2nd International Symposium on Work in Agriculture
*Thinking the future of work in agriculture*

***March 29th – April 1rst, 2021***
Clermont-Ferrand (France)

***WS 2***
***Health and work***
***in agricultural activity***

# Wellbeing and societal alienation among farmers: the case of Flanders, Belgium

*Sanders Arthur [a], Charlotte Prové [a], Jeroen Adam [a], Lies Messely [a]*

*[a] Flanders institute for agriculture, fisheries and food research (ILVO)*

***Abstract:*** *International scientific literature and media coverage is increasingly paying attention to the many indications that the wellbeing among rural and agrarian populations is inadequate. This also applies to Flanders, the area under investigation. However, before this study the wellbeing of farmers was underexposed in Flemish scientific research. The present study fills this gap by exploring farmer wellbeing by investigating what type of stressors farmers are experiencing in their daily activities and how they rationalize and interpret these different stress factors. Empirically our analysis draws on qualitative interviews (24) and focus group discussions (9), reaching 81 Flemish farmers. We found that two main categories, comprising many different stressors, could be identified. These are: 1) regulation and administrative burdens, and 2) financial insecurity. Throughout the interviews, these two aspects could be deduced as having the largest impact on individual wellbeing. We argued that this negative impact is closely connected to the nature of these stress factors; that is that they are understood as the outcome of specific political and economic processes that work against farming and are not understood as the inherent risks that farmers are confronted with, which are considered as inextricably linked to the profession and activity of farming. During our analysis of the multitude of stressors, an important aspect emerged essential to grasp farmer wellbeing: farmers contextualised and interpret the difficulties they face beyond their strict individual impact. Going beyond a listing of the different stressors, by analysing how these are rationalized and aquire meaning through mental schemata of farmers being part of a specific socio-professional group that is being targeted and becomes increasingly disconnected from broader society, this study contributes to the extensive literature body of sociological approaches adressing what determines and affects (farmer) wellbeing. We conclude that feelings of societal appreciation and recognition do indeed contribute to a person's wellbeing and that the notion of the 'collective self', the sense of being part of a broader socio professional group facing similar challenges, is essential in understanding the impact of specific stressors on individual farmer wellbeing.*

***Keywords****: farmer wellbeing, stress, collective self, societal appreciation and alienation*

## Introduction

In different countries in Europe, discussions on farmer wellbeing have entered the academic and political debate the past decade. One example is France where the systematic high numbers of suicide among French farmers (Deffontaines, 2014; Réseau agri Sentinelles, 2018) has triggered numerous discussions as diverse as the future of family farming in the 21st century (reference) or the systematic marginalization of what some refer to as *'la France périphérique'* (Guilly, 2014). Preliminary evidence seems to indicate that also in Flanders, Belgium there are reasons for concern about the overall wellbeing among farming populations. First, there exists a longstanding trend of a sharply diminishing number of farms and farmers in Flanders; indicating that reproducing the farm is challenging (FOD Economie, 2019). Also, there is a very low rate (13%) of farmers older than 50 with a possible successor (LARA agricultural report, 2018). Another set of data pointing at the problematic nature of farmers' wellbeing in Flanders are provided by the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (Bourdeaud'hui *et al.*, 2020). These data show that 43,4% of the farmers experience stress in terms of work-life balance. This is remarkably higher when compared to other socio-professional categories. Slightly more than half (50,3%) of the farmers indicate that they experience the daily workload as too high. Despite these quantitative findings pointing at the gravity of the problem, there are a wide set of issues we remain ill-informed about for the Flanders' case study. With this article, we wish to fill some of these gaps by providing an answer to 2 research questions. First, it will be analysed what type of stress factors farmers

are experiencing in their daily activities. In a second stage, it was then questioned how the different stress factors that farmers are experiencing in their daily lives are rationalized and contextualized. Answering these question will enable a more nuanced and refined understanding of the interrelation and interaction between different sources of stress and farmers' wellbeing. This will also allow for a better understanding as to the relative importance of different types of stressors.

Based on our analysis, the paper will confirm that a significant share of farmers in Flanders experience negative impacts on their wellbeing due to different job-related factors and changes. More specifically, 48% of our respondents indicated that they were confronted with feelings of frustration, anxiety, burnout, depression, suicidal thoughts, etc. When taking a closer look into these reasons, that is: the stress factors negatively impacting individual wellbeing, there are 2 broad categories that can be discerned. These are: 1) regulation and administrative burdens, and 2) financial insecurity. Throughout the interviews, these two aspects could be deduced as having the largest impact on individual wellbeing. It will hereby be argued that this negative impact is closely connected to the nature of these stress factors; that is that they are understood as the outcome of specific political and economic processes that work against farming and are not understood as the inherent risks that farmers are confronted with, which are considered as inextricably linked to the profession and activity of farming. A specific moral critique surrounds these stress factors through which farmers experience and express a set of societal grievances of frustrations. For this reason, these cannot merely be understood as stress factors negatively impacting individual wellbeing. Our hypothesis is therefore that these are signs of a broader process of societal alienation of a specific professional group, that is: among farmers, there are strong feelings of a disconnect from society.

