



 **Good initiatives and
elements of replicability
to support the mental
health of farmers and
farming communities**

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Disclaimer

This document has been developed as part of the work carried out by the CAP Implementation Contact Point under the EU CAP Network to support the activities of the Thematic Group (TG) on [Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities](#). The information and views set out in this document do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.



1. Introduction: an overview of mental health in farming in the EU

Increased awareness of mental health issues in the farming community has stoked both academic interest and focused the general public's attention on the need for political action. External factors like climate change and environmental concerns contribute to a decline in farmers' well-being. Farmers' mental health is usually affected by demographic, economic, geographical, environmental, social and cultural factors¹. Suicides, stress and anxiety have been recognised as major issues in the farming communities². Due to farming's specific work-life balance, mental health in farming is often associated with occupational and safety health measures.

The targeted user for mental health support initiatives in agriculture is often the person working on the farm and this may exclude other people involved in farming, such as the families, women or non-contractual workers on the farm.

Despite the recent academic and political interest, initiatives dedicated to tackling mental health issues in farming are still the exception. This is reflected in the European Commission's strategy for mental health.



¹ Lund, C., Brooke-Sumner, C., Baingana, F., Baron, E. C., Breuer, E., Chandra, P., Haushofer, J., Herrman, H., Jordans, M., Kieling, C., Medina-Mora, M. E., Morgan, E., Omigbodun, O., Tol, W., Patel, V., & Saxena, S. (2018). Social determinants of mental disorders and the Sustainable Development Goals: A systematic review of reviews. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 5 (4), 357-369. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(18\)30060-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(18)30060-9)

Becot, F. A., Kohlbeck, S., & Ruszkowski, S. (2023). *Investigating suicide in agriculture globally: A scoping review of methodological approaches and a roadmap for future research*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.10406105>

² Ramadas, S., & Kuttichira, P. (2017). Farmers' suicide and mental disorders perspectives in research approaches-comparison between- India and Australia. *International Journal Of Community Medicine And Public Health*, 4 (2), 300-. <https://doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20170002>



In June 2023 the European Commission issued a comprehensive mental health strategy. Mental health is described as an 'integral part of people's health. It enables individuals to realise their own abilities, to cope with the stress of life, to socialise, work and contribute to community life'³. The three guiding principles in the Commission's approach to mental health are prevention, access to mental healthcare and treatment and reintegration. According to the European Commission, initiatives on mental health need to be applied horizontally, across policies.

The Commission document highlights the political value of mental health for the EU, providing a necessary general framework for more specific and developed policies at the European level. While the communication underlines that farmers are essential workers, it also refers to their specific challenges, revealing disproportionately high suicide rate among farmers in some EU Member States. It calls for support to enhance the resilience of the farming population not only through CAP funds, notably through its farm advisory services, but also through the European Social Fund+ and the European Fund for Regional Development.

As suggested by the European Commission, mental health initiatives should be applied horizontally across policies, while considering existing and new European and Member States' policies.

Building on this momentum, EU Member States and EU institutions are called to promote mental health in farming through targeted initiatives. The Commission will ensure that EU OSHA produces a report that addresses psychosocial risks in the agricultural sector that shall be published before the end of 2024.

This briefing aims to explore best practices in mental health initiatives for farmers and farming communities in the EU. It identifies initiatives at the local, national and European level. Furthermore, this paper provides necessary insights and analysis of the common traits shared by these successful local, national and European initiatives. This document looks at the main challenges these initiatives face and at possible solutions, providing key questions to help practitioners and policymakers advance the debate on mental health in farming in the EU.

2. Examples of best practices in Europe



2.1 Embrace FARM, Ireland

<https://embracefarm.com>

In Ireland, there is a long-standing commitment to ensuring the well-being of farmers through farm safety and measures to address stress and anxiety. [Teagasc](#), the national support body which integrates agricultural research, advisory services and training, has championed farmer well-being for almost twenty years. Their National Health and Safety Executive also promotes farm safety and well-being. In addition, successive Irish government ministers have also shared this commitment. The current minister's portfolio was broadened to include farm safety in 2021 and eight EIP-AGRI related farm health, safety and well-being [projects](#) were launched in 2021.

