

# Empowering Belgian farmers by building capacity for short food supply chains

Providing specialised business skills for farmers to improve their competitiveness and resilience.

## EAFRD-funded projects

**Location:** Flanders, Belgium

**Programming period:** 2014-2020

**Priority:** P6 - Social inclusion and local development

**Focus Area:** Local development

**Measures:** M16 - Cooperation

<b>Funding:</b>	Total budget	199 375 (EUR)
	EAFRD	64 797 (EUR)
	National/Regional	64 797 (EUR)
	Private	69 781 (EUR)

**Timeframe:** 01/09/2021 - 31/12/2023

**Project promoter:** Hogeschool Vives

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## Summary

The project 'Empowering Farmers' worked with short food chain producers in Flanders, Belgium. It followed a previous initiative that provided information about business improvements. Because the information did not trigger sufficient action, the decision was made to become more proactive in supporting farmers in how to move from a good intention to actual implementation of a planned action.

The project provided support in two subsequent steps. First, the customer journey was mapped through an in-depth interview and a mystery shopping exercise with each participant farmer. Second, bespoke guidance was provided on how to implement actions via three distinct methods. This included individual coaching sessions, participation in learning networks, or creating and using mentoring via a 'Board of Confidants'.

At the completion stage of the project, each participant farmer had implemented two actions on average, and was more aware and confident about how to activate their already existing business knowledge and skills.

## Project results

The following results were obtained:

- Eighty business improvement actions were implemented across 40 farms and at least 140 students were reached within the project period.
- One digital toolbox was created. It contains 24 thematic info sheets and eight webinars that are publicly available.
- The participating farmers gained insights and improved skills in aspects such as cost calculation, business models, customer experience and loyalty, marketing, store design, storytelling, work-life balance and communication.
- The project led to a professionalisation of short supply chain farm shops.
- The project provided agricultural students and young farmers with knowledge and hands-on experience in short supply chain companies.
- Through the training and advice, the participating entrepreneurs became more aware of their strengths and potential, and gained the confidence to further professionalise their businesses.





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## Key lessons and recommendations

- The participants became more aware of the fact that they already had the necessary knowledge and skills to improve their businesses, thereby empowering their self-esteem and confidence.
- Farmers can benefit from guidance and/or a sounding board to relate to, particularly if they find themselves in an isolated situation.
- Effective coaching incorporates a step-by-step approach. The following sequence of project delivery is recommended - map the initial situation, set up a specific action plan with priorities and timings that have been set by the participants themselves, and follow up with meetings on a regular basis.

## Context

The former CAP-funded project 'Farmer Business+' specifically targeted around 2 100 short food chain suppliers in West Flanders, Belgium, and provided them with information about improving the competitiveness of their business. While the companies acknowledged the need for business improvements and expressed their good intentions to address them, researchers found that most farmers did not have either the time or confidence to convert their plans into action. The conclusion was that there was a lack of motivation and clarity about how to take step-by-step action. To overcome this, it was felt that companies would need further assistance like a mentor to fall back on. Such mentors could support, motivate and guide the farms through their business improvements with solid intermediate goals and feedback.

Led by the University of Vives, the project involved, among others, two Flemish government organisations (POM supporting entrepreneurship and Westtoer focusing on tourism development), and a support organisation for agricultural entrepreneurs (Steunpunt).

## Objectives

The main goal of the project was to empower farmers in short food supply chains, assisting them to independently address business issues to make their enterprise more resilient to competition from the retail sector and other companies. The ambition was to align better the services provided by project promoters to short supply chain producers.

The objectives were to:

- Provide intensive hands-on guidance to 40 farms.
- Offer bespoke guidance, tailored to the profile of each company including process-oriented assistance, creative advice and knowledge input.
- Achieve an average of two business improvement actions per farm.
- Assess whether a 'Board of Confidants' could be a valuable and feasible measure for short supply chain companies.
- Integrate the learning of the project into the curriculum of professional bachelor education for young, future farmers.



