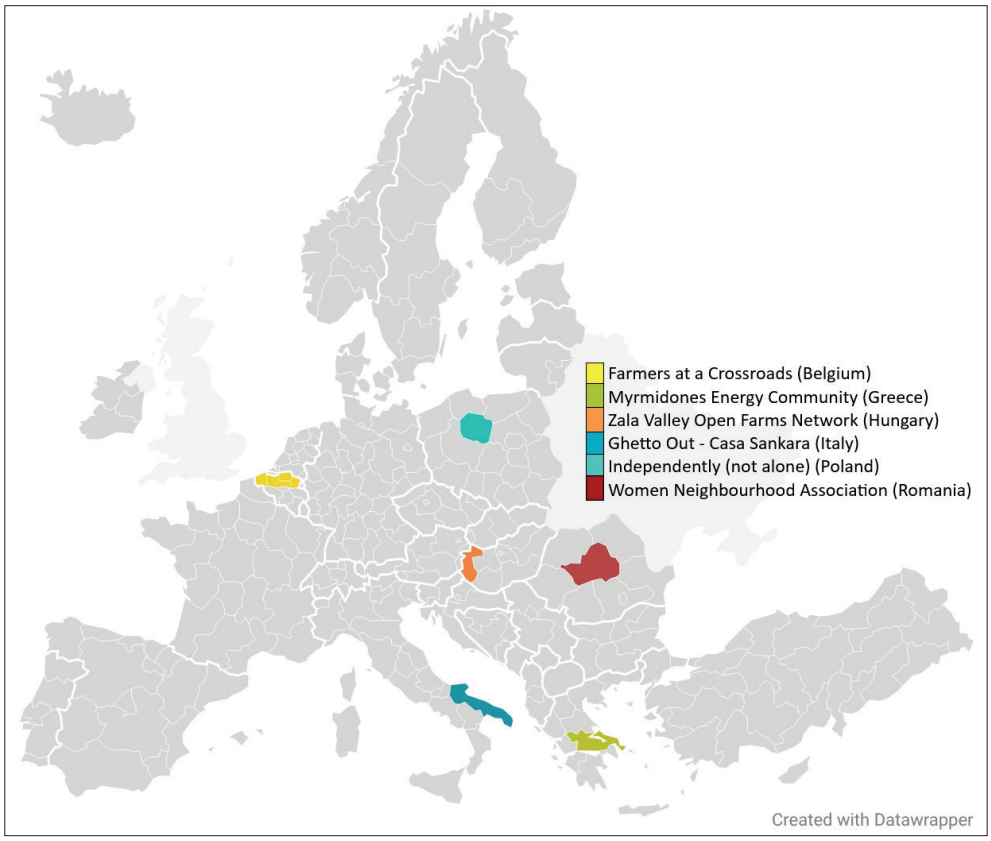


Fig. 1: Location of social innovations studied aimed at improving farmers' well-being
Source: Own elaboration created in Datawrapper, https://app.datawrapper.de

agricultural community (Tab. 3). By restoring control over a key production cost, the cooperative reduced the financial insecurity underlying farmers' stress, thereby improving their mental well-being; the material gain thus operated as a route to, rather than a substitute for, well-being.

In response to the economic insecurity of small farms and a weakly developed culture of cooperation (C1, P4, P6, P8), the network of open farms in the Zala Valley in Transdanubia, in Hungary sought to overcome isolation, build trust and strengthen relationships among farmers who had previously been competitors. This was to be achieved through joint marketing and advocacy activities, training, workshops and shared channels for selling agricultural produce, including the regular organisation of open farm days for consumers (Tab. 3). Beyond their commercial purpose, these open days also had educational value, addressing issues of healthy living, nutrition, traditional farming and food processing. Through these activities, farmers' well-being improved most markedly in its social dimension, as their social recognition, sense of belonging and sense of partnership in pursuing shared goals all increased.

