

BELGIUM

Social inclusion

Location(s)

Ottignies, Braine l'Alleud, Tubize.

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Promoting social inclusion & local development

Measure

M16 - Cooperation

Funding (EUR)*

Total budget 1 300 490
EAFRD 682 757
National/Regional 617 278

Project duration*

2017 – 2021

Project promoter(s)

Service de Santé Mentale Entre Mots de la 'Clinique Saint-Pierre d'Ottignies' asbl; Service de Santé Mentale 'Safrans' asbl; CPAS de Tubize

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<https://vachesetbourrache.be/>
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* All three projects

Association 'Nos Oignons' supported the preparation and implementation of three RDP-funded projects that promote social farming in Wallonia

Summary

'Nos Oignons' is an association that since 2012 has supported social integration by organising collective and individual activities on farms for people who suffer from mental health and/or social issues. This kind of interaction helps patients and beneficiaries to learn new things, become reempowered, build new relationships, feel useful and gain self-confidence.



Since 2017, 'Nos Oignons' has contributed to three RDP funded projects in Wallonia. These projects include: organisation of collective workshops and individual experiences at participating farms; networking with other institutions in the territory to extend the coverage of needs; and creation of an operational framework with other operators in Wallonia to address legal issues that obstruct the growth of social farming. The project promoters are two NGOs and a public Social Care Centre.

Results

2000 "farm days" for individuals and 900 days of collective workshops will be delivered by the end of the three projects.

Reduction of costs of day care for public finances combined to innovative source of support and income for farmers (a defrayment is paid to them).

A structural policy is being set up for social agriculture beyond current RDP funding:

- An edition of a practical political guidelines book ('Memorandum') to be distributed before the May 2019 Belgian general elections.
- Modification of the Rural Law Code of Wallonia achieved to integrate the concept of "Rural Social Welcoming", giving Social Farming its first legal basis.

Lessons & Recommendations

"The first results in the field are stunning, for beneficiaries and for farmers. We shall continue to consolidate the framework and spread it in Wallonia (and elsewhere!)." Pursuit of the networking process with other public and private partners (in Wallonia and other European regions) is key to achieve this goal and produce a useful and sustainable framework. Our priorities are :

- ❑ Clarifying and securing the farmers and beneficiaries' status regarding social farming (notably regarding labour and volunteering laws);
- ❑ Convincing health care funds, national medical authorities and labour unions to collaborate as facilitators and acknowledge social farming as a care or a transitory alternative to unemployment;
- ❑ Sustaining the new regional 'umbrella' structure for social farming to give stakeholders appropriate support beyond the 15 current RDP funded pilot projects.

Context

Stakeholders involved in the development of social prescribing consider there to be a distinct lack of tailor-made, non-medical referral options for providing patients in primary care with sources of health and wellness support within their communities. These support offers typically operate alongside medical treatments, but take place outside of health institutions: in community centres, museums and libraries, and in the case of these RDP funded initiatives, on farms. They support beneficiaries' recovery and provide valuable preventative actions that can have a significant impact on reducing the high costs of primary care. Working together with farmers can produce mutual benefits to the farming sector and care provision. Farmers often face high levels of stress, loneliness and a lack of recognition by the local community. On the other hand farmers deal with plant and animal life, which is known to have its own therapeutic effects ('green care').

The association 'Nos Oignons' is specialised in 'social farming'. It has been active in the field of mental health since 2012 when they started to organise collective gardening workshops in partnership with vegetable growers. In 2014 and 2015, the association brought together institutional stakeholders to discuss social farming, for which there was no legal framework and especially no protective status for beneficiaries and farmers. The association also collected and documented relevant experience from various European regions (e.g. Flanders and Rhône-Alpes). By late 2015 it was a laureate of the 'Social Innovation Award' organised by UNIPSO, it then won the Jury Prize at the 2016 "Reintegration Award" organised by the Walloon Reference Centre for Mental Health (CRESAM). A broad consensus was achieved by the end of 2015 on the need to create a multi-sectoral umbrella structure to support social farming in Wallonia.

From 2017 on the first social farming pilot projects were initiated and funded by the Walloon RDP, these predate the umbrella structure. These projects cover fields such as disability, mental health, addiction and social inclusion. Thanks to this support and 'license to experiment', a community of practice is gradually emerging.

'Nos Oignons' co-produced three of the current 15 projects in partnership with project holders: Ottignies' Mental Health Service; "Safrans" Mental Health Service of Braine l'Alleud and the Public Center for Social Action of Tubize.

The projects are focused on psychiatry / mental health and social inclusion and aim to support cooperation between the three participating organisations and local farmers. The area covered by the projects is the province of Walloon Brabant, to the south of Brussels. It has an area of 1 000 km² and population of 400 000 inhabitants, there are more than 1 000 agricultural holdings and has 64 000 hectares of agricultural land.

