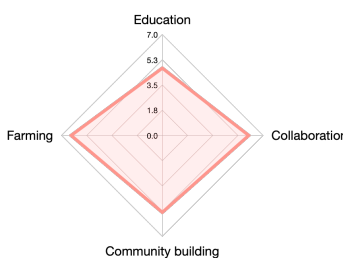


Appendix 12: East Flanders (Belgium, NE5)

Organising partner:	De Landgenoten	Innovation Type 
Practice:	Farm collectives: a lever for an agricultural and rural transition (France, FR6A)	
Practice context:	Toussaq, Belêtre, Champ Boule - Predominantly rural	
Confrontation context:	Zulte, East Flanders (NUTS3) - Intermediate	
Workshop location:	Online	
Date:	October 18th 2021	

Summary

This report contains the outcome of the confrontation of the promising practice on 'collective farms' that Terre de Liens researched in T5.2 of the RURALIZATION-project. Within their D5.2 case study report Terre de Liens considers collective farms as follows: 'farms where farmers have a common project for agricultural production and partially or totally mutualise investment, labour and, in some cases, marketing and remuneration'.

De Landgenoten confronted Flemish stakeholders with the 3 studied French farm collectives in 3 brainstorm sessions during which De Landgenoten focused on critical factors and obstacles to roll out this practice within the context of the stakeholders. Subsequently we merged the participants of the brainstorm sessions for one collective focus group in order to identify solutions for the obstacles encountered. The goal of these sessions was to sharpen the lessons learned in the case studies and to help identify the key factors of success.

In the following report we go more into detail on the general outcome of our confrontation. We would like to point out that amongst the chosen stakeholders there was a strong affinity with the idea of collective farms.

Context

The agricultural sector in Flanders is characterised by an on-going enlargement and specialisation on one hand, and providing other services ('broadening') that aren't directly related to agricultural production on the other hand. According to the Flemish biennial agriculture report of 2018 (LARA2018), 23.225 farms were active in Flanders in 2017, of which 78% professionally (which means an output of at least 25.000 euro). In comparison to 2007 this is a decrease by just over a quarter, a yearly decline of 3,2% on average. Mostly smaller farms quit. In that same time period, only a decade, the average surface of cultivated land per farm increased by one third to 26,3 hectares.

The LARA2018 mentions the inflow of new entrants and successors as one of the current challenges for the agricultural sector in Flanders. Due to a lack of inflow and a stable outflow of farmers, the farming population in Flanders is aging and thinning. This loss of social capital is similar to the one described in the introduction of the D5.2 Case Study report on Collective Farms in France.

One of the main obstacles that newcomers encounter is the price of agricultural land, raising up to on average 63.000 euro per hectare (in the first half of 2021). This is not as much due to urbanisation as it is in the French context, but more due to recreational use of agricultural land.

For this confrontation we initially focused on one specific case of a farmer's daughter looking to take over her parent's conventional dairy farm along with her life partner. The farm is situated in Zulte, a municipality in the province of East Flanders. She contacted De Landgenoten a few years ago in her search on how to continue the farm and make a transition to organic agriculture, in close collaboration with other farmers and/or processors.

Zulte counts about 15 000 inhabitants and has 3 sub-municipalities: Zulte, Machelen and Olsene. It has a surface of 32,52 square km (Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur & Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2018). Zulte is part of the arrondissement of Ghent, which is marked as an 'intermediate region' according to the Urban-rural Typology²⁷.

About 55,5% of the total surface of Zulte is used for agriculture, which is just slightly more than the average of the province East Flanders (54,2%). Yet it is less than the actual surface with an agricultural spatial destination within Zulte, which is 66,4% of the total surface of this municipality. In 2020 77 agricultural businesses were active. Which is a decrease of 42,1% in comparison to the number of 2001 (Interprovinciale werking Landbouw). A lot more detailed information on the agricultural sector can be derived from that same source.

We do want to nuance the determining effect of this given local context for the emergence of the researched promising practice. In the D5.2 case study report 3 different farm collectives are presented and compared. All three French collectives emerged in quite different contexts (see chapter 3 of the D5.2 case study report, pages 6 - 10). Moreover this case study report states (page 10): "In any case, we can

²⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/statistical-atlas/viewer/?config=typologies.json&mids=BKGCNT,TYPREGURT2021,CNTOVL&o=1,1,0.7¢er=50.97226,4.9278,7&lcis=TYPREGURT2021&ch=TYPREG,TYPREGURT&nutsId=BE234&>

hardly draw conclusions from our surveys on what contexts that are favourable or unfavourable to the emergence of agricultural collectives. When questioned on this issue, farmers themselves emphasised that the choice of a location to establish had been primarily a matter of opportunity, the presence of a farm to take over and benevolent farm transferors seemed, at least in the cases studied, more crucial prerequisites to the emergence than the wider context. This wider context, as we will see in the next section, does however influence the trajectories of emergence of collective farms and the shape they take."

