



The farmers approach: Supporting farmers towards sustainable farming

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LEADING POSITIVE CHANGE

Introduction

Life is a journey!

It is our confidence in our mind and spirit that allows us to have new adventures, learn lessons and make true connections.

I was not born and raised on a farm, my life as a farmer began a little later when I married a dairy farmer. We moved in 2011 to the family farm together and we made plans for changing the dairy farm into a modern and sustainable business. My job was in the beginning an easy and probably a little traditional one; doing the books. With a background in Political Science and Economics I still had a job as a strategic advisor of one of the biggest cities in the Netherlands and was a local politician as well. Having a young family, working at the farm, a job and being a politician I struggled with all the things needed to be done – at the same time, with the same priority. It took me a couple of years to finally decide the amount of stress was not right for me and my family and in December 2017 decided to leave my job.. It was clear where my heart and future belongs; at the farm with my family and friends surrounded by people.

Back in 2018, my husband Rick started as a Nuffield scholar. While he was away for his travels, I really thought about my role at the farm – who am I, what gives me energy, what is important to me? With my core values in mind I decided to start an educational farm besides the dairy. I see the importance of getting people to the farm and educate them about food production and all the hard work farmers are doing by making sustainable and healthy food. With my background in Political Science, I was really trying to understand agricultural policies and the way they affect the food production and day to day life on the farm.

In the summer of 2019 I decided to apply for a Nuffield scholarship, never ever thought they would select me because I didn't know much about global agriculture. But it happened, and I must say: this was the most exciting time of my life! It started with a pre-CSC (Contemporary Scholar Conference) with the Dutch scholars in London and the CSC at a tropical island at the east coast of Australia in March 2020. The week started as a dream – interesting programme, great people and a beautiful island. In that week, Covid hit the world and in just a couple of days everything changed. From closed borders to self-isolation. During the week, the Nuffield Board decided to cancel the CSC – when already half of the present scholars left early and returned home. It was clear that travelling in a pandemic wasn't possible, so a lot of the remaining CSC program and the start of the Nuffield International visits were held online.

It took until January 2022 for me to travel outside the Netherlands, all the way to Denmark. And to me, I never felt demotivated and decided to make the best of it. When I reflect it gave me the time needed for me to grow and develop my agriculture knowledge to decide the topic of my Nuffield study. I decided to focus on ways to improve the relationship between government and farmers to enable working together and trust.

I quickly felt overtaken by reality. Dutch farmers gathered for huge protests against new environmental regulations and continued their momentum to significantly impact the provincial elections. That all made me think I had to reconsider my topic.

From January 2022 until March 2023 I was able to travel for 20 weeks. In these weeks I met the most amazing and inspiring people – from farmers to ambassadors, scientists and a wide variety of farms – from very small to very big- and beautiful places – from Belgium to Chile, from Washington DC to Italy, from Argentina to Canada to Spain.

Being away and seeing so many things around the world made two important things clear to me:

1. Fewer and fewer people know where their food comes from or what happens before it ends on their plate. It strengthens my ideas about the important role our farm can have when it comes to communication, education, supporting and bringing people together. I feel it is really important we as farmers tell our story, what we do to produce food, how we do it in a sustainable way and why we make the choices we make. Nobody can tell our story better than ourselves, and if we don't someone else will – but probably different as well. This motivated me to open up our farm to thousands of people each year for an open farm day and this is complimented by school class educational visits from the city. We are also successfully hosting business meetings for key organisations and policy makers where we provide a professional environment alongside an immersive farm tour experience..
2. Not only in the Netherlands, but also elsewhere in the world, there is a lot of attention for the way food is produced. Sustainable agriculture is or will be the norm, adapted to the country, culture, population and environment. In all the countries I've been to, all the visits I've made and all the conversations I've had, it became clear that change doesn't happen by itself. The changes are accompanied by many opportunities and challenges, entrepreneurial qualities, resilience and emotions. People in particular are sometimes forgotten in the changes because there is perhaps a bit too much focus on the outcome, e.g. environmental improvement.

It was a positive that I had more time for my Nuffield study due to Covid. Or as Winston Churchill would say; 'Never let a good crisis go to waste'. Gradually I realised that my research should focus on farmers. This ultimately led to the question, how do we support farmers towards sustainable farming?