In Italy, growing cost pressures on farms have fed an informal system of labour exploitation, under which migrants from Asia and Africa work in extremely difficult conditions (C1, P5, P9). The Ghetto Out–Casa Sankara innovation responded to these unfavourable conditions by offering those in need work, housing, care and administrative support. With the assistance of the regional authorities, the association, which is run by people with personal experience of migration, obtained the premises of a disused farm, where produce was grown for self-consumption and direct sale. It provided accommodation for migrants and organised activities to promote mutual understanding and integration. The mechanism through which well-being was affected lay in the emancipation of exploited workers and the transformation of their status – from victims of exploitation into active individuals engaged in decent work who could collectively improve their social and economic standing. The effects of the innovation were felt in all dimensions of well-being (Tab. 3).

In the Kujawsko-Pomorskie region in Poland, challenges associated with rural depopulation and pressure on farms manifested themselves in a shortage of care and therapeutic services and in the low profitability of farms (C3, P4, P6). The "Independently…" project established a system of care farms for adults with intellectual disabilities, supported by specialised regional, local-government and civil-society institutions. The innovation operated by harnessing farm resources for therapeutic, rehabilitative and activating purposes while stabilising farmers' incomes and coordinating the activities of partner institutions (Tab. 3). Its effects bore most directly on the well-being of the service recipients – adults with disabilities. As a result of participating in the project, farmers also enhanced their life and work skills and their self-esteem (mental well-being), strengthened their social ties with the local community (social well-being) and, by diversifying their income and stabilising farm finances, secured the material basis on which improvements in personal and social well-being could rest.

In Romania, the association responded to structural challenges in the form of out-migration and social isolation (C3), a lack of cooperation and limited access to public services (P4), by setting out to rebuild social relationships through culinary and festival events (the Rhubarb Fest), health fairs, food fairs and small gastronomic projects. The innovation operated partly by women farmers filling a gap in the social fabric, integrating the local community with the support of external civil-society organisations (Tab. 3). These undertakings increased trust, cooperation and the women's sense of belonging, which had the potential to reduce the fragmentation of a community at risk of shrinking through out-migration. The association's activities improved women farmers' self-esteem and sense of agency, impacting their mental and social well-being.

4. Discussion

The social innovations examined here influenced the three well-being dimensions identified in the study, namely: physical, mental, and social, in three principal ways: by broadening access to social services (e.g. housing and means of production for migrant farmers in Italy, and therapy and psychological counselling for farmers experiencing mental-health difficulties in Belgium); by strengthening cooperation and recognition (e.g. women farmers organising shared events centred on local food tradition in Romania, and farmers' energy cooperative in Greece); as well as through integrating them as a key link into the support network for rural inhabitants (e.g. the provision of care farming services in Poland).

Across the six countries, which together account for a substantial share of EU farmers and farms (Eurostat, 2024), we identified macro-level challenges, namely: pressure on farms, ageing, and rural depopulation, that were associated with farmers' well-being indirectly, through a range of specific problems: health issues, difficult working conditions and labour availability, limited access to specialised health and social services, social isolation, unrecognition, and weak cooperation both among farmers themselves and with the local community. Underlying and accompanying this unfavourable physical, mental, and relational condition were the limited opportunities for developing the farm business, reflected in unsatisfactory incomes. These stemmed from rising operating costs, competitive pressure, an increasing administrative burden, a weak position within market structures, and slender prospects for succession to the next generation.

The contribution of our findings to the existing literature lies in showing that social innovations are an effective means of addressing the challenges and problems for farmers' well-being (Neumeier, 2012; Herrera Sabillón et al., 2022; Adam et al., 2024; Whitaker, 2024). The comparative case analysis showed that, irrespective of national and regional differences, the explored initiatives generally responded to these challenges adequately and constructively, and impacted well-being through three mechanisms, above all a relational, community-based channel grounded in trust, collaboration and a sense of belonging, and, to a lesser extent, a top-down pathway involving economic and services support (Tab. 3). The first mechanism concerned cooperation and networking among farmers and within wider local settings: the initiatives drew isolated farmers into joint activities, fostering agency, recognition, and a sense of collective belonging while strengthening mutual trust (e.g. the Myrmidones energy cooperative in Central Greece, the open-farm network in Zala Valley in Transdanubia, and the SWNA association in Transylvania). Here, the well-being improved indirectly, as a by-product of cooperation. The second mechanism concerned the professionalisation and territorialisation of support services: innovations such as the grassroots psychological-support network for farmers in need (FC in Flanders) and the strengthening of farmers' knowledge and skills in providing care services for vulnerable rural residents ("Independently…" in Kujawsko-Pomorskie) closed gaps in access to social services in rural areas – gaps resulting from depopulation and economic pressure. The third mechanism concerned the empowerment of marginalised groups of farmers: migrants (Ghetto Out–Casa Sankara in Puglia) and women farmers (in Central Greece and Transylvania). A shift in a group's social position translated into improved physical and mental well-being (notably higher self-esteem) and social well-being (recognition within the community) (Tab. 3).