Regulation and administration was noted by multiple farmers as one of the aspects of farming that is least enjoyable and a task for which many farmers felt ill-prepared. Many of the regulations were also considered irrelevant and sometimes highly artificial, following an abstract administrative logic that is not attuned to the daily practice of managing a farm. Regulation was also described as a considerable stressor as certain inspections could lead to serious fines, possibly further aggravating the situation for those farms experiencing economic insecurity. When it comes to the larger rationalities through which this stress surrounding regulation and administrative burdens are being contextualized, 3 points are worth mentioning. First, different types of governmental regulation at different scales are understood to be decreasing autonomy, limiting the farmers' range of options to organize farm activities in terms of labour allocation, financial or other inputs, marketing strategies, etc. Second, it was being mentioned that administrative burdens added significantly to an already high workload and lastly, regulations, and more specifically inspections were understood as inappropriate infringements on private property, lacking respect for private property and the carefully balanced labour organization that goes into running a farm.

These stressors result in a broadly shared sense of an overall lack of societal respect towards farmers, something that also comes back in the second main stress factor that was detected, that is: financial insecurity. Farmers hereby emphasize that they are being forced to sell their products at rock-bottom prices that do not allow to generate a decent revenue, resulting in difficulties to repay debt and enhances dependency on compensatory subsidies. In addition, farmers indicate that they are being confronted with increasing investment costs, in order to keep the farm viable and to be in line with regulatory changes. For obvious reasons, financial insecurity has a negative impact on individual wellbeing. Farmers experience stress for not being able to pay the bills, having to quit farming or not being able to fulfil their children's daily needs. Importantly, these financial problems were not understood as inevitable outcomes of larger market forces. Rather, these were understood as evidence of the lack of broader

societal disrespect for farmer's labour as farmers did not receive a fair price for a product that is understood to be essential to society's needs. Apart from the fact that these low prices add significantly to financial uncertainty and stress, it is hereby argued that these prices do not reflect the true value of the labour put in the production of their agricultural output. As such, these are seen as proof of the fact that people no longer wish to pay the correct price for a valuable and qualitative product, generated by 'honest' and dedicated labour. Next, these low prices are perceived as evidence of the fact that farmers are being used by larger agro-industrial corporations or other intermediaries illegitimately appropriating surplus. Lastly, the low price that farmers receive for their produce is seen as indicative of their declining socio-political power in which they no longer have representatives pushing for price controls that would enable a more sustainable livelihood.

Overall, through an analysis on wellbeing and the stress factors impacting on this wellbeing, this paper enables for a richer understanding of the manner in which farmers as a socio-professional category perceive their changing societal position. It will hereby be shown throughout this paper how questions of stress, autonomy and individual wellbeing are intimately tied to a broader and collective perception about the changing position and overall (lack of) appreciation that farmers experience in Flemish society. It will hereby be argued that the feeling of gradual loss of autonomy and control has become part of a perceived growing societal disrespect for agriculture more in general and proof of the declining societal status and political influence of farmers more specifically. This perception is reflected in the manner in which farmers make sense of the above mentioned loss in autonomy in the arenas of government regulation and marketization. At the level of different types of governmental regulation, this is understood by many farmers as proof of the ignorance of the outside world, no longer understanding and respecting the complexities and exigencies of running an economically viable farm. Many, quickly changing, regulations are thus seen as incompatible with established, 'commonsensical' working patterns and farm organization. In addition, these regulations, in particular when it comes to those 'green' regulations aiming at a reduction of emissions or improving biodiversity, are seen as emblematic for a society where farmers are no longer wanted and where farming is seen as a burden and nuisance to non-farming communities. All these mentioned elements, and the particular tone in which many respondents elaborated about them, reinforce the observation that understood as just another example that farmers are being disrespected and ridiculed by a society ignorant of and even overtly hostile to agriculture. Ultimately, all this is being framed within a conviction that in particular conventional family farming does not have a viable future and in which this type of farming is inevitably bound to disappear in Flanders.

## Method

The research consisted of two partially overlapping phases of data collection. A first step consisted of a quantitative questionnaire. More specifically, for this paper, a survey was conducted in 2018-2019 among farmers from the agricultural monitoring network database (n=285). These data primarily allow to obtain a representative insight about the number of farmers which experience stress in their daily lives and what the different types of stress are that farmers indicate that have a negative influence on their wellbeing.

These data have been complemented with a qualitative component, consisting of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with farmers in Flanders, Belgium. The total amount of respondents in our qualitative study consisted of ninety farmers, both men (41) and women (49) from diverse farm types

and sectors, who were consulted in either individual interviews (24) or focus group discussions (9). In line with the overall structure of Flemish agriculture, the vast majority were conventional farmers.

| | personal interview | focus group discussion | | Farming Sector | amount |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Active farming years** | | | | | |
| [0-5[ | 3 | 5 | | Dairy farm | 13 |
| [5-15[ | 5 | 14 | | Beef farm | 10 |
| [15-25[ | 11 | 25 | | Horticulture farm | 1 |
| [25-…] | 11 | 16 | | Pig farm | 11 |
| | | | | Arable farm | 25 |
| **Gender** | | | | Vegetable farms | 9 |
| Man | 17 | 36 | | Mixed dairy and poultry farm | 9 |
| Woman | 13 | 24 | | Organic farm | 6 |
| **Total farmers** | 30 | 60 | | **Total farms** | 84 |