The organisation: Liam Rohan, a well-respected and model farmer died in a farm accident in 2012. Following his loss, their son Brian and Brian's wife Norma were traumatised. They received

support from neighbours and friends but were surprised to find that there were few emotional or practical support networks available to assist families traumatised by loss and/or witnessing a farming accident. They established Embrace FARM in 2014 and it obtained charitable status in 2017. Embrace FARM began with an annual remembrance service and has grown organically to include support groups and events. It now employs several staff members, including more than 40 contracted professional mentors dedicated to the farming community, who provide bereavement counselling, legal and farm succession information consultations.

The project: Embrace FARM is one of the few organisations that provides support for mental health rather than well-being. It supports people who have suffered post-traumatic stress following a death or suicide or after witnessing a fatal farm accident. As demand for its services have increased, it has ensured that it has the correct employees and trained volunteers to meet the needs.

³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union/comprehensive-approach-mental-health_en



Main activities: This initiative has grown from experiencing a personal loss. Brian and Norma had the skills to develop networks, establish a charitable business and provide for a specific mental health need in the farming community. It is difficult to see how the personal commitment, skills and experience could be replicated across the EU. However, in their 2020-2024⁴ strategy, it seems that the Rohans might be able to replicate their local model in other regions through personal contacts if they were resourced to do so. This locally based model would then provide national coverage. Embrace FARM is already operating nationwide within Ireland. Charities in Britain and Northern Ireland have adopted their [Remembrance Service](#) in their jurisdictions.

Results: This initiative has grown organically and has become more successful than initially envisaged. The greatest challenge is securing on-going funding. While Embrace Farm received 300 000 euros for the [Embrace FARM Encircle Programme](#) as an EIP-AGRI Operational Group, this was short-term funding that only covered two years. They are largely reliant on donations and fund-raising. As the initiative has increasingly met a real need in the farming community, they have had to hire and pay specialist staff to meet demands. Embrace FARM represents a successful example of how EU project-based funding can be used to address mental health at the national and local level. They have a trained team and are very knowledgeable in this domain. Using a group such as this is preferable to utilising farm advisors and vets who are not trained and have little knowledge of the topic. Embrace FARM could also, if funded, become a national overarching body that could train and oversee local activities across the country.



2.2 MELA (Farmers' Social Insurance Institution of Finland - Maatalousyrittäjien eläkelaitos), Finland

<https://www.mela.fi/en/>

Finland's commitment to strengthening mental health and mental well-being in farming started more than a decade ago. In 2023 the Finnish government launched the 3.5 million euro 'Good Work Programme' to promote careers in healthcare and social welfare. Additionally, as part of the EU Recovery and Resilience Plan, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health allocated 43 million euro to projects in healthcare and social welfare. Part of this budget will be used to strengthen mental health awareness in the workplace⁵.

The organisation: MELA is the Farmers' Social Institution of Finland. It is a social insurance institution and the main provider of pension insurance for farmers and rural entrepreneurs in Finland. MELA operates within Finland's Farmer Pension Act (MYEL). Most farmers

and rural entrepreneurs have to sign up for MYEL pension insurance. If the rural entrepreneur is not covered, he or she can voluntarily join the pension scheme. The MYEL pension scheme is open to self-employed entrepreneurs in agriculture and forestry, professional fishermen, reindeer herders and people who are retired but continue to work as agricultural entrepreneurs, as well as the family members who work with them.

The project: In 2017 the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health appointed MELA as the leading institution for the project 'Support the Farmer'. Farmers are supported with one-on-one consultations from MELA's project workers. Currently, MELA employs 15 project workers around the country. They are trained in social work, occupational or psychiatric health care and nursing, economic and administrative management, farm replacement work and administration, agricultural advising, agricultural research and agricultural teaching. Some of the project workers are also part-time farmers. They help farmers identify the issue, coordinating with them and reaching an agreed solution with designated experts. When the support provided by the project workers is not sufficient, MELA provides farmers with a voucher of 500 euro to spend on mental health services. MELA organises meetings and seminars for the early intervention network, helping them identify signs of burnout or stress, and with the aim of making this early intervention model permanent.