The importance of an opportunity and of benevolent transferors was acknowledged during the brainstorm sessions in Flanders. Surely areas where for example the pressure on land is (even) higher than elsewhere, may prevent the emergence of collectives. Yet it seemed more relevant to look into the transferability of this promising practice on a larger regional or even national scale. As De Landgenoten is active in Flanders, as are all participants of the brainstorms and focus group, the chosen context is the region of Flanders. Flanders is a region where agricultural land is typically intensively used, and where parcels are relatively small. Agricultural land is used for permanent pasture (35%), for cereals (23%) and fodder (21%) (source: Kerncijfers landbouw 2020).

Results

Acceptance and interest in implementing the practice

Amongst the participants of the brainstorm sessions and focus group there is a large interest and affinity with farm collectives: all but one, are farmers who are or have been involved in a farm collective, or are strongly considering starting a collective in the near future.

One of the participants states it is either starting a farm along with others or starting not at all. "I relate to remarks made about the hardships of working in a collective, yet at the same time, doing this alone wouldn't be an option for me. To me it's important." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 3).

Identified critical factors related to the implementation of the practice

At different moments within the brainstorm sessions and focus group, references are made to external guidance, know-how and methodologies to help develop the collaboration between farmers on a human and organisational level. One of the participants points out that it is more obvious to call on within non-familial settings.

A certain mentality is required as well. Participants feel there is a more collective spirit in Wallonia, the French speaking southern part of Belgium, in comparison to Flanders. According to one of the participants, more financial incentives are present in the southern part of Belgium, for example subsidies for the collective operation of a farm shop.

In addition, in Flanders the population density is high, in Wallonia the distances to a sales market are larger, so the effect of collaboration is immediately much more perceptible.

Moreover, historically the number of children within families is much smaller within Wallonia, another participant explains. "Peasant families only had 2 children, in Flanders they had 10. You had your collective within the family in Flanders. In Wallonia farmers were larger, with less children, so historically they have always had to rely on others to make it happen." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 3 /part. 4)

Key issues and barriers for implementing the innovative practice in the context

Access to land

One of the first thresholds mentioned by participants is the **difficulty in accessing land**.

One participant, along with another new entrant, is on the verge of joining an existing collaboration of 2 CSA-farmers looking to expand their farm (more vegetable production, more diversified production, as well as new sales channels and providing care to vulnerable groups).

Whether their expansion will happen, depends on finding additional land within the area and -equally important - within a foreseeable future.

Access to land is indeed a focal point within RURALIZATION and problematic within many European regions, and a very tough challenge within Flanders too. On average Flemish farm land costs about 63.000 euro per hectare (Fednot, 2021) and landowners are the longer the less inclined to lease land for the long-term (LARA, 2020).

Housing

Another barrier that comes up are the strict rules with regard to obtaining a permit to divide an existing farmstead into various housing units. Moreover, it is not legally possible to take up residence in a yurt, tiny house or other type of alternative living space. This makes it challenging to cohabit a farm with more families.

"I assume a difference with France is the scale of farms in general. Out here farms often start with 1 or 2 hectares or even smaller. That makes it more difficult to do something with 3 or 4 people. I assume the projects that we discussed from France were bigger at start and had more possibilities for housing." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 3 /part. 1).

Start-up is challenging

Another barrier linked to starting a farm, and in particular starting a farm collective is the **starting period with lots of (financial) insecurities** that needs to be bridged.

"I wanted to point out the financial aspect of the start-up and the tense period you are in and everyone's individual situation. Who can still get benefits (...) who can get an income as of when. That is a very big threshold too." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 4)

"I assume the context in Flanders is, that a lot of money is needed just to live, plus a challenge to make it profitable. I do believe collectives are promising to start. But it is looking for a way to make it work. I think the reality here is that most CSA-farms start by themselves and then (...) at a certain point grow towards a collaboration." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 3 /part. 1)

It seems to be a deliberate choice, or at least a defensible strategy for some of the participants, not to start with too many people in the collective. "I currently run a CSA along with one colleague. We started with the idea to run a collective farm. In hindsight, I am glad we did not start straight away with 3 or 4 people." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 2 /part. 2).