***Table 1.***

The 24 interviews were originally conducted in Dutch. They lasted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes using a 'narrative interviewing' technique (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). The initial starting questions were open-ended in keeping with the exploratory nature of the study, and reducing the role of the interviewer. The second part of the interview consisted of open probing questions based on literature research on wellbeing. Potential interviewees were obtained by announcing an open call in the (national and farming) press, asking that those who wished to participate could contact the researchers. Since this yielded a lot of interest, the research team was able to select the research cases in order to obtain the most versatile interview sample possible (based on gender, age, scale, sector and geographical location in Flanders). We also conducted several interviews with staff members of a farmers' aid organisation. In addition, nine focus group discussions, based on the 'problem tree' method (Brouwer and Brouwers, 2017: 39-41), were organized with a total of sixty participants. The aim of these discussions consisted of facilitating mutual interaction among farmers about difficulties they experience in their job, how they cope with specific problems and what possible solutions are available. Two focus group discussions were organised with participants from the same agricultural sector (dairy and beef cattle), others were with mixed participants over different sectors. For the organization of the focus groups we collaborated with different farmer organizations.

Interviews were transcribed and entered into Nvivo 11 qualitative data analysis software and coded in three steps: open, axial and selective coding (Mortelmans, 2013: 395-469). An analytical code book was developed focussing on the topics covered in the interviews. These codes were extended and interactively revised between three researchers involved in the analytic process to ensure triangulation. This was also done through contact and assessment with fellow researchers, multiple farming (aid) organisation and the usage of different sources (Creswell, 2003).

Central to these interviews and focus group discussions were the different stress factors that farmers experience, the importance that is attributed to these stress factors and, most importantly, the manner in which these stress factors are accounted for. In doing this, this article follows an explicit actor oriented and qualitative methodology wherein peoples' experiences and the manner they make sense of and give meaning to these experiences are taken as the analytic starting point. The argument for this actor oriented and qualitative approach lays in the belief that farmers themselves through their daily routines and agentive reflection on these routines, are the most privileged informants to gain better insight into

the different types of stressors they experience. In addition, by delving into the manner these stress factors are contextualized by the farmers themselves, this paper attempts to shed a light on how individual farmers perceive their own (changing) societal position and the position of the larger socio-professional group they identify themselves with. Because of this interpretative focus that explicitly delves into farmers' subjectivity, this paper does not aim to make definitive statements on broad structural changes in the farming sector and then link these to individual stress factors. Instead, this paper aim to analyse the interpretations, values and meanings contemporary farmers connect to specific stress factors and how these then relate to their wellbeing. Finally, through this analysis of the way in which individual stressors are contextualized in a broader political and socio-economic perspective, this article hopes to open up a larger socio-political discussion about the manner in which individual farmers and the agricultural sector more in general is increasingly feeling alienated from the larger societal fabric in current-day Flanders.
In the section below, we will first address how our results and analysis interacts with already existing literature on farmer wellbeing, then in the result section we set out in more detail what findings support this approach.

## Farmer wellbeing

Within the academic literature a wide set of explanations have been put forward to account for the high levels of burnout, depression, isolation experienced by farmers. For instance, previous research has indicated how negative farmer wellbeing is closely associated with -and affected by- the access and willingness to seek help (Roy, Tremblay, and Robertson, 2014), tensions resolving around identity (Bryant, 1999; Burton, 2004), isolation and anxiety (Swisher *et al.*, 2004; Lobley *et al.*, 2004; Slee, 1988) and can result in dramatic outcomes such as depression (Ellis and Albrecht, 2017) or suicide (Bryant and Garnham, 2013, 2014; Roy *et al.*, 2014). Others have focussed on stress that is experienced due to restructuring and changes in the agricultural sector, hereby delving into the significance of gender roles, identity construction and help seeking (Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Shortall 2006, 2014; Price and Evans 2009). For example, Burton (2004) studied the symbolic value of farming –what it means to be 'a good farmer'- and the (anticipated) loss of identity related to particular changes in the agricultural sector which can result in stress. Brew *et al.* (2016: 8) have shown that remoteness can be a significant influential factor to wellbeing. Dessein and Nevens (2007) focus on the link between the display of pride in being a farmer on the one hand, and individual and family wellbeing on the other hand. Their contribution is not the only one pointing at the importance of taking values into account when doing research on farmer wellbeing; some authors hereby highlight entrepreneurial identity (Niska, Vesala, and Vesala, 2012; Stock and Forney, 2014; Vesala, Peura, and McElwee, 2007); others show the importance of farmer autonomy, both as a value and a practice (Stock and Forney, 2014); still others indicate how the micro-politics of state actors and corporate agriculture is constraining farmer autonomy and relates to suicide (Bryant and Garnham, 2013). What many preceding studies addressing farmers wellbeing have in common are approaches investigating how socio political changes, individual attributes and the availability of auxiliary channels affect individual farmer wellbeing. As will be shown, this study contributes to these approaches by demonstrating how farmers, besides the individual impact on their wellbeing, make sense of a multitude of the everyday stressors they experience within a broader framework of farmers as a socio-professional group. Throughout our analysis of the many interviews and focus group discussions we undertook with Flemish farmers, we argue that in an inductive way, an essential aspect emerged to better understand and possibly improve farmer wellbeing. That is: the rationalization and contextualization of specific