Naturally, these positive associations between social innovations and well-being varied in strength and in their effects, depending on the maturity and type of each initiative, the strength and number of the actors involved, and the intended time horizon (Tab. 3). Social innovations that were new and cost-intensive yielded weaker effects and were comparatively less well attuned to farmers' needs. The case analysis also revealed certain barriers common to a number of social innovations. First, although these were formalised initiatives resting on the involvement of several institutions, with few exceptions they were project-based and reliant on voluntary effort, and they depended heavily on

Country/social innovation	Main challenges and problems to farmers' well-being	Transmission mechanism	Main well-being dimension affected	Potential problems and limitations
Belgium (Farmers at a Crossroads)	stress (low incomes, administrative burden) (C1); social isolation, mental health, cultural barrier (P1, P4)	lowering barriers to accessing support; destigmatisation; early detection by gatekeepers familiar with the agricultural context	mental (reduction of anxiety and depression) and social (readiness for conversation, access to support)	underrepresentation of men; innovation as a 'tissue for bleeding' – does not address the root causes of stress; growing demand for the service
Greece (Myrmidones energy cooperative)	low incomes; high cost of energy; low female farmers recognition (C1, P4, P6)	collective agency over energy costs; cooperative principles; local trust; democratic decision-making	social (trust, women recognition and empowerment) and mental (stress reduction through action)	energy law instability; lack of specialised services and funding; weak culture of cooperation
Hungary (Zala Valley Open Farm Network)	pressure of strong competition; low incomes; weak cooperation (C1, P4, P6, P8)	networking: joint marketing, short supply chains, knowledge transfer, continuous animation by network actors	social (respect for farmers and increased cooperation)	reliance on project funding; volunteer burnout; legal barriers (VAT, association status); mental health taboos
Italy (Ghetto Out–Casa Sankara)	unregistered employment and exploitation (caporalato); poor housing and working conditions (C1, P5, P9)	emancipation through legal employment and dignity; housing and legal support; an 'inter-migrant' community / a 'by migrants, for migrants' community	mental (resilience and self-esteem) and physical (housing and working conditions)	bureaucracy; minor beneficiaries received remuneration within the project; continuous fundraising; beneficiary – workers, not a fully independent farmer
Poland (Independently (not) alone – supporting people with disabilities)	low incomes; weak intersectoral cooperation (C3); lack of specialised services in rural areas (P4, P6)	therapeutic utilisation of farm resources; income diversification; multi-actor coordination	mental and physical for participants (life satisfaction, independence); social for farmers (intersectoral cooperation and recognition)	project-based nature of funding; legal and tax barriers for farmers
Romania (Saschiz Women Neighbourhood Association)	low incomes and educational level; out-migration (especially women) (C3, P4)	empowerment of women and community animation (festivals, health fairs); external impetus from NGOs	social (trust and cooperation, lower out-migration); mental as an intermediary link	absence of well-being and social innovation in agricultural policy; cultural taboos; exclusively project-based funding

Tab. 3: Comparative case analysis of six social innovations aimed at improving farmers well-being implemented in Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Romania
Source: Own elaboration based on: case-study reports documenting social innovations (Messely et al., 2023; Partalidou, 2023; Magócs, 2023; Palmioli, 2023; Czarnecki et al., 2023; Ion et al., 2023) and social innovation database (https://farmwell-h2020.eu/social-innovations/)

public funding, which undermined the durability of their effects. The temporary nature of the support and services thus had, in a sense, a counter-productive effect on well-being. Second, most innovations analysed had to contend with an unstable or ill-suited regulatory environment (e.g. the lack of a legal definition and systemic embedding of care farming in Poland, and protracted residence procedures for migrants in Italy). Third, effects of social innovations were constrained by cultural barriers: the taboo surrounding mental health and the ethos of the 'strong farmer' limited the reach of interventions – a symptom of which was the low participation of men in well-being activities. Finally, the innovations carried a risk of substitution, alleviating symptoms rather than removing causes that lay beyond their scope (Zajda, 2017; Adam et al., 2024).