Agriculture in itself is challenging

An **agricultural setting** is special, with long days, (very) low wages, and many challenges.

"Within agriculture, where to find the time to set up a collaboration?" (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 1).

"Collaborating in the agricultural sector is like a euphemism. I don't think it is something for just any farm or farmer... There are many people for whom this wouldn't be an option according to me. (...) Surely external facilitation is key, you can't do it alone. But still, you need to talk, think, research stuff, have patience... There are so many aspects (...) Surely context can make it even harder, yet it is inherently very hard and requires many competences, and also some luck in a lot of things you don't control" (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 2 /part. 2).

"You have to cope with four different seasons in a year. It takes time to get to know your business in all seasons. If you start with three difficult years because of extreme weather, a start-up is very hard. In many ways a collective in agriculture does not differ from other commons, but this dependence of external factors, of weather and seasons, make agriculture a difficult business. You are never sure to realise profit, even when you have worked hard." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 3 /part. 4)

Working together is demanding

Working in a collective means that partners are **depending on the efforts of the other**. And that can create tensions. This is especially the case when farmers choose to work collectively in a constellation where there isn't a real hierarchy between wage earners and the self-employed farmers. Thus, the fate of the company and each person's professional career is strongly intertwined and depends on each other's commitment. Collaboration is repeatedly labelled as **challenging** throughout all brainstorm sessions.

"Our societal context is focused on doing things and shaping our lives individually, while we feel there is a challenge, or that there would be so much more possible by collaborating. But we have forgotten how to do that." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 3) Two of the participants are a couple with the offer to take over the parental farm. "We could take over the (large) farm of my parents. But if we decide to do this, we need to let go of our current work-life balance. Collaboration would be ideal for that. (...) At the same time, collaboration is so **demanding**. It is something extra that comes on top of everything else." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 1). Her partner adds: "I was enthusiastic about collaboration. I wanted to take over a larger farm straight away along with several others so to speak. Yet my partner wasn't into that. She feels we first need a good routine within our family before making it more complicated. Collaboration is **complex**" (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 2).

As another participant states: "One of the obstacles is that a collective exists of more people that each want to realize their dream. Someone wants to go in a certain direction, another wants to move in a slightly other direction. In the beginning this will look very similar, but when you start having meetings you will encounter obstacles where there's a difference. That seems to me like an important difference with a family setting. It's a very different process when you want to start something with 2 people and there isn't something yet. You start with nothing. If there already is a company, you continue in a certain direction. If there isn't something yet, there is no context." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 3 /part. 1). "There are so many ways to farm" (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 2 /part. 1).

Need for a (not too) solid base

It is easier to start working together, once there is a **solid base** between the partners."That solid base, that is what everything depends on. You can build this by yourself or with 2 people" (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 1 /part. 4). On the other hand, if the base is **too solid, it can be an obstacle** as well. Stepping into an existing structure can be a barrier for new entrants. One participant testified about the collective farm where he works for years: "We have been in business for 40 years. We grew from having no rules to having too many rules. That rule-making tendency, like 'something goes astray, we need to make an arrangement' prevents new people from joining. We can all justify why these rules or agreements were made, but this has a very suffocating effect on new people who think 'I want to contribute, but in my own way'. Then you have to rethink everything that has been created in the course of time and rethink how you can give people the chance to enter." (Flanders, NE 5 / bs 2 /part. 4).

A similar barrier exists when farmers from existing farms try to work together as a collective: How to start pooling means when the investments that are already made, may be very different for the producers concerned? One of the participants set up a marketing platform for several sustainable producers within a certain region. As they offer a wide range of products, sharing a marketing channel towards conscious consumers is a way to strengthen the bond with them and allows new producers to launch their business better as the local sales market is already there. There is currently no desire among them to fully develop a farm collective in line with the definition used in the French examples. Their group consists of an existing CSA with land in a separate cooperative structure, a young farmer that leases 9 ha of land in ownership of her parents, a beekeeper and a mushroom grower that are way less soil-bound. Nevertheless, there is a strong solidarity between the producers involved in this particular case.

