


# Supporting the Mental Health of Farmers and Farming Communities

## Thematic Group - 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting


The second Thematic Group (TG) meeting allowed TG members to exchange experiences and to review insights from previous TG activities. Combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience, participants developed action-oriented recommendations which aimed to improve farmers' mental health support and replicate successful approaches in other regions.

### Introduction and icebreaker


 **Alessia Musumarra (EU CAP Network)** opened the meeting reminding members of the TG's objectives and summing up its work so far, starting with a **first meeting in February** 2024 and continuing with two informal online meetings in March and April.

**Veronika Korčeková (EU CAP Network)** then led a dynamic **icebreaking activity**, through which participants got to know each other better and prepared for more informal discussions and interactions.

### Reporting key messages from the informal TG exchanges

 TG members **Branwen Miles (Copa-Cogeca)** and **Alun Jones (CIHEAM - International Centre for Advanced Agronomic Studies)** reported from the **two informal TG meetings**, which they had volunteered to moderate. These focused respectively on mental health and women in farming, and on tailored sustainable mental health support for farmers.

**Branwen Miles** stressed that women in farming can control their specific perspectives and networks to foster positive mental health outcomes in their communities. **Alun Jones** highlighted the importance of evidence-based approaches for developing sustainable mental health support programmes. Both mentioned the importance of employing tailored and multi-faceted approaches, e.g. by offering training, discussion groups and legislative support; as well as the importance of cooperation and networking activities, involving the wider farming community (e.g. advisors and veterinarians).

 **James Claffey (Irish NN)** reported on the **EU CAP Network's Subgroup on CAP Strategic Plans Implementation** meeting (17/04/2024), where Subgroup members completed a survey on 'How can advisory services better support farmers in recognising and addressing mental health issues?' Their replies emphasised the importance of

### Event Information

**Date:** 28 May 2024

**Location:** [EU CAP Network premises](#), Brussels

**Organisers:** EU CAP Network

**Participants:** 34 participants from 16 EU Member States, including Managing Authorities (MAs), National Networks (NNs), European organisations, farmers and farmer organisations, the European Commission, national/regional stakeholder organisations and researchers.


**Outcomes:** Discussing best practices in supporting farmers' mental health and their transferability; design of action-oriented recommendations.

**Web page:** [https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/events/2nd-meeting-thematic-group-supporting-mental-health-farmers-and-farming-communities\\_en](https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/events/2nd-meeting-thematic-group-supporting-mental-health-farmers-and-farming-communities_en)

comprehensive training for advisors to identify signs of emerging mental health issues and to expand their field of competence. They also showed the importance of farmers' involvement in open dialogue, of reducing stigma, providing access to resources and referrals, personal interaction, and of collaboration for effective support networks.

This feedback prompted a discussion with TG members. This highlighted the potential role advisors could play when developing mental health support services. It is important to note that such services can also use other funding options beyond the CAP. Overall, mental health support cannot be separated from other important topics such as occupational health and safety, as well as broader issues faced by rural areas. Advisors in the room again reinforced the importance of basic training to recognise early signs of mental distress and to signpost farmers to the relevant resources and support systems.

### Discussion on the transferability of the best practice examples identified so far

 **Professor Sally Shortall and Salvatore Barillà (EU CAP Network, non-permanent experts)** presented the research carried out for the TG on the strength and replicability of four initiatives supporting farmers' mental health. All the initiatives analysed point towards the importance of direct involvement with farmers' context and environment, of the training of staff or volunteers, and of integrating any new initiatives with existing national projects.

The meeting continued with a **fishbowl discussion**, which allowed everyone in the room to join a rotating panel and share their views.



The discussion confirmed that **building trust is crucial** for farmers if they are to open up and start the (sometimes uncomfortable) conversation on both physical and mental health. It is also important not to focus solely on extraordinary situations like loss of life or trauma, but also **to recognise that constant pressure is not 'normal'**. The analogy of the boiling frog was used to illustrate how farmers might be so preoccupied with daily stressors that they do not realise the toll that this takes on their mental health<sup>1</sup>.