Main activities: MELA is a pension provider for Finnish rural entrepreneurs, workers in agriculture, fisheries and forestry, as well as the family members who work with them. It is deeply embedded in Finland's institutional framework. While it would be difficult to replicate the Finnish model due to their specific characteristics, the 'Support the Farmer' project could represent a valuable example for other EU Member States. MELA's project workers provide personal consultation to farmers, helping them find solutions with the support of the early intervention network consisting of farmers' various cooperation partners. These partners represent the early intervention network. They are trained to observe and report on farmers' early symptoms of decreased working ability. As a coordinator, MELA organises regional meetings and seminars for the early intervention network, e.g. the Mental health first aid course for farmers (some 15-20 courses/year), the Farmers' welfare days (10 days/year) and peer group meetings on Teams (2-3 groups/per year).

Results: 'Support the Farmer' has been a successful project, welcomed both by the farmers' community and the Finnish government. Since its start in 2017, the project established contact with farmers more than 12 000 times with almost 4 000 farm visits. The project had initially received funding on an annual basis⁶. The funds for the project had been included in the government's budget expenditure every year. In 2023, the Finnish government declared that 'Support the Farmer' will be included as an established activity of the government, in line with their policies on food security. MELA's activity to support mental health and well-being in farming is a key priority of the Finnish government. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health extended the budget for the project in 2024⁷. The Finnish government is willing to extend the funding of the project, making it permanent in the budget expenditure. This would provide MELA with the necessary financial aid to further the work done on mental health support in farming, turning it into a permanent institutional pillar.

⁴ <https://embracefarm.com/about-embrace-farm/reports-and-accounts/?v=a685be4af122>

⁵ <https://stm.fi/en/-/2024-draft-budget-of-the-ministry-of-social-affairs-and-health-and-its-administrative-branch>

⁶ See General Government Fiscal Plan 2022-2025: <https://vm.fi/en/search?q=GENERAL%20GOVERNMENT%20FISCAL%20PLAN%202022%E2%80%932025>

⁷ <https://stm.fi/en/-/2024-draft-budget-of-the-ministry-of-social-affairs-and-health-and-its-administrative-branch>



2.3 CCMSA (Caisse Centrale de la Mutualité Sociale Agricole), France

<https://www.msa.fr/lfp/web/msa/organisation/conseil-administration-ccmsa>

France has been at the forefront of suicide prevention in the agricultural sector for more than a decade. In 2011 the Ministry of Agriculture appointed CCMSA to develop a strategic plan for suicide prevention among agricultural workers⁸. In 2016 the Institute of Public Health signed a partnership with CCMSA to cooperate on mental health and mental well-being solutions for agricultural workers. The French government has financed activities on suicide prevention among agricultural workers through their annual budget, promoting inter-ministerial plans of action among its institutions.

The organisation: CCMSA is the central branch of MSA, the Agricultural Social Mutuality in France, which provides social security coverage for all farmers and their dependants through 35 regional branches. CCMSA works with the network of regional branches to implement agricultural social policy. It also represents the MSA at national level.

Due to the nature of the French social security system, CCMSA is a private entity with a public mandate. It manages social protection of agricultural workers in France, together with local agricultural mutual funds and the French Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of the Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Health. Membership of the MSA is compulsory for all the non-salaried and agricultural employees enlisted in the French Rural and Maritime Fishing Code. Furthermore, linked to its health and social policy benefits, MSA provides its members with occupational health care, as well as prevention programmes.

The project: MSA has been at the forefront of supporting the mental health and mental well-being of farmers. In 2011 MSA established a national plan to prevent suicide in agricultural work. The action plan focuses on four main areas: prevention, detection, support and orientation. The MSA puts a particular focus on prevention and support services to intervene before any sign of distress. To help assist agricultural workers in their mental health and mental well-being, MSA set up Agri'écoute, a telephone service run by medical, healthcare and social work experts. The telephone service is available for members of the MSA. The service is set up in collaboration with 'Empreinte Humaine', a private partner of professional psychologists. Agri'écoute personnel help agricultural workers in the detection of any sign of distress, orienting them to the best solution available. The MSA can then also provide financial support for more specific treatments.

Main activities: MSA and Agri'écoute have been successful in the prevention of suicides among agricultural workers, developing a sustainable model that might be replicated in other EU Member States. While the way MSA and Agri'écoute work with different ministries is peculiar to the French system and might be difficult to export in its entirety, the model they created could be applied in other countries.