Identified measures and actors that need to be involved to overcome the obstacles and succeed in the implementation of the practice

Coaching for interpersonal dynamics

Since collaboration and the interpersonal dynamic is such a key issue, it's no wonder measures on this level were mentioned during the focus group. "What I think would be helpful is a sort of **training on how to communicate** (well). Being able to put on the table what is important to you. Earlier someone mentioned how much time you need to get to know one another. I think you can have very long meetings, yet still encounter a first issue on something you didn't discuss or bump into a problem you couldn't predict. Those skills... in general I think we unlearned those." (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 7). Inspiration on how to do this can be looked for in other professional settings too. "I wonder how this works in other contexts. Many companies are founded by more people, not only within agriculture. How does this happen in those settings? If you are two people wanting to start a coffee bar, an IT company... or something else, isn't it similar? Those are also separate entrepreneurs that want to start a company together, wanting to do this in a collective way. Maybe we can learn from them. From a context that isn't agricultural. (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 11).

Quite some participants refer to the work of Frederic Laloux 'Reinventing organisations' as a useful and insightful framework to look for ways to better address the organisational aspects of collective work. One of the topics it focuses on is responsibilities and ways to regularly question them and, if necessary, redistribute them. His work also provides tools for decision-making. As pointed out earlier: an **external**

facilitator can be an important asset to make the most of a collective. Another idea is to set up a **learning platform** and provide networking possibilities to exchange knowledge and experiences between peers.

Actors that help create a solid base in different ways: land, capital, trust

In relation to the solid base as a prerequisite to make expansion possible, a number of aspects are of importance in this regard. "What De Landgenoten does, facilitating **access to land**, is an important base for that. If you are confronted with matters on **capital** at the beginning, that makes it even more complex. Also, the run-up, how do you start with each other? (...) What time do you take together, **how well do you know each other?** All different pieces that make it possible to build a solid base. That's what it's all about." (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 4). "Collaborating sounds fun, but it can only work when you trust each other. And how do you build trust? How much time do you invest to come to a trustful relationship?" (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 5)

Systemic improvements

Other **systemic issues** should be addressed too in order to help succeed the implementation of farm collectives: the pressure on **income** for farmers, the **administrative burden**, the challenging work-life balance, the **extensive regulation**, the **strict housing rules**, to mention the most important.

Paid internship or unemployment benefit during training

In line with the financial challenges many (starting) farmers face, the idea of paid internship is put forward. Currently many new entrants are trained at Landwijzer, the training centre for adults on organic and biodynamic agriculture in Flanders. This training takes 2,5 years and is financially challenging as it is very hard to combine with a regular job, because the trainees do several internships of many hours at several farms. This means that for many trainees, their savings are gone by the end of the training.

One of the farmers clarifies: "Certain interns mentioned to me that if their internship would have been paid by the farm, it would have been more probable and easy to continue working at the farm. Their savings wouldn't have been gone by the end of their training. As a business manager, I find that interesting. I get a trainee that doesn't know much, and I train him. If I pay him, it is most probable that this trainee stays at my farm, if I want him to. If I don't pay him, it is most likely that he needs to build up new savings elsewhere, in a job where wages are better. " (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 11)

A participant adds: "I have been working on our farm with IBO and ACTIVA status for two years now. IBO²⁸ is a paid internship so to speak, ACTIVA²⁹ means that the **salary is partly paid by the employer and partly by the unemployment benefit**. It is partly subsidised work. With two people, we are now

²⁸ IBO stands for 'Individuele beroepsopleiding' or 'individual professional training'. Through an IBO an employer can train a jobseeker within the company during a maximum of 6 months. No wage or social security contributions are required, only a fixed monthly amount. <https://www.vdab.be/ibo>

²⁹ ACTIVA-system in the Brussels region allows an employer to hire someone even if they don't have a lot of financial margin. <https://www.actiris.brussels/nl/werkgevers/activa-brussels/>

employed through this status. So I have been able to learn and work for two years and I have a salary." (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 8)

An alternative measure could be to allow an **unemployment benefit** or being **entitled to a minimum wage** during a year or two whilst in the process of starting up a farm collective.

Venture capital

Another idea to bridge the financial challenge in the beginning, is brought up by one of the participants: "Perhaps there are also people who would like to put **venture capital** into these young farmers. They might want that capital back one day, but don't necessarily want to make a lot of profit. Suppose they want to finance for three or four years, with the risk of losing it, but on the other hand also the possibility of getting it back in ten years' time. I think many other sectors work in the same way. The idea, however, is that they will make a big profit on it. But there is also a lot of capital that does not necessarily have to make a lot of profit." (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 11). Surely the financial threshold is too high, participants agree. Yet one of them points out it can't become too easy either. "Farming requires entrepreneurship, searching for solutions, it demands ruggedness." (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 4).