4.1 Methodological limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. The empirical base of this study is heterogeneous, almost mosaic-like in its methods, sample characteristics and sizes, time spans and in the themes examined in each national report. Because the six reports differ in the segments of the farming population they cover, in their methods and in the themes selected for in-depth analysis, the country-level statements that follow should be read as characterising the material reported for each country, rather than as representative generalisations about its entire farming population. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the challenges and specific problems relating to farmers' well-being were identified, in each country, on the basis of research and secondary data pertaining to a defined time frame, chiefly the period 2020–2022. Since then, events have occurred that may have significantly affected the pressures and constraints on farmers considered in this article – among them war in Ukraine, changes in agricultural policy, the energy crisis and the intensifying adverse effects of climate change. It is likely that some of the well-being-related challenges and problems identified here have deepened or intensified; equally, new issues not captured in this study – bearing on farmers' well-being and needs – will undoubtedly have emerged (Rose et al., 2023; Whitaker, 2024; Bauer et al., 2026).

Additionally, the procedures of synthesis, comparison, and categorisation that we applied were qualitative in nature and based on generalising inference. It should be emphasised that the study's distinction between challenges and specific problems is not a strict, mutually exclusive classification, but rather encompasses phenomena that are often closely related, mutually conditioning and overlapping in scope (Adam, 2021). The analytical approach adopted is heuristic in character: its aim is to identify a range of issues relevant to farmers' well-being as interlinked and mutually reinforcing, rather than as a strict hierarchy of causes and effects. Moreover, the selection of both the countries in which well-being was analysed and the social-innovation cases was purposive and shaped by the assumptions adopted for the project design. Our findings are therefore confined to the extensive and various empirical material gathered on farmer populations. We sought to mitigate analytical shortcomings by drawing carefully on a range of well-established data sources, set against the literature and existing research on well-being, and by keeping our conclusions qualitative in character. At the same time, our analysis addresses a research gap by identifying and examining the relationship between social innovations actually implemented in six European countries and the three dimensions of farmers' well-being (Neumeier, 2012; Herrera Sabillón et al., 2022; Adam et al., 2024; Whitaker, 2024).

5. Conclusions

This study set out to identify the principal socio-economic challenges and specific problems impairing farmers' well-being in six European countries (Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Romania), and to assess the effectiveness of social innovations in addressing them. Drawing on a combination of existing empirical materials and qualitative methods, the study yields two main conclusions. First, across the six national cases, three overarching challenges – pressure on farms, ageing and rural depopulation – and nine associated specific problems recur as the issues reported to depress farmers' well-being, albeit with significant cross-national variation in their intensity and institutional expression. Second, social innovations that were bottom-up, multi-actor, inclusive, and responsive to locally identified needs demonstrated positive effects on well-being. The observable gains of social innovations analysed occurred in the social dimension of farmers' well-being. Our findings contribute to the existing literature by showing that social innovations can be an effective mean of addressing challenges to farmers' well-being through a relational, community-based channel grounded in trust and collaboration.

Future research on social innovations intended to improve farmers' well-being in the face of such complex challenges should draw on a coherent and consistent body of data covering both well-being and context such as quantitative datasets (e.g. the Farm Sustainability Data Network or Eurostat), that reflects the diversity of farming conditions and contexts. Subsequent studies should also address the limitations of this analysis by developing harmonised cross-national instruments for exploring and measuring farmers' well-being, extending methodologies to longer time horizons, and examining the scalability and transferability of individual social innovations across different national contexts.

For policy, the findings suggest that national and EU agricultural and rural policies should explicitly integrate farmer well-being as an outcome objective alongside economic and environmental targets. Action should be taken to design the instruments aimed at destigmatising mental health issues, whilst incorporating gender-sensitive solutions. Comprehensive training, therapeutic, organisational, and financial support could be embedded within trusted agricultural services and in communication that normalises discussions around mental health. The approach aimed at improving farmers' social well-being should leverage the potential of women as agents of change, which has been proven in all cases of social innovation analysed.

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