stressors by respondents within a framework of collective self-representation of farmers as part of a particular professional group being cornered.
Many have argued that work identity, often referred to as 'occupational identity', is a socially constructed process determined by 'doing identity' (Shortall, 2014). Within the continuous process of identity formation public representation of oneself as part of a social group, with associated roles and meanings applied to the self, is essential (Burke, 1991, 2007; Jenkins, 2008). Rather than being an 'individual trait, people question or verify who they are, and which position they occupy within communities, through social relations and the structures within which that identity is embedded. To do this a reflexive process, usually based on a hierarchy of different identities (Shortall, 2014; Sedikides *et al.*, 2011),

## Results

Based on our quantitative survey, 48% of farmers indicate that their work exhausts them mentally. It can hereby thus be argued that by and large half of the farming population in Flanders experiences negative impacts on their mental wellbeing which is manifested through feelings of frustration, anxiety, burnout, depression, suicidal thoughts, etc. In addition, 42% of farmers indicate that their work has a negative impact on their social life; meaning that they lack the time and energy to meet up with family and friends, are confronted with feelings of loneliness, isolation, etc.
Many of these points can also be detected in the qualitative interviews conducted among Flemish farmers. Within these interviews, a wide variety of so-called stress factors are being mentioned that negatively impact farmers' wellbeing, ranging from weather-related hazards, to financial setbacks, animal diseases, etc. Based on a systematic analysis of these qualitative data, we hereby suggest to put forward 2 broad categories of stressors, instead of providing a descriptive overview of the different stress factors Flemish farmers are being confronted with. These are: 1) regulation and administrative burdens, and 2) financial insecurity. The selection of these categories is based on 2 parameters. First, throughout the many interviews and focus group discussions, these two were mentioned most often and, most importantly, attributed the largest impact on individual wellbeing. Second, this impact is closely connected to the particular nature of these stress factors, that is that they are understood by the farmers themselves as indicative of a broader process of socio-political marginalization or even a desire by some to oust farms and farmers from society. Whilst other stress factors such as volatile weather conditions or animal diseases were perceived as an inherent risk and part of farming; meaning that this is something that has always happened and one has to deal with if one wishes to start farming, regulation/administrative burdens and financial insecurity are understood as the outcome of specific political and economic processes that work against farming. As such, in particular these stress factors not only impacted negatively on wellbeing but are also sources of increasing socio-political frustrations and grievances, which is translated and used by many as evidence of a feeling of being cornered as a broader professional group.
In the result section below, we will show which stressors farmers experience and how they illustrated the importance of broader interpretative frameworks when dealing with these stress factors.

### Regulation and administrative burdens

A large number of our respondents indicated that they see regulation and administration as increasingly complex, rapidly changing and in some instances even highly irrelevant. Regulation, most prominently epitomized by a wide range of inspections taking place on the farms for a variety of issues, is hereby understood as evidence of a widening gap between the daily practice of farming versus the logic of

policy and regulation. First and foremost there is the increasing amount of regulation, administration and monitoring that compels farmers to do certain things and prohibits others. In particular those tasks perceived as 'externally imposed' were often understood to be annoying, decreasing their motivation and negatively influencing their wellbeing. Some were labelled as unfair or "*not why we chose to become a farmer".* Administration was often mentioned as such a task and considered by the respondents as hopelessly rigid and complicated. Most farmers expressed that they lack the time, and sometimes the knowledge to do all the administration on time and in a correct way. Farmers talked about a sprawl of different specialised agencies responsible for supervision of specific legislation while farmers themselves have to know and present everything in detail, which often becomes too complicated and too much to accomplish. As one farmer tellingly explains:

> *"I'm sorry, but I also have a PHD, I know things pretty well! But I don't think it's exactly fair what you expect from farmers. I actually think it is very narrow minded. You are all Bio engineers, the only thing you need to know is the Bio legislation. But we need to know the bio legislation, the FAVV*[1]*, the manure legislation and more. And that's actually incidental! We especially need to know the crops! And I find that almost incomprehensible!"* (female, 41, CSA farm).

The amount and speed of changes in regulations for farmers could also clearly be identified as a major source of frustration. Many felt that regulation could always change in no time, forcing farmers to continuously adapt to be in line with novelties:

> "*that's why I no longer go to technical meetings anymore because you always come home with the feeling that you are doing things wrong […] and I definitely don't go to the managerial meetings! Because there you only get to hear what is forbidden or mandatory from now on. And by the time you get home it has already changed!"* (male, 46, mixed dairy and poultry farmer).

Throughout the interviews, the issue of administration was mentioned in 3 interrelated ways.