Structures bringing together new entrants and older farmers

Another measure to get **new entrants** started, is to **bring them in contact with older farmers** looking to transfer and/or explore new business options, yet don't want to start new adventures on their own. Besides linking them, a **safe context** should be provided so a transferor doesn't fear his farm will be taken over by the next generation without his consent. In Flanders, there currently isn't a **structure or organisation** to refer new entrants to. In the case of the French example in Toussacq it was indeed the farm's owner that initiated a farm incubator that eventually led to a collective.

An organisation from abroad that inspires one of the participants of the brainstorm group within this field is 'Landgilde'³⁰: an innovative practice from the Netherlands that was documented by De Landgenoten within the first phase of T6.4 of the RURALIZATION project.

Participants agree that it would be interesting to create a **database** of older farmers and new entrants to try to match them. Several conventional farmers owning land are open to new forms of agriculture like organic or to new sales models. They do not want to start it up themselves, but are willing to rent out land to new entrants. A database could bring them together. But it should come along with coaching, otherwise it won't work.

Recalling common inspiration

A famous farm collective from abroad existing for many years brings a final idea: "A long time ago I asked the people of Dottenfelderhof³¹: What is the secret to your success? I got a surprising answer: they told me they need to see each other at least every fortnight, but preferably even once a week, during a study session. During these, they look for inspiration on how to achieve their goal. That was key for them. Those sessions differ completely from any organisational exchange. Meeting each other, not to make appointments but for substantive work. You then meet each other in a totally different

³⁰ <https://landgilde.nl/>; Landgilde is a matching platform to inform farmers (to be) about work and learning opportunities on a farm. Landgilde also informs farmers about farms in need of a successor.

³¹ <https://en.dottenfelderhof.eu/>

way." (Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 5). Two members of the focus group indicate this practice also exists on their farms and is indeed very useful. A possible tool to shape these sessions is Joke Bloksma's 'Werkboek Gezond Landbouwbedrijf'³² in which the author helps farmers develop their farm into a coherent whole with its own identity. "If you can't find each other in the practical organisation, you can still find each other in the content."(Flanders, NE 5 / fg /part. 11).

Lessons learned and recommendations

What could be additionally learned about the practice?

First of all, we want to acknowledge the thorough research on the promising practice of collective farms performed by Terre de Liens. The report succeeds in capturing the different aspects and dimensions in the emergence and sustainable continuation of farm collectives.

Two out of the three obstacles to setting up a collective that were identified in the French research, were mentioned during the brainstorm sessions: although for different reasons, finding suitable **housing** is an issue, as are the **human aspects** of farming as a group.

One of the subtopics in the case report of Terre de Liens are the **legal models**. Although this topic wasn't tackled in depth during the confrontation, the aspect of legal models came up here and there during the sessions. Quite a few participants are working together within a 'maatschap' which is an agreement between two or more people who bring together their contributions with the idea to share direct or indirect capital gain that may be derived. There's no need for an intervention of a notary to form a 'maatschap', there's a large contractual freedom and no legal minimum capital or financial plan is required. It is therefore considered a simple way to explore a collaboration without having to set up more complex and strict legal entities (e.g. a cooperative), to which it could evolve however, once a certain base is formed.

Terre de Liens mentions the fact that the type of operating structure chosen has many implications for the collectives in various areas. One of the implications in Flanders for instance is that a cooperative, an ideal quite some farmers work towards, is no longer subject to the leasehold legislation if not all the directors of the cooperative have the status of farmers. This means that a lease contract for land brings along less protection for such a cooperative than for farmers or farmers cooperatives.

Another topic we just slightly touched during the sessions yet also came up in the case report is the numerous **interactions** the three farms have **with citizens**, an interest that seems to be shared by the Flemish participants (willing to) engage(d) in collectives. This collective spirit surpasses the limits of the farm itself.

Further consequences for the context

One of the ideas pitched and encouraged by the participants of the focus group was for an actor to look for alternative support from a LEADER-project on the matter. LEADER is a European rural development

³² <http://www.jokebloksma.nl/werkboek/>

grant programme and could help support the uptake and further development of certain collective initiatives. Or more broadly subscribe to a grant call that enables to gather existing knowledge, tools, contacts of services, organisations and consultants and that helps disseminating learnt lessons.

Relevant actors to contribute to unlock these matters would be BioForum (the sector organisation for organic agriculture, processing, retail and food services in Flanders), Landwijzer (the training center for organic and biodynamic agriculture in Flanders), existing facilitators on farm collaborations, De Landgenoten, Innovatiesteunpunt (a support centre that offers consulting for farms on all sorts of innovation), etc.

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