CCMSA supports the 35 local MSA branches that are actively involved in the delivery of the programme. One of the main services provided is Agri'écoute. Together with the private organisation Empreinte Humaine, Agri'écoute employs 30 psychologists trained to assist people living in rural areas. The service provides supported users with five calls with the same psychologist, as well as a dedicated online platform.

⁸ <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r20-451/r20-4519.html>

⁹ <https://www.safehabit.us/publication/philippe-tran-tan-hai-responsible-for-prevention-ccmsa-france-on-ccmsa-activities-to-prevent-farmer-suicide/>

MSA branches are also equipped to tackle suicide prevention, involving support from various professionals like health and social workers. They offer a holistic approach to support MSA policyholders in distress. Local branches provide administrative help to prevent burnout among workers in agriculture. Their Respite Aid programme assists both non-salaried policyholders and employees. The programme allows MSA to help farmers find temporary relief cover for their business, to allow them to take a break, as well as promoting suicide prevention among their policyholders (e.g. by addressing burnout syndrome and encouraging reflection).

MSA branches are also involved in developing actions to raise awareness of psychosocial risks in the agricultural profession through the programme 'What If We Talked About Work?' (ESOPT). The programme involves a series of debate-meetings around the screening of the ESOPT film (audiovisual report of four ergonomic studies of agricultural operator activity). These meetings include specific training to help farmers analyse their strengths, difficulties and possible areas of improvement to prevent psychosocial risks.

Ultimately, MSA supports the Sentinel Network, which is made of volunteers with experience in the agricultural world (e.g. retirees, prevention advisors, elected officials, social workers, veterinarians, etc.). The Sentinels receive professional training by regional authorities and have a presence all over the country. They help identify and direct farmers and agricultural workers in situations of distress, or even at risk of suicide, towards support.



Results: The MSA's action plan has proven to be successful in the recognition of early signs of distress, as well as the support provided by Agri'écoute. In 2022, Agri'écoute was contacted over 250 times per month, and the Respite Aid programme supported 3 911 policyholders (3 256 in 2020 and 4 249 in 2019). The ESOPT training reached almost 3 100 policyholders between 2016 and 2020.

Most of the work at the prevention and support stage is carried out at the local level by healthcare and social work professionals⁹. Its action plan and the development of the Agri'écoute project have been recognised by the French government, putting the MSA at the core of a French inter-ministerial plan for suicide and distress prevention in agriculture.

The MSA is present at the European level via the Representation of French Social Protection Institutions (REIF), the European Social Security Platform (ESIP) and the ENASP network (European network of agricultural social protection systems). MSA could represent a leading example of prevention of suicides and support of agricultural workers' mental health and mental well-being in Europe.



2.4 FARMRes (Farmers Assistance Resources for Mental Health)

<https://farmres.eu/>

While the debate on mental health and mental well-being has started to permeate the political and institutional debate, European initiatives that are specifically targeted at mental health issues in farming and the agricultural sector are still lacking¹⁰. However, the recent focus of European institutions on this theme and the rise of local and national initiatives indicate the political will for concrete action in support of mental health in agriculture.

The organisation: FARMRes is an Erasmus+ Project. Its main aim is to 'raise awareness and provide strategies for farmers to deal with mental health problems'¹¹. Together with raising awareness on matters of good mental health and mental well-being among farmers, the FARMRes project aims to provide farmers and their wider community (i.e. farmers' families and farming associations) with the necessary tools to 'prevent, detect and aid' in case of mental health distress. Ultimately, FARMRes will advance the policy level debate on the importance of mental health and mental well-being for sustainable economic and social development in agriculture. Member partners of the project are the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA), COAG, Hot Und Leben (HuL), Mental Health Ireland, OnProjects (OnP) and Satakunta MTK.

The project: FARMRes is one of the few initiatives at the European level that is specifically focused on issues related to mental health and the mental well-being of farmers and on the agricultural sector more widely. In particular, the FARMRes' website has a list of easily accessible resources for farmers and online users interested in the topic.

Main activities: FARMRes has created a platform for European farmers and farming associations to look for resources which are available to support mental health and mental well-being in the agricultural sector. Awareness initiatives like FARMRes can be replicated at national and local levels, creating hubs for farmers and their wider network, allowing them to easily access resources.