Objectives

The three projects concerned aimed to:

- Adapt and offer relevant administrative and support tools to stakeholders in the field (farmers, beneficiaries, other social institutions from the territory)
- Promote social farming by:
 - building a network of institutions to reach a significant number of beneficiaries;
 - creating communication and facilitation tools;
 - contributing to project coordination and documentation;
 - creating synergies with other projects and supporting the creation of an operational framework for Wallonia.

Activities

2017 implemented activities

- Launch and coordination of the "Nos Oignons de Safrans" (Braine l'Alleud - 2017-2020) and "Vaches et bourrache" (Tubize - 2017-2021) projects. Hired respectively 1 and 1.25 FTEs for the field work, "Nos Oignons" hired a project manager at 0.2 FTE per project for methodological support, cross-communication and facilitation of the partners network.
- Organisation of first collective workshops and individual receptions at the farms and the creation of administrative and scheduling tools to assist stakeholders (farmers, beneficiaries, colleagues within institutions).
- Organisation of information sessions to recruit participants, institutions and farmers.
- Work with the Walloon Rural Network and other operators to share tools and prepare a Memorandum on social farming which includes practical guidelines, experiences from the field and takes stock of policy suggestions.

2018 implemented activities

- Launch of the project "Nos Oignons d'Entre Mots" (Ottignies - 2018-2021). 1 FTE was hired by the project and 0.2 FTE by 'Nos Oignons' for its support provision.
- Growing level of activity in a growing number of farms.
- Work in progress on the Memorandum for social farming in Wallonia - first release in July 2018.
- Inclusion, together with the Agriculture Minister's office, of social farming in the Walloon Legal Code for Agriculture.
- From January 2018 creation of a "social farming" manager position within the non-profit association 'Accueil Champêtre in Wallonia'. Initiative funded for two years by the private cooperative CERA. It specified the concrete proposal to create an umbrella structure as jointly proposed by "Nos Oignons" and "Accueil Champêtre in Wallonia" since 2016.

Activities planned for 2019 to 2021

- Canvassing a growing number of partner farmers and social institutions (beneficiaries).
- Continue the deployment of adapted communication tools for the general public and the various project stakeholders (dissemination of information, feedback and continuous adaptation of the framework).

Main Results

Economic benefits:

Reduced care cost for patients. Participants in social farming tend to have fewer relapses and hospitalisations. In Wallonia, a day care centre costs around €190 /day/patient and for hospitalisation around €430/day/patient. Social farming is estimated to cost €80/day/patient in this exploratory stage. Valorisation of existing infrastructures and small complementary defrayment/income for farmers (max. €40 /day).

Environmental / Climate action benefits:

Social farming encourages environment-friendly agricultural practices. It has been noted that those who already engage in environment-friendly farming practices are more likely to be open to the idea of getting involved in social farming. On the other hand, several owners of highly-industrialised and non-organic farms have asserted that our initiatives could be a means of helping them to rebuild links with their neighbourhoods and consumers.

We note an evolution in food practices among beneficiaries and community kitchens in social institutions towards local and seasonal food, as a result of our activities.

Social benefits:

Beneficiaries become reempowered, create new relationships, feel useful and gain self-confidence.

The farmers share their know-how, benefit from social exchanges and create new links with beneficiaries and social institutions. They and their working environment is valorised by the recognition and development of different, unexpected skills e.g. relational. All-in-all there is an enhancement of their sense of social worth despite a gloomy overall context.

Results achieved by mid-2018: 18 farmers / 48 individual participants / 432 'farm days' for individuals / 44 participants in 346 days of collective workshops.

Networking value:

The ongoing development of a Walloon framework for social farming brings together a diverse range of actors : 'Nos Oignons', the Walloon Rural Network, the "Accueil Champêtre en Wallonie", "Steunpunt Groene Zorg" in Flanders, etc.

Transferability:

The current work on a regional framework will benefit all farms and social institutions' beneficiaries in Wallonia. In many European regions rural areas are also experiencing very similar realities and could be inspired.

Synergies with other EU policies:

'Nos Oignons' projects contribute to the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy (poverty and social exclusion)

"We go out of our daily lives, we meet people, we discover things. It does me a lot of good. I was rather of a character to stay locked in my room... (...) Little by little, it became almost a passion. It's the weekly outing, we let off steam, we change air, we relax. (...) The fact of coming back from the field with vegetables that we cultivated ourselves, it pushes you after a while to consume them, not to throw them out, it would be a shame. (...) This is also very, very good in the project. And it's good for your health."
Jeremy, beneficiary

Additional sources of information :

https://www.tvlux.be/video/autre/agriculture/au-chant-du-coq-les-fermes-sociales_27361.html

<https://youtu.be/6ElwVxxVLpA>

<https://youtu.be/Lh8m81CTH3c>