My Nuffield study was definitely the great experience everybody is talking about, with its challenges, inspiration and opportunities that were given. I am humbled by the brilliant, innovative and resilient people I have met along the way and the kindness of strangers who have opened their homes and business for me. I am very grateful for all the new friends and networks that have been made. It was my pleasure being part of a fantastic Global Focus Program group as well.

The weeks I went away, I had to leave home. This would not have been possible without the support from my family and friends. I also want to thank my sponsors for their support.

Judith de Vor
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The farmers approach – sustainable agriculture, food production and landscape management

The agricultural sector in the Netherlands and abroad is in full development. New cultivation methods, techniques, animal welfare concepts and labels in the supermarket are visible products of this development. Development is of all times and will continue to be so for the agricultural sector. Due to the growing world population, the call for healthy, safe and nutritious food and pressure on nature, the role of agriculture is becoming increasingly crucial in contemporary times. The Netherlands excels in sustainable agriculture, efficient land use, innovative power and knowledge development. Broader challenges such as housing, infrastructure, food production and landscape management that require a common vision, problems that are also felt in the agricultural sector and have an impact on the yard of the farmer and farmer's wife. Some of these challenges include water quality, nature quality and further tightening in the field of animal welfare.

In recent years, a considerable amount of regulations have been drawn up and further measures are being enshrined in legislation. For every issue, the regulatory reflex is often shot. The space for the farmer to make independent choices is relatively small and cannot be influenced. In the Netherlands, an area-based approach attempts are made to look at the challenges in an integrated way and how and by whom should contribute to the solution. That whole and the process is not simple, but rather complex. A so-called wicked problem, a complex situation without a simple answer to solve the problem. Many stakeholders sit at the table and have a voice in the whole, whereby the different interests must be weighed against each other.



Sustainable agriculture is certainly an important topic for the agricultural sector and farmers itself. Where major steps have already been taken, more and more is expected and desired. It is not always clear what the results should be, how and by whom the costs are associated. At the same time, it is expected that often substantial steps will already be taken. The increasing regulatory burden, a complex process that is the area-oriented approach, the further mental pressure and stress that is experienced, ensures that the question is how farmers can best be supported in the further sustainability of agriculture. The different factors can have a negative impact on the opportunities farmers have on road towards more sustainable agriculture. A move towards more sustainable agriculture will ensure food security for present and future generations, have ecological benefits and contribute to economic and social sustainability. At the same time, there is also a huge opportunity for agriculture to reconnect and mean something to everyone. In the Netherlands, but also abroad, agriculture, healthy food, a green living environment and landscape and a vital rural area are essential for well-being.

Emiliana organic vineyard in Chili



Farmers are the ones who can take care of this. Farmers therefore play an important role in society and that is why we must support farmers as much as possible towards further sustainable agriculture.

In this report I present therefore the farmers approach.

The farmers approach

Farmers in the centre; with subjects that matter:

Positive mindset
Involvement
Walk
Trust
Facilitate
Network
Mental Health
Mentorship
Vision
Entrepreneurship



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The farmers approach – what about the farmers?

Being a farmer is the best profession in the world, making food that works in harmony with the natural environment. If you are a farmer it also means you are an entrepreneur, having flexibility to move with the times.

The production of food and the maintenance of soil and landscape must meet all kinds of requirements. That has not changed from the past. Each time period has its own changes, opportunities, challenges, possibilities and impossibilities. It will be no different in the future. Yet more and more regulatory, political and public pressure is experienced on the way food is produced. This can lead to reduced job satisfaction or worse, that farmers stop being a farmer. And that at the same time raises an issue in itself.

Are there enough farmers left who are willing to produce food and take care of the environment?

The average in age in most countries is high; globally the average age is 64 years old. The expectations is that a lot of those farmers will quit – without turning over the farm to others. For the last decade, each day in Europe a 1.000 farmers stop farming. This means that more food has to be produced by less farmers. This is another serious issue and key factor that plays an important role in solving the problem of food availability and food security.