• *Autonomy*

First of all, the increase in administrative burdens is understood as proof of the fact that farmers are being confronted with a creeping autonomy and increasing control over the manner in which they organize their farm activities and, more broadly, their own personal lives. Crucially, notions about freedom, independence, creativity and autonomy are hereby understood as quintessential to being a 'real' farmer. The positive aspect of farming that was thus mentioned most often, was the notion of being free; of not being supervised by others, of being able to do whatever one wishes to do. Farmers in our study, clearly link many of the positive aspects of their profession, in one way or another to being autonomous actors who individually own and decide what, when and how things get produced on their farm. As one fruit farmer vividly explained:

[1] Federal government agency responsible for food chain safety

> "*most importantly, I became self-employed because I was a free person. Then much freer than now. […] I could eventually do my own planning in my work, that was my freedom for me."* (male, 58, Fruit farmer).

Another farmer went on about this in the following manner:

> **Farmer**: *"you are your own boss. If you say 'I'm not doing anything today, no one will complain."*
> **Interviewer**: *and do you say that to yourself sometimes?*
> **Farmer**: (laughs) *No, that's difficult. […] But it's an advantage of being independent. But if you do nothing for a week, you will have nothing as well. You have to do your job. Going to work [as an employee] is something, and being self-employed is something else"* (female, 47, vegetable farmer).

These values of autonomy and freedom are contrasted with a set of characteristics attributed to classic wage labour such as dependence, hierarchy and the overall dullness of doing 'office' or 'factory' jobs. Not coincidentally then, it is particularly when these values of freedom and autonomy are being threatened that are supposedly an intrinsic part of what it means to be a farmer, that farmers experience frustration but also a negative impact on their wellbeing. The foremost reason that farmers hereby feel threatened in their autonomy is through an increasing regulation and administrative burdens.

Some authors have hereby shown that the self-employed, including farmers, are prepared to keep working for less income since they consider aspects of their work process itself as valuable as it is linked to being autonomous (Benz and Frey, 2008). The importance farmers in our study ascribe to their sense of autonomy hereby parallels Benz and Frey's argument. Many of the positive aspects why farmers (still) like to do what they do is clearly linked to self-employment as a professional category. The willingness to work more for less and the mentioned connectedness to the job also raises the question whether this possibly makes farmers more susceptible to stress related mental, social and physical problems (such as depression, illness or burnout).

• *Workload*

Quite tellingly, 45% of farmers indicate that their work exhausts them physically as they experience physical discomforts, migraine, fatigue, exhaustion… Administration is hereby mentioned as adding significantly to the overall workload. Administrative work hereby often needs to be done late in the evening, resulting in a lack of sleep and reducing the possibility for normal social contact with family and friends. Most importantly, a lot of this administrative labour is understood as highly compulsory and adding little to the economic viability of the farm or the quality of the agricultural products.
The necessity, as a farmer, to constantly having to reinvent and adapt yourself to changes are experienced as problematic as farmers feel insufficiently recognized or rewarded in the effort they undertake. To put it in Burton's (2004) words:

> "*The problem is how to introduce these changes without destroying the existing farming culture […] If changes are implemented too quickly and farmers see neither the economic nor social value of continuing in agriculture, many farmers/farm families may not adapt but*

> *may simply choose to leave agriculture and thus, within one generation, decades or even centuries of experience, knowledge and local history could simply be lost" (211).*

This is indeed a process that one sees happening as regulation and administration is mentioned by some as one of the most decisive reasons to consider or effectively quitting farming. One can hereby detect a sentiment that can be labelled as 'administrative fatigue'. This administrative fatigue needs to be understood as more than a mere frustration over the regulations imposed on farmers these days. Rather, this is a process wherein in a gradual manner, farmers no longer do the effort to inform themselves about changing regulations or even comply to some of the regulations. As such, this administrative fatigue often constitutes a crucial component of a more long-term process wherein farmers finally decide to quit farming, or, at least, no longer wish to hand over their farm to their offspring. In general, this 'administrative fatigue' is hereby combined with a precarious economic situation and growing frustration over the high workload that goes in managing an economically viable farm and the limited financial rewards this brings.

• *Societal disrespect*

Lastly, the increase in administrative burdens was seen as proof a wider incomprehension or even outright disrespect for farming and farmers. Constant reference is hereby being made to rules and regulations that are understood to be exaggerated and disproportionately targeted at the farming sector.

> *"I don't understand that they don't understand that things politically can't go on like this. All those rules […] which also don't have an added value to your company itself. If you could say that this or that has an added value, and that it can be economically justified so you yourself also gain something from it, then I can agree with that. But there are a thousand and one silly things!"* (female, 62, dairy farmer).

A large portion of the rules and regulations are hereby being understood as being out of sync with the daily workings of managing a farm and seen as following a highly bureaucratic logic, made up by people sitting in government offices having no affinity at all with agriculture. A truly contentious point in this regard are the different inspections carried out by different governmental agencies. In the first instance, these were experienced as stressful events that could lead to warnings, fines etc. all potentially having a negative impact on the sustainable future of the farm. The fear of an unforeseen inspection or even sanctions when the farm is not perfectly compliant with regulations hereby results in constant pressure.

> "*when the telephone rings with the announcement that they will come and check the Global GAP tomorrow at 8 am, or the papers of the VLM[2] or VMM[3], 9 out of 10 won't sleep that night"* (male, 63, fruit farmer).

