



ESSI webinar "Social innovations in/with/for the welfare state in rural areas"

The Belgian case study – Care farming

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Introduction to the case study



- Focus: Care farming in Belgium for individuals with burnout
- **Care farming** = therapeutic use of agricultural activities for mental and physical well-being
- Linked to 'green care' and nature-assisted therapy
- Growing across Europe, with strong roots in the Netherlands and the UK



Objectives and innovation focus



- Novel application: Using care farming for burnout recovery
- *Soins Verts – Groene Zorg* collective leads Belgian pilot
- Not a replacement for therapy, but a first step towards reintegration
- Represents a 'socialisation of care' and involves various actors

Objectives and innovation focus



Fulfils four key social innovation criteria:

- Satisfying unmet needs
- Innovative solutions
- Transforming social structures
- Enhancing societal capacity to act



Rising mental health concerns in Belgium

- Anxiety/depression increased from 10% (2018) to 25% (2022)
- 32.9% of manual workers and 25.5% of office workers at risk of burnout (2024)
- Burnout and depression led to 118,000 long-term sick leaves in 2021
- Estimated cost to public finances: ~5% of Belgium's GDP

Policy innovation: Green care prescription



- Proposed legal framework to enable 'Green Care' prescriptions
- Involves therapeutic farming or forestry activities
- Aimed at individuals with mild to moderate mental health issues
- Goal: facilitate reintegration into workforce and ease public costs
- Supported by public, private, and civil society stakeholders



What is care farming?

- Combines agricultural work with therapeutic support
- Activities include: feeding animals, sowing/harvesting, work in the farm, selling produce
- Promotes mental and physical health through contact with nature
- Seen as 'grounding' and healing by care recipients

What is care farming?



- Structured routines: fixed days, repeated activities (e.g., feeding animals)
- Flexible tasks tailored to abilities and interests
- Supports development of skills, routine, and confidence
- Personal growth often emerges gradually
- Farm work \neq formal reintegration, but is meaningful
- Rebuilds a sense of purpose and social connection
- Helps care recipients regain status and self-worth



Care farming in Belgium: Current landscape



- A therapeutic and social support tool for vulnerable groups
- Activities include horticulture, animal care, tool use, and outdoor work
- Supports skill-building, inclusion, and well-being
- Used by people with disabilities, mental health conditions, and long-term unemployment



Regional development and support



- Flanders: advanced system with subsidies, legal frameworks, and certifications
- Wallonia: growing interest, but less structured
- Public subsidies more accessible in Flanders
- Emerging networks in Wallonia focusing on sustainability and inclusion



Partnerships, challenges, and outlook



- Partnerships: *Steunpunt Groene Zorg* supports training and coordination
- Challenges: Funding instability in Wallonia, need for standardisation
- Outlook: Growing awareness and potential for policy integration
- Goal: Formal recognition in social services and public health systems

Green Care Programme: Concept and aim



- Led by *Terre de Vie Foundation* and partners
- Proposes 'Green Care' prescriptions for burnout and depression
- Involves nature-based activities (e.g., farming, forestry) as therapy
- Goal: prevent long-term incapacity and support reintegration into work

For more information: <https://www.soinsverts-groenezorg.be/>



Green Care Programme: Concept and aim



- Pilot phase with 6 to 8 care farms
- Inspired by successful UK and Dutch models
- Typical steps:
 - Medical referral for Green Care
 - Assignment to care farms
 - Participation in activities: gardening, animal care, forestry, etc.



Target group



- Focus: work-related burnout with ≥ 3 -month sick leave
- Key symptoms: exhaustion, emotional regulation issues, mental distancing
- Aims to break the cycle of disability and promote gradual recovery



EU support and social innovation



- Supported by the EU CAP Network as an innovative approach
- Promotes multifunctional farming and links urban-rural areas
- Recognised as a form of social innovation enhancing cohesion and rural development
- Aligns with EU goals on sustainability and inclusive growth



Leading countries and societal shifts



- Pioneers: Netherlands, Italy, and the UK
- Integrates vulnerable populations into farm life
- Supports both rehabilitation and social reintegration
- Part of a wider move toward community-based mental health and social care
- Enhances well-being and rural sustainability



Research methodology



- Case study combines desk research and fieldwork
- **Desk research** covered:
 - Care farming literature
 - Mental health and burnout
 - Global megatrends and their labour market effects



Fieldwork: Interviews and focus groups



- 10 in-person **interviews**:
 - 6 programme participants
 - 2 health professionals
 - 2 farmers
- 2 **focus groups** with 12 diverse participants
- Participants included academics, practitioners, and care farm staff



Addressing societal needs through care farming



- Responds to rising mental health and social care challenges
- Serves vulnerable groups: mental illness, disability, isolation
- Aligns with Portales' 1st social innovation element: satisfaction of needs
- Provides access to nature, social interaction, and purposeful work



Innovation: Blending agriculture and care



- Unique model combining therapeutic goals with farming practices
- Promotes personal growth while supporting sustainable farming
- Aligns with Portales' 2nd element: innovation of the solution



Transforming social structures



- Empowers care recipients to take active roles in recovery
- Breaks traditional patient-caregiver hierarchies
- Broadens the role of farmers into therapeutic providers
- Meets Portales' 3rd element: changing social structures and relationships



Enhancing societal capacity to act



- Community-based collaboration and volunteering
- Builds social networks, knowledge exchange, and support systems
- Boosts personal and community resilience
- Demonstrates Portales' 4th element: increased capacity to act





Thank you!

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