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## Activities

**Step 1** - registration and mapping of customer journeys:

- An invitation was sent to the network of West Flanders short supply chain companies, resulting in 40 farmers being selected for project participation.
- Each participant was visited by two consultants who mapped their customer journey focusing on strengths, distinctive capacities, opportunities and challenges.
- To cover the customer perspective, each participant also received feedback from a mystery shopper.
- Following the analysis of the findings, the participants choose a maximum of three improvement actions/action points relevant to their distinct business situation.

**Step 2** - provision of guidance for business improvement actions. Depending on the selected actions, each participant could choose how they wanted to be supported. Additional external expertise was offered as an incentive and as a reward for commitment. The following three delivery methods were available:

- Receiving individual coaching by project staff - farm time management, process guidance, and motivation were the main issues, a coach facilitated action item approaches and scheduled quarterly follow-up meetings. Written reports made the agreements concrete. The coach took a sounding board role, and offered ideas for solutions and follow-up actions. The implementation and costs connected with the actual improvement actions were borne by the company.
- Joining a learning network - in this method, learning from the exchange with experts and/or peers with practical experience was key and fostered the exchange of knowledge and co-creation between the participants. Companies with similar action points came together in one of four learning networks, focusing on topics such as customer loyalty, store design, storytelling, and communication.

- Accessing a 'Board of Confidants' - the agricultural industry has unique characteristics (family labour, seasonality of production, etc.). Farm managers are often on their own, which can create a lot of pressure. Bespoke to each participant, the Board of Confidants would consist of an engaged group of acquaintances, friends or family members providing mentoring inputs from outside the agricultural sector. Board meetings followed action points and were co-led by project staff. Over time, the role of the consultant changed from that of a leader/moderator to that of an observer so that the participants could continue independently after the completion of the project. An undergraduate student accompanied this approach by studying the conditions for a successful and sustainable implementation of such a business mentor Board. The experience was pooled into a roadmap.

## Main results

- Eighty business improvement actions were implemented across 40 farms. Twenty-five (62.5%) of the participating farmers were women.
- One digital toolbox was created. It contains 24 thematic info sheets and eight webinars that are publicly available.
- At least 140 students were reached within the project period.
- The participating farmers gained insights and improved skills in aspects such as cost calculation, business models, customer experience, and marketing (USP profiling, social media planning, attractive packaging, etc.).
- The project led to a professionalisation of short supply chain farm shops (modifications to the shop's layout, furnishing, assortment, lighting, etc.).
- This approach is transferable to other areas and sectors where the main goal is the improvement of business skills and knowledge. The methodology is clearly structured into three approaches all seeking to empower the participants to become central actors taking responsibility to achieve long-term change.



- > The project provided agricultural students and young farmers with knowledge and hands-on experience in short supply chain companies. For example, the digital toolbox does not only empower current farmers, but also offers the next generation of young farmers a head-start in the future.
- > The project focused on entrepreneurial skills such as marketing, cost-price calculation, work-life balance and social skills. Through the training and advice, the participating entrepreneurs became more aware of their strengths and potential and gained the confidence to further professionalise their businesses.

## Key lessons and recommendations

- > The participants became more aware of the fact that they already had the necessary knowledge and skills to improve their businesses. The empowerment actions increased the self-esteem and confidence of the participants by motivating and encouraging them to put their plans into action.
- > Farmers benefit from guidance and/or a sounding board to relate to. Due to the distinct characteristics of the agricultural sector, small supply chain providers often feel isolated and benefit substantially from participating in measures such as learning networks, or Boards of Confidants, to address issues jointly.
- > Effective coaching incorporates a step-by-step approach. The following sequence of project delivery is recommended: map the initial situation, set up a specific action plan with priorities and timings that have been set by the participants themselves; and follow-up with meetings on a regular basis.

*“I just want to tell you that I am very happy that we had the opportunity to work on this project. It gave me a fresh, new perspective on everything and allowed me to adapt or implement things that at first, I had lacked the courage to undertake.”*

Emily from the Baljuw-Farm

### Additional information:

[www.vives.be/nl/onderzoek/agro-en-biotechnologie/empowering-farmers](http://www.vives.be/nl/onderzoek/agro-en-biotechnologie/empowering-farmers)

<https://inagro.be/projecten/empowering-farmers>

<https://inagro.be/themas/landbouwverbreding/korteketentoolbox/klantenbeleving>