In addition, they were understood as unwanted incursions on private property and a carefully balanced labour management. Also in terms of having to "*suddenly make time for the inspections*" while other

[2] Flemish government agency responsible for inspections related to nutrients and manure management
[3] Flemish government agency responsible for inspections related to water quality

tasks on the farm can't wait. Therefore, these inspections were seen by many as lacking any respect and displays of utmost arrogance.

**Financial insecurity**

Different farmers indicate that prices for their produce are highly volatile, not only affecting the economic viability of the farm but also adding to an overall feeling of insecurity and uncertainty. In addition, it was often mentioned that costs for investment are clearly on the rise, further adding to financial insecurity and high degrees of indebtedness. Also, farmers indicate that they feel a constant pressure for continued expansion and further investments; a pressure they have difficulties to meet considering, amongst others, the high financial costs for investments they have to make.
For obvious reasons, those farmers experiencing financial problems indicated that this had a serious impact on their overall wellbeing. With this paper, we do not have the ambition to delve into the more objective reasons why a particular farm is (no longer) economically viable. Though highly relevant in itself, this research question would need another methodological approach. Suffice to say here that the interviews clearly indicate that many farmers in Flanders are still confronted with high levels of financial insecurity and some even experience outright poverty, as is the case in other 'wealthy' European countries (Contzen and Crettaz, 2019):

> "*today I took a picture of my refrigerator. If you would show that to a normal person, they would cry. You do have a capital that you are building with animals and so on. But, right now, the month has been so bad that I can't buy food at the end"* (male, 36, dairy farmer).

What is most important within the framework of this paper is the manner in which farmers make sense of these financial problems and how they contextualize this within a broader and more structural socio-economic framework. Throughout our analysis, 2 aspects have been distilled that are particularly relevant in this regard. First, there is a clear sentiment that the low prices farmers receive for their produce is not just the outcome of some accidental market mechanisms, but a much deeper lying expression of the lack of societal respect for their work and produce. In other words, the price they receive is not seen as an adequate expression of the real value, frequently mirrored to the delivered labour input, of the product. As many farmers told throughout the interview, despite the fact that they are the ones responsible for the production of one the most essential commodities in society, that is: food, they do not feel sufficiently appreciated for this. Due to the overall declining number of farmers in Flemish society and their weak political representation in the capital.

• *Value/societal disrespect discussion*

First, many farmers express frustration that their many hours of hard and dedicated labour are not valorised and sufficiently translated into, what is considered, a 'fair income'.

> "*in fact, every farmer should be able to buy a fancy car. I wouldn't do that, I don't want that, but it should be possible. [if you consider the hours of work] maybe we are satisfied with too little as farmers. That's something, when predicting the future, that won't keep working out. There is a limit to that. If you have to do even more for animal welfare, environment or water purification, we want to do all those things, but you get nothing in return financially"* (male, 39, dairy farmer).

> "*it is as if a farmer is doomed to keep producing at rock bottom prices […] it's a beautiful job, but it's a shame they make it this hard... Sometimes you see on TV that people say that we need the farmers. But we don't feel that! Today we don't feel appreciated for the products we produce by the supermarkets or buyers who come on the farm! "* (male, 36, dairy farmer).

• *A weak negotiating position*

Farmers perceive their position in the market as weak and subordinate, best exemplified by the low price they receive for their agricultural produce. In addition, it is being mentioned that farmers too often do not receive a fair price and that they have no control whatsoever over these prices. Importantly, these financial problems and low prices are perceived as evidence of an overall impotence of farmers. Farmers see themselves as price takes that are increasingly subjected to external (f)actors that determine whether their efforts result in success or failure. This perceived powerlessness weighs heavily on farmers. Besides the impact of the low prices on farm profitability and income, farmers struggled with their role as price takers because low prices can simply undo all the efforts made to develop a successful farm. A staff member of a farmers' aid organisation strongly summed up this feeling:

> "*how is it possible that, as an entrepreneur, your success is not dependent on your management capacity or entrepreneurial performance, but on sheer luck?"* (male, farmers' aid organisation).

The perceived powerlessness of farmers to influence their received financial remuneration or to weigh on the development of regulations and policy is difficult. Many pointed at the role of middlemen situated downstream of the farm as the ones who were responsible for bad pricing, such as food processors and distributors (dairies, auctions, supermarkets etc). A significant part referred to these actors as 'those factories'; big players who have influence, power and are able to put pressure on farmers, or even squeeze them out:

> *"the dream of the factory is that they no longer need farmers. That they themselves can decide to grow those potatoes there. So what do we see now? […] That those factories start buying up larger pieces of land themselves*" (male, 36, dairy farmer).

However, farmers also indicate actors further down the commodity chain, mainly the final consumer, as responsible for low prices. Many farmers told us that they believe society in general has no knowledge and is no longer in touch with agriculture. This would not only affect the price they want to pay, but it also prevents them from understanding farmers' difficulties, resulting in a decreasing support for farmers. The fact that farmers don't feel understood or taken into account by society in general is a major source of irritation and stress for farmers in Flanders.