But what if more and more farmers are stopping because they cannot handle the increasing demand for new and additional requirements and regulations? How do we draw up plans for the future, if many things are not clear? There is no doubt that change can be challenging. Whether it is by choice, or by changes that are demanded by society. Many farmers have already actively started working on changes on their farm, based on entrepreneurship and intrinsic motivation. Others need a little more time and support. This support can come from the government and from networks of people in the industry, colleagues and family and friends.

Many programmes and training courses have been set up by various public and private organizations to offer farmers a direction or to move them in the right direction. These changes are often shaped in processes, systems and financing models.

Not many focus on actual farmer themselves. Leadership programmes are available, but usually it is a smaller group of more progressive and innovative farmers who participate. Availability of time and money are factors that play a role here.

In order to take steps towards more sustainable agriculture as a farmer, it is important to be in an environment where your mental capacity is stimulated. If you don't have room in your head to walk new paths, solve everyday problems or have to deal with too bigger challenges, it becomes complicated to make the move. This is why a positive mindset can help in dealing with challenges that come your way as a farmer.





GFP in Chile; visiting El Reinal Regenerative beef farm

The farmers approach – support from the government

A major change in agriculture is only possible if the preconditions for support are right. A clear picture of what can no longer be done is generally not that difficult to draw up. A clear vision of what the direction is for sustainable agriculture is more complicated. And that creates concerns and ambiguities. Changing regulations, uncertainty at the start, and the accumulation of challenges do not help. From the many conversations I had during my travels, a number of points emerged that, as far as I'm concerned, ultimately form a common thread of how farmers can be supported by the various governments in times of change.

The role of government should be focused on support and capacity building and resilience of farmers. It is important to prepare an integral and innovative approach, where farmers are central. We must support knowledge sharing and exchange.

What has been heard a lot is offering space, real cooperation and giving confidence. This does not sound like a big surprise, but at the same time it is not easy to implement it properly. *Invest in the content and in the relationship.* Not only with the different government bodies, but also as farmers. To be an impactful advocate in policy processes, it is important to unite, work together and build bridges.

A number of frequently mentioned components relate to the content of policy and decision-making and implementation on sustainable agriculture, which also can be seen as recommendations in the policy process:

1. Determine in advance which framework and associated decision tree to clarify how final policy choices are made;
2. Clearly indicate how a design process works, which stakeholders are involved in the process and ensure that expectations are clear;
3. Involve farmers and the right stakeholders very early in the process, ensure there is scope in the input to be supplied and focus on co-creation;
4. Align content, process and management with other subjects and authorities so that an integrated vision can also be created;
5. Allow scope to focus on objectives instead of measures, offering flexibility to make your own choices within the frameworks. Have an eye for circumstances and other influences that farmers have to deal with, which are at the same time difficult for them to navigate.

Visiting secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig and deputy secretary Julie Kenney of Iowa



It is also important to invest in the relationship in order to get a better sense of the challenges, opportunities and wishes of farmers. Trust and respect are crucial themes here, both for governmental bodies and farmers. Here too, a number of components are frequently mentioned:

1. Treat people the way you want to be treated;
2. Listen to understand, not to react;
3. Value the input that is given and substantiate what has been or will be done with the input;
4. Have the best interests at heart for the various groups for which policy is being made or who are affected by its effects;
5. Do what you say you will do;
6. Apply servant leadership, ask how you can help farmers, include people and assign value to them.

Visiting the Capitol in Washington DC during my Global Focus Program in 2022



The farmers approach – mental health and mindset

Being a farmer can be a challenging occupation. Changes, innovations and other markets can boost development and entrepreneurship. At the same time, uncertainty with fast moving forced direction can also bring a lot of tension that can be accompanied by many different emotions. It can be difficult for farmers to take a break from the daily routine. Simply because there is work to be done every day, the image may be that farmers must be strong and not complain. This can have consequences for mental health. Stressors are often seen in farming as well. We tend to focus on physical health, but mental health is just as important. It is easier to see if a leg is broken, than seeing that somebody is having a hard time.

Stress has many impacts on different parts of your life. Not only your mood, energy level and relationships, but also work performance at the farm. Stress can cause a wide varieties of health conditions and cause a lot of problems which increase the likelihood of sickness. Chronic (on-going) stress can be caused by the experience of repeated stress over several years. When somebody is in a chronic state of stress, the body has physiological changes caused by the raise of the hormone cortisol level. Many farmers who suffer from a raised cortisol level aren't able to see things clear anymore. Acute stress is mostly caused by changing life events.