When farmers seek help, this must be **readily available and multi-faceted**, addressing a variety of issues through advice, awareness, hotlines and collaboration. The **'traditional' mindset** – where farmers try to manage everything themselves, often neglecting their own mental health – **has to change**.



**Implementing preventive measures**, not just reactions to incidents, is key. Support systems should not only focus on 'fixing the farmer', but also **on improving the farming context as a whole**. This includes considering external forces (e.g. the market and weather) as well as the wider community. Sharing initiatives across Member States, as facilitated by this TG, can drive progress and change attitudes.

Some TG members pointed out **a low uptake of support initiatives by farmers**. Addressing this challenge is crucial to ensure that initiatives continue to be implemented. In this way, **farmers must be aware of** (and understand) occupational health and safety services and be provided with clear explanations regarding their costs and benefits.



**Elena Schubert (DG AGRI, Unit B3 social sustainability)** joined the conversation and stressed that the explicit mention of farmers' mental health in the European Commission Communication on **'A comprehensive approach to mental health'** was a significant achievement. She highlighted that farmers are recognised as essential workers and that it is important to acknowledge the specific challenges of their working environment. She also drew the attention of participants to the importance of respecting health and safety standards at work, as they can have an impact on farmers' mental health. In addition, she highlighted the importance of acknowledging farmers' position in society as the backbone of food supply and the rural economy.



Closing this session, **Professor Sally Shortall** and **Salvatore Barillà** summed up the **key points emerging from the discussion**, highlighting the importance of long-term funding and of strong political and institutional commitment to ensure the success and the replicability of good practices.

### Interactive session



TG members engaged in a two-hour, dynamic session of group discussions where they elaborated practical recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders, based on the **key ingredients** already identified by the TG.

The discussion on recommendations was based around four areas of interventions: **awareness raising, farmer level, community level, and institutional level**.

During the final **plenary discussion**, TG members explored the feasibility of the proposed recommendations, ways to secure buy-in from policymakers and the priority of actions. Members agreed that these recommendations are ambitious yet achievable, also depending on their own commitment to integrate such recommendations into their work and to keep networking.

The importance of effectively communicating these recommendations was emphasised. Broader support can be gained using a more positive terminology that focuses on the desired changes, such as 'enhancing working conditions and quality of life' rather than 'supporting mental health'. Additionally, members expressed the need to maintain the momentum with follow-up actions and by keeping the conversation going beyond the end of the TG.

<sup>1</sup> The analogy refers to the story of a frog placed in a pot of tepid water that is gradually heated to boiling point so that eventually the frog cannot jump out of it. This illustrates that it is extremely difficult to tell when slow, gradual changes become monumental and cause a significant effect.





## Conclusions



Participants exchanged their plans to make use of the insights gained from the TG activities on a personal and professional level. These actions include organising training sessions, a better exploration of how social insurance systems work across different Member States and applying greater sensitivity when interacting with one's neighbours (e.g. by being aware of signs of distress, and by breaking the taboo on mental health through having open conversations).

TG members underscored the significance of gathering and disseminating best practices across Member States, e.g. through reports, research and other channels. Many participants committed to share information with relevant colleagues and to foster dialogues with other institutions, departments and national policymakers. Measuring and communicating the impact of existing measures was acknowledged as important to persuade ministers to sustain initiatives over the long term.

Despite clear political challenges, participants expressed their optimism and hope for progress on farming and farm community mental health. They stressed the importance of ongoing dialogue with policymakers at national and local levels, to ensure that the issue remains a priority for the next European Parliament. They also expressed the hope that the next European Commission and the new Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development will prioritise this topic.

All the TG outputs will be accessible on the [EU CAP Network website](#) and inputs from this TG will feed into future work of the EU CAP Network.