Furthermore, the interviewees mentioned that there is a lack of representation and influence on political decision making to try and resolve some of these pressures. Many referred to the observation that there were too few farmers left to be properly represented, and that organizing collectively is essential and necessary:

"*one of the big problems in agriculture is that we are only a few, we are only about one percent of the population. We don't weigh on politics anymore, that's normal. No politician is going to take us into account. Who makes the laws? The politicians, that's true. But the unions like the catholic and the socialist unions can still weigh on policy, to form one voice"* (male, 60, dairy farmer).

## Discussion and conclusion

### Wellbeing, societal alienation and the importance of the collective self

As has been explained above, a large majority of the farmers expressed a sentiment that there are broader structural changes working against farmers and agriculture more in general. As a result, many farmers increasingly feel alienated from society and express a great deal of misunderstanding and disrespect. Many farmers hereby indicate that this process of societal alienation does not only play for their individual case, but that it applies for the larger agricultural sector as a collective professional group. Based on our analysis, in line with other research (*e.g.* Kallstrom and Ljung 2005; Burton, 2004), it can hereby be stated that societal appreciation and recognition indeed are feelings significantly contributing to a person's wellbeing. A big part of appreciation flows from how others view farmers, or how farmers believe they are perceived by society as a whole. Farmers themselves actively translate specific factors of stress into a vocabulary claiming that very few people still have a connection to farming anymore, that society no longer understands them and that still fewer want to take it up for their interests. The latter grievance mainly come up expressed in the context of the idea that farmers are being politically 'overlooked' –either due to their electoral share and demographic decline of the Flemish farming population, or the political leverage and power of other actors in the commodity chain. Other researchers are extending these feelings of being 'left behind' as something present in many rural communities and areas, possibly strengthening support for right-wing populist agenda's (Bilewicz, 2020; Ferrari, 2020; Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020). Within the literature, researchers seem to be divided on the main drivers of this feeling of being overlooked, and the resulting breeding ground for right-wing populist support, between those pushing cultural factors and those who privilege economic factors.

One arena where this dynamic plays out fiercely, is the large public debate about climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, etc. In particular conventional farmers not engaged in organic or other 'alternative' forms of agriculture, raise the issue that they feel patronised, depicted and used as a scapegoat in these debates as agriculture is disproportionately targeted with little room for rebuttal or input given by farmers themselves. The overall negative media coverage feeds the impression of being 'under attack'. For some this went as far as being 'unwanted' by society: "*what kind of feeling does society still have about us? They don't care. […] Everyone is in their own world right now. The environment is central now. People want quality of life, a job, free time and beautiful and healthy nature. We no longer fit in with that, despite the fact that we are badly needed for food!"* (Male, 58, Fruit farmer). In many farmers' perception, there is no consideration in public debate on the specific nature of farming, where due to long term investments and natural production processes, farmers cannot immediately turn things around and start producing in a different way, whether they want to or not. Many also vividly claimed that they feel patronised since "*others always feel the need to instruct us how things should be done"*. It is against this background that the impact of a stress factor such as regulation and administrative burdens needs to be understood. As indicated by many farmers, the adaptations

demanded from farmers to meet targets in terms of biodiversity, reduction of pollution, etc. are often considered as unrealistic, further adding to an already high workload and oftentimes increasing financial insecurity and stress.
Another arena where these sentiments of disrespect and alienation are felt concerns the contempt for the many hours of labour and hard work that goes in managing an economically sustainable farm. As indicated by many farmers in our study and in literature, working hard constitutes a core value of what it means to be a farmer (Dessein and Nevens, 2007). This is also something that differentiates farmers from other sectors of society who (supposedly) can enjoy holidays and free time and simply return home from work at 5 pm. Whilst many indicated that as such they can cope with long working hours, it was mainly the sentiment that the 'outside world' no longer understands the hard work that goes into managing a viable farm and producing a high-quality product that frustrates many. This feeling is clearly expressed in the following passage wherein a female farmer expresses how the outside world has become totally ignorant of what farmers have to endure:

> *" … you see, it would be better if they treat wage labourers, …, the same way they treat farmers. If they could only do this to them. If they could only do that. Then everybody will start realizing how hard we have to work" […] ' and not just wage labourers, but also the ministers and those stupid idiots who invent I do not know what and make it into a law… let them be known what real labour is'*

As indicated above, this issue of long working days is a crucial one when trying to grasp a stress factor such as financial insecurity. Whilst, for obvious reasons, financial insecurity has a direct negative impact on the individual wellbeing of a farmer, there was also a deeper lying issue at stake here. That is the fact that people, putting everything they have to them in producing the food for people, have the fundamental right to be valued for this labour through decent prices and a sustainable livelihood.

**Wellbeing and the future of farming**

As explained by multiple informants, financial insecurity and regulation/administrative burdens are not just things randomly 'falling from the air' but need to be understood against the background of a changing socio-political and economic landscape. Farmers realise that the balance between positive and negative influences experienced through their job, which subsequently influences their wellbeing, is fundamentally socio-politically determined. What we mean by this is, following authors like van der ploeg (2003, 2011, 2013), Bryant and Garnham (2013) and Burton (2004), that farmers themselves point at structuring dynamics of power within – and beyond – the agricultural sector together with societal tendencies as determining factors to their wellbeing. Hereto respondents looked at the market and government as determining social institutions. They understand very well that the agricultural sector is being structured in a particular way, that there is nothing 'natural' about things like the market price, the valorisation of their labour and efforts or the dominance of certain ideologies towards agricultural development and models. They recognize that these aspects are determined by social relationships, that can be altered.

