

Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities

Thematic Group - 1st meeting

The first Thematic Group (TG) meeting allowed members to get to know each other, to reach a common understanding of the root causes of mental health issues faced by farmers and farming communities, and to learn from practical initiatives across the EU. TG members exchanged thoughts on the key ingredients for an efficient provision of farmers' mental health support and discussed the next steps of the TG.

Setting the scene

TG members were welcomed to their first meeting by the EU CAP Network team. In the [opening presentation](#), **Alessia Musumarra (EU CAP Network)** noted the TG's primary objectives and stressed that the TG composition is structured to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and well-balanced outcomes, with 40 members from 18 countries and three representatives of European organisations.

During an **icebreaker activity**, participants shared their reasons for joining the TG. These included the challenges faced by farmers, the pressure to produce sustainably, economic uncertainties, the need for a holistic approach to farmers' mental health at EU level, and the importance of increasing awareness in policy.



Professor Sally Shortall (CAP Implementation Contact Point, non-permanent expert), gave a brief framing presentation on farmers' mental health. She noted that terms such as 'mental health' and 'mental well-being' are complex to define and often used

interchangeably. However, they are not exact synonyms, and by using them as such, we run the risk of overlooking the importance of attending to well-being. In short, defining and using these terms is key. Professor Shortall explained that mental health includes psychological, emotional, and social well-being, and is also affected by factors like economics, politics, geography, environment, social dynamics and culture. Increased concern about suicides in farming communities, stress, anxiety, and occupational safety health measures emerged as major challenges. A key aspect in farming is the importance of work-life balance, as the workplace is often also the home.

Event Information

Date: 27 February 2024

Location: Virtual meeting

Organisers: EU CAP Network

Participants: 48 participants from 18 EU Member States and three EU stakeholders' representatives, including farmers and farmers' organisations, Managing Authorities, National Networks, advisory services, European stakeholder organisations, the European Commission, national/regional stakeholder organisations and researchers.

Outcomes: Discussion on key ingredients for effective formal support to the mental health of farmers and farming communities; exchanges on challenges and solutions at farm and community level.

Web page: https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/events/1st-meeting-thematic-group-supporting-mental-health-farmers-and-farming-communities_en

Professor Shortall introduced the European Commission (EC) **Communication** on "A comprehensive approach to mental health", which defines mental health as an integral part of health. She emphasised the three guiding principles of the EC approach, that are centred on prevention, access to mental healthcare, and on treatment and reintegration. Additionally, she highlighted the strategy's advocacy for horizontal initiatives across policies.

Four practical examples from Member States were presented, each addressing different components. **Embrace FARM** in Ireland emerged as a grassroots organisation supporting those suffering mental health issues following fatal farm incidents. **Caisse Centrale de la Mutualité Social Agricole (CCMSA)** in France focuses on preventing suicides in agriculture through a comprehensive national plan. **Finland's Farmers' Social Insurance Institution (MELA)** integrated mental health support within its pension insurance framework. Lastly, **FARMRes**, an Erasmus+ Project, aimed to raise awareness and provide strategies and tools for mental health in agriculture.



Each of these initiatives demonstrates different approaches to mental health support, with a focus on prevention, detection and aid. Professor Shortall highlighted the need for a coordinated and comprehensive approach, in view of the complex challenges faced by farmers.

Professor Shortall finished her introduction with some key questions about the responsibility for mental health initiatives in EU farming; the preference for local or national initiatives; and the long-term sustainability of mental health efforts. She highlighted the challenges of short-term, programme-focused EU funding and emphasised the need to consider the diversity of national contexts. She also reflected on the institutionalisation of bottom-up initiatives and emphasised the need to find a balance between a systematic approach and local appeal.

The ensuing discussion with TG members revolved around supporting skilled organisations that resonate with the agricultural community and addressing the specific challenges in mental health within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Interactive session

The interactive session was dedicated to ways to address mental health challenges in farming communities. Three groups of TG members rotated from one topic to the next in three phases, building successively on each other's inputs.



Each group discussed **the causes and effects of mental health issues** and then considered practical interventions at the farm and local communities' levels, and the access to formal mental health support. The structured discussions emphasised the importance of diverse perspectives and real-world experiences. Reporting back to the plenary, rapporteurs shared the main outcomes of the discussion.



Addressing mental health at the farm level requires the breaking of taboos, promoting conversations about emotions and creating peer groups as a first line of support. TG members stressed the role of the media and of women in farming communities in discussing mental health and said that learning networks for women in farming have proved very helpful. The discussion identified the importance of establishing a local support system based on trust, involving communities and on promoting available options. Successful tools include helplines and information dissemination,

e.g. through veterinarians. TG members stressed the importance of mentoring and knowledge transfer, particularly for young farmers, recognising the significance of intergenerational connections and the importance of family relationships. Societal support overall was mentioned as a crucial element.



Inclusivity was identified as a key starting point for **community-level mental health support**. Initiatives across Europe, from community events and from fundraising campaigns were discussed and clustered based on similarities. Examples included trained volunteers providing support, as well as training initiatives open to various community actors, who can then provide support based on the needs of their community. The creation of an 'early intervention' network to detect farmers under pressure and to signpost them to available help was highlighted. The role of women's organisations in organising activities and providing mentoring programmes was acknowledged. Geographical differences emerged, with northern Europe commonly supporting farmers as entrepreneurs and southern Europe adopting a more community-based approach. The discussions then moved on to key ingredients, focusing on tailor-made help, awareness campaigns, community commitment and sustained funding.



Tools and policies which enhance **access to formal mental health support** must prioritise farmers and their families. Geographical barriers can be addressed through mobile health teams, online counselling, and helplines. Local networks, such as early intervention or psychologists' networks with local branches, help improve local access to mental health support, including in remote areas. For better outreach, training could be provided to advisors and also to veterinarians and other actors working directly with farmers. Comprehensive training for farmers, awareness campaigns and tools like farm relief services were thought vital.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of a holistic approach, including e.g. mobile and online tools, national action plans (such as in the French national plan to prevent suicide), networking, and the inclusion of mental health checks into farmers compulsory health insurance.

Cross-cutting elements emerging from the group discussions included the importance of awareness-raising campaigns, holistic approaches to farmers' mental health and networks; as well as the need for integrated, sustained strategies to address mental health challenges in farming communities.



Closing remarks and next steps



Margaret Bateson-Missen (DG AGRI) summarised the day's discussions. She emphasised the crucial need to recognise farmers as individuals and to advocate local networking support, funding for initiatives at both local and Member State levels and the importance of a forward-looking approach to the next CAP, including better support for such initiatives.

The discussions had reiterated the various pressures faced by farmers, with growing acknowledgment not only within DG AGRI but also in the wider society. Bateson-Missen also referred to recent farmers' protests and to the need to improve the public image of farming, addressing the polarisation between environmental organisations and farmers through inclusive discussions.

The main takeaway messages underscored the specific and diverse topics discussed, highlighting the necessity to destigmatise mental health issues and to promote open dialogue. Early intervention, support through women's circles, proper signposting to specific services and enhanced training for advisors were identified as essential elements. The need for tailor-made support for farming communities was acknowledged, importantly including collaboration across all levels and administrative help. The involvement of DG SANTE was recommended, given the recognition that this is not only an agricultural problem.

The work of this EU CAP Network's TG will continue with informal discussions among members and wider networking and communication activities, to be disseminated via the [TG web page](#). The final TG meeting is scheduled for 28 May 2024.