Results: Most of the initiatives listed in FARMRes' Summary report provide training for farmers to detect mental health issues. The report includes initiatives at the EU level and at Member State level¹². A wider coverage of initiatives would be beneficial for farmers and their communities in other EU Member States. As an Erasmus+ Project, FARMRes is tied to the lifecycle of EU funds. While the work done has been fundamental, it seems difficult to envision further developments of the project without the support of other institutional actors at the EU and Member State levels.



3. What's next? Successful elements and future questions for mental health in farming

The social dimension of the CAP, together with the mental health strategy of the European Commission, are a call for action for new and specific initiatives for mental health in farming. This paper described four successful initiatives that raise awareness or provide a form of assistance for farmers' mental health in the EU.

Despite the specific national context, and the unique personal or institutional will at the heart of their foundation, these initiatives share common traits. Each of the initiatives highlighted in the document had some level of direct involvement with the concerned area, either with direct work (Embrace FARM), or with financially and administratively supporting action at the local and national level (MELA, CCMSA). Every initiative seems to recognise the importance of awareness and prevention, ultimately helping develop a first-contact network of support for farmers. One attractive feature that is envied elsewhere in Europe is the 26-day annual leave provided free of charge, offered by MELA. Farmers can avail themselves of farming relief to facilitate holidays, sick leave or time with family. This is similar to the service offered by CCMSA with Respite Aid. Furthermore, all four initiatives recognise the importance of staff that are specifically trained to support farmers at the local level. The support of multiple institutional actors at the national level seems to be a successful element for both MELA and CCMSA. The projects

Agri'écoute and Support the Farmers had been developed within national institutions that were already created to support farmers and their social security.

This paper shows how EU Member States and civil society across the EU can use the four initiatives to replicate similar support to mental health for farmers. Ultimately, these initiatives can be seen as successful examples of national and local frameworks for prevention of suicides and poor mental health.

However, common challenges are faced by these initiatives. These are often project-based, making it difficult to provide long-term plans for the communities in which they operate. At a policy level, the European Commission's communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health defines the actions that shall be implemented by Member States and outlines what initiatives shall be taken by the Commission.

While the Finnish model of 26-day support is envied across Europe, questions arise about whether it is replicable or not in different political and welfare state contexts; it is nevertheless important in going forward that farmers are recognised as employees who need time off from their work, whichever way that is arranged.

¹⁰ Exception are the Horizon projects FarmWell and SafeHabitus.

¹¹ <https://app.farmres.eu/summary-report>

¹² <https://app.farmres.eu/summary-report>



Another issue that arose during the research was the need to develop an insurance scheme to compensate for lost income due to climate change. This is a practical measure that could potentially mitigate the stress of changed weather conditions.

The analysis of these successful examples of local, national and European initiatives on mental health in farming shows the importance of a strategic and coordinated plan of action at the national level, as well as the importance of trained advisors in the agricultural sector. To advance the debate on mental health in farming, policymakers at the European and national level are required to ask themselves important questions, such as:

- › Which actor should be responsible for planning and sustaining initiatives on mental health across the European farming communities?
- › How is it possible to maintain long-term sustainable initiatives on mental health at local, national and European level?
- › Can the Finnish and French models of farm relief services be replicated across the EU?
- › Are bottom-up initiatives only 'reactions' to traumatic events? How can they be institutionalised in a more systematic framework?
- › What kind of initiatives are best received by the farming communities?
- › Should mental health in farming be separate from the general debate on mental health at the European and national level?
- › Are there peculiar factors of mental health in farming that need specific political and institutional consideration?

The EU CAP Network Thematic Group (TG) on Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities explored potential answers to the questions above. All the documents produced by the TG are available on the EU CAP Network website.

The conversation is bound to continue beyond the TG's lifespan, thanks to the commitment of its members and all actors involved. It will build a foundation for the work of related TGs in their future efforts within the [EU CAP Network](#).

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¹³ For further reference: Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union defines the intervention framework for the EU and Member States as it puts forward that public health, including mental health, is a competence shared between the European Union and its Member States: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E168>

Regulation (EU) 2021/522 establishes the EU4Health programme for the 2021-2027 period: https://health.ec.europa.eu/funding/eu4health-programme-2021-2027-vision-healthier-european-union_en



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