Some of the stressors and stress factors can be controlled, others stressors don't. Like the weather or regulations. It is important to realise what kind of aspects you can control and what you cannot. With aspects you can't control, you can still be in control when it comes to the mindset. By having the right mindset, resilience and productivity can be increased. Being better prepared when it is going to be difficult is important, because by then we are able to better manage the farm and taking care of the people around you. Dealing with day to day stress is about creating a positive mindset. Farmers can surround themselves with positive and forward farmers and create a positive mindset, but also work on that themselves.



Visiting Lesly Kelly, founder of the Do More Ag Foundation and High Heels & Canola Fields

A positive mindset is very important when it comes to mental health and dealing with challenges and in stressful situations. A positive mindset doesn't solve these, but helps a

person's mental health to be able to have the ease and power to think. A positive mindset is a powerful tool that everybody should be able to develop. It is not always easy, but it is something you can train. Explore your mindset, focus on the positive things rather than the negative things, set goals and visualise your goals in order to create resilience and have a growth positive mindset. For all kinds of stress the same things can actually help:

Having a positive self-talk and positive mindset influences the perception and helps better dealing in stressful situations. Use self-talk; be positive about yourself and tell yourself you can overcome the difficult situations. Simple things, like meditation, go to a happy and quiet place, exercise, walking and talking can actually help to ease and let your mind settle and calm the body.

Accepting the situation is helping to focus on solutions, instead of being overwhelmed by the stressors and problems. Being able to take a pause, accept the issue and start thinking about solving problems. When in peak stress mode, it is difficult to have discussions and get out of the stress circle and the worries and this wastes a significant amount of energy. Sometimes it is easier to accept the things the way they are and focus on the solutions.

Speaking with major students of the North Carolina State University



The farmers approach – what can we do to support farmers and ourselves?

As a farmer, with a lot of responsibilities and ongoing changes or being in stressful situations, it is important to invest in your own mental health, train the positive mindset and find support and look for opportunities to support others as well. There is several things that can be done:

1. Become part of a network where learning, knowledge exchange and growth are central. Positive focus on helping, possibilities and new ideas;
2. There is always work to do. Also make sure that time is made available to do something other than working on the farm, such as exercise;
3. Finding a positive network to join and do something besides the farm or in the community;
4. Surround yourself with the right positive people;
5. Don't lose sight of your passion, personal energizers and craftsmanship;
6. When things aren't going well, talk about it. It's okay to say things aren't going well. Ask for help, as difficult as this may be. It is not a sign of weakness, but rather a strength!
7. Find a mentor for support from outside of your own circle, for sparring and discussing the farm, developments, mindset and growth.

Visiting Amy Cronin, Nuffield scholar 2020 from Canada and involved in many supportive and leadership programs



As a result of this Nuffield journey two new initiatives will be launched:

1. Walk with me

To improve wellbeing by walking and creating more positive, supportive and open conversations about mental health and wellbeing for farmers. Talking about problems is helpful, as it has been said 'a problem shared, is a problem halved'. This is the case while walking and talking in a different environment and allowing people to have time and space to be more open with each other can be the start of a supportive positive mental health journey that could be life changing for many people. There is many benefits of walking, such as boosting oxygen intake, increased exercise, socialisation and friendship.

With the Walk with me initiative, the aim is to share stories online while walking. This doesn't have to be personal but you could post a photo of the area, with supporting text or something else. This is to create a movement, to support each other while walking.

The Walk with me is not only present in the Netherlands, together with 3 scholars from the UK, Canada and Zimbabwe we were able to launch this during international mental health month.



WALK WITH ME
NLD



2. Dutch mentor programme in agriculture

The aim of the mentor programme is to give farmers the support of a discussion in confidence with other people than from their own network. In this programme, everybody from the industry is welcome to become a mentee or a mentor. Support by talking about life as a farmer, challenges, opportunities and personal growth.



MENTORPROGRAMMA
VOOR DE LANDBOUW

Life is a journey, allow yourself to be happy!

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