This feeling of being 'under attack' and being misunderstood as a socio-professional group is therefore closely connected to the perception that certain types of agriculture have little future in Flanders and might come to an end, something that may be exacerbated by the recent nitrogen issue and related

debates in Flanders. This is not understood as a 'natural' evolution but as the outcome of political decisions and the manner in which upstream and downstream markets are organized. As written above, there exists a perception that the profits in agriculture do not go to farmers themselves but that these are reaped by a set of intermediaries. Regulations are often understood to work against economically viable farming, purely following an abstract administrative logic not attuned to the daily practice of running a farm. Throughout the interviews, different farmers hereby expressed some sort of hopelessness about the future of their own farm and the sector more in general. This seems to be particularly the case for so-called conventional forms of family farming, which are still dominant within Flemish agriculture. These conventional family farms feel squeezed between two types of agricultural models. On the one had there are the so-called alternative models of organic farming, short supply chain initiatives, community supported agriculture, etc., that are understood to be 'in line' with growing societal demands for clean air, organic food, biodiversity, etc. On the other hand, there are the large-scale models of farming with high capital investments, hired labour and state of the art technology. Despite a body of evidence (Oostindie *et al.*, 2013) showing how large-scale farms are not inherently more resilient, a strong perception existed that the growth based models of intensive agriculture, will manage to deal with rising investment costs and increasingly smaller profits in the future, in contrast to their own family models of farming.

## References

Alarcón Ferrari C., 2020. Contemporary Land Questions in Sweden, Far-Right Populist Strategies and Challenges for Inclusionary Rural Development, *Sociologia Ruralis* 60, 833-856, https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12319.

Benz M., Frey B.S., 2008. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization The value of doing what you like : Evidence from the self-employed in 23 countries 68*, 445-455, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2006.10.014.

Burke P., 2007. Identity Control Theory, *In* Ritzer G. (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Co., 2202–07

Contzen S., Crettaz E., 2019. Being a poor farmer in a wealthy country: A Swiss case study. *Sociologia Ruralis*, *59*(3), 393–418. https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12230.

Creswell J., 2003. *Research design; qualitative, quantitative and mixed method approaches*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Deffontaines N., 2014. La souffrance sociale chez les agriculteurs, *Études Rurales 193*(1), 13-24.

Dessein J., Nevens F., 2007. "I'm sad to be glad". An analysis of farmers' pride in Flanders, *Sociologia Ruralis 47*(3), 273-292, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2007.00437.x.

Et R., 2020. *Tout faire pour l'éviter ! 40*.

FOD Economie, 2019. *Kerncijfers landbouw* 28, https://doi.org/s000.01N/2016.

Grint K., 2005. *The Sociology of Work: Introduction*, Polity, Cambridge, UK. Haggerty.

Guilluy C., 2014. *La France périphérique : Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires*, France, Flammarion.

Helliwell J., Layard R., Sachs J., 2012. *World happiness report*, Earth institute Columbia university.

Judd F., Jackson H., Fraser C., Murray G., Robins G., Komiti A., 2006. Understanding suicide in Australian farmers, *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 41, 1-10.

K¨allstrom H.N., Ljung M., 2005. Social sustainability and collaborative learning, *Ambio* 34 (4-5), 376-382.

Lobley M., Johnson G., Reed M., Winter M., Little J., 2004. *Rural Stress Review*, Report to Rural Stress Information Network, Stonleigh, Warwickshire, by the Centre for Rural Research, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

Mamonova N., Franquesa J., 2020. Populism, Neoliberalism and Agrarian Movements in Europe. Understanding Rural Support for Right-Wing Politics and Looking for Progressive Solutions, *Sociologia Ruralis 60*(4), 710-731, https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12291.

Mortelmans D., 2013. *Kwalitatieve onderzoekstechnieken*, Acco, Leuven.

Page A., Fragar L., 2002. Suicide in Australian farming, 1988e1997, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 36.

Pearlin L., 1989. The sociological study of stress, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 30, 241-256.

Price L., Evans N. 2009. From stress to distress: Conceptualizing the British family farming patriarchal way of life, *Journal of Rural Studies* 25 (2009), 1-11

Oostindie H., Douwe Van Der Ploeg J., Van Broekhuizen R., 2013. *Buffercapaciteit - Bedrijfstijlen in de melkveelhouderij, volatiele markten en kengetallen*.

Sentinelles R. agri., 2018. *Chefs d'exploitation 372 suicides soit près de 2 suicides par jour en 2015, Salariés agricoles 233 suicides*, 1-20.

Slee P., 1988. The personal cost of farming: the result of a phone-in on rural health, *Health Education Research: Theory and Practice* 3, 331-335.

Swisher R., Elder G., Lorenz F., Conger R., 1998. The long arm of the farm: how an occupation structures exposure and vulnerability to stressors across role domains, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 39, 72-89.