

## BELGIUM

### Local development

#### Location

Gaume, Wallonia

#### Programming period

2014 – 2020

#### Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

#### Measure

M07 – Basic services & village renewal  
M19 – LEADER/CLLD

#### Funding (EUR)

Total budget 248 474  
EAFRD 94 998  
National/Regional 128 928  
Private 24 548

#### Project duration

2017 – 2021

#### Project promoter

ASBL – Parc Naturel de Gaume

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#### Website

<https://parc-naturel-gaume.be/>

The project focuses on improving access to agricultural land for new farmers and on adapting conventional agriculture to new agricultural systems based on the production or maintenance of biodiversity through profitable and innovative practices.

### Summary

In the past, rural landscapes were varied and primarily created by the practice of growing a mixture of crops and livestock farming. Marginal lands were devoted to mowing and grazing, that created 'semi-natural' ecosystems rich in fauna and flora. However, current agricultural practices have reinforced the phenomenon of degradation in these semi-natural agricultural environments.



The Agrinew project focuses on the issues of access to agricultural land and the agroecological<sup>1</sup> transition of agricultural systems. It gives farmers viable opportunities to develop their farming activity through public/private or private/private partnerships; as well as ensuring the availability of agricultural land and promoting the restoration of abandoned farmland with high ecological potential. The project supports research and development in innovative agricultural systems that maintain biodiversity, promotes environmental farming systems, and brings together a wide network of stakeholders in the region.

### Results

The project restored 67 hectares of agricultural land and facilitated the setting up of six farmers.

Eight farms took part in the economic analysis, sustainability diagnosis and forage evaluation activities which involved monitoring the weight of 200 animals.

Fifteen hectares will be sown with native flowering plants.

The information and results collected by the actions of the project, together with those of agricultural systems developed abroad, have been communicated through five training/information sessions.

### Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ A key success factor for this project was the strong partnership established between the municipalities of the territory: the Wildlife and Forestry Department for the restoration of land, the Natural and Agricultural Environment Department and the non-profit making association Natagriwal.
- ❑ In the context of rapidly decreasing agricultural biodiversity and the difficulties in accessing agricultural land - problems that exist across Europe - all actions implemented by this project are applicable to other rural regions.

<sup>1</sup>Agroecology promotes farming practices that; mitigate climate change - reducing emissions, recycling resources and prioritising local supply chains.

## Context

In the past, the varied rural landscapes were mostly developed by growing a mixture of crops and livestock farming. Marginal lands were devoted to mowing and grazing, giving rise to 'semi-natural' ecosystems rich in fauna and flora. Current agricultural systems are the result of a political shift towards the intensification of agriculture. This has resulted in the overuse of good and fertile agricultural land, while marginal lands have been abandoned. In addition, current agricultural practices that focus on the increased use of fertilisers and pesticides, the intensification of ploughing and overgrazing have reinforced the phenomenon of degradation in these semi-natural agricultural environments.

Agricultural systems can no longer be evaluated exclusively on the basis of their technical and economic performance, but must also take into account the environmental and 'ecosystem services' impact, such as the conservation of rare and endangered 'heritage' species, the quality of livestock feed, pollination, water purification, atmospheric carbon storage, erosion and flood control. The future of agriculture in Europe, as in Gaume south-east Belgium, the focus of this project, probably depends on the success of our ecological transition. This requires the development of new agricultural systems based on the principles of sustainable agriculture.

The Gaume territory in Wallonia contains large sections of unexploited agricultural land and large areas classified as nature reserves, Natura 2000, etc. In addition, there is an important network of associations that are concerned by issues related to agriculture and the preservation of biodiversity. This project was conceived in response to the decline in agricultural biodiversity at a local level and the difficulties faced by new farmers who wish to access agricultural land.

## Objectives

The objectives pursued by the Agrinew project are to:

- enable the sustainable establishment of new farms by facilitating access to land via public-private or private-private collaboration; and
- develop new agricultural systems which will be based on the production and/or maintenance of biodiversity through research and the promotion of innovative, inspiring and economically viable agricultural practices.

## Activities

To facilitate access to land for new farmers, the project worked on two types of collaborations.

The first is a public-private collaboration aiming to restore municipal agricultural lands that are managed by the Wildlife and Forestry Department and make them available to farmers. These lands, which were initially abandoned and reforested, have been restored with financial support from the Walloon Rural Development Programme (RDP) – sub-measure 7.6. The farmers selected need to maintain the land and follow a management plan with specific agricultural and environmental objectives.

The second is a private-private collaboration which involves cooperation between a vegetable producer and citizens. This is based on the concept known as 'home gardening'. In this case, a landowner who no longer cultivates his land lends it out through a convenience agreement which is free of charge. In this way, the legislation relating to farm leases can be avoided, making the process simpler in administrative terms. Throughout this process, the Agrinew project intervenes by accompanying the vegetable producers in their networking, communication, setting up contracts and logistical organisation regarding short food supply chain orders.

The vegetables, meat and milk produced on the land are then processed and marketed under quality labels by a cooperative created and managed by the Local Action Group 'Parc naturel de Gaume' via the Diversi'Gaume project (territorial synergies).

To support these new farmers in the development of innovative farming systems based on environmentally friendly practices, the project carried out several activities to understand and improve the profitability of fodder management, herd management and the integration and ecological status of natural grasslands :

- Local farms that own natural grasslands participated in an economic analysis and sustainability diagnosis of their farming system.
- A series of quantitative and qualitative forage assessments (production, chemical composition, energy, etc.) were carried out on the entire forage area of the participating farms. The results obtained were then related to the real animal's needs, quantified by a series of animal weight measurements.

<sup>1</sup> Mowed or grazed meadows subject to environmental requirements due to their protection status (natural reserves, wetlands of biological interest, etc.), or environmental regulations (Natura 2000, agri-environment measure, etc.)

- Seeding trials, using an innovative tool designed and manufactured by the project, will be carried out to promote the increase or reintroduction of native flowering prairie plant populations. This tool is composed of a combined spiked harrow-seeder with a customised ploughshare in front of the harrow, and vertical discs that allow 'de-grassing' of a seed furrow. Behind the seed drill there is a roller attached which slightly compacts the soil to improve the soil-seed contact.

Some training and information sessions were also organised to promote innovative agricultural practices adopted in Europe, focusing on themes such as veterinary issues in natural environments and the management of species-rich grasslands.

## Main results

The project restored 67 hectares of agricultural land and facilitated the setting up of six farmers.

As well as the advantage of free and diversified access to land, the vegetable producer-citizen system creates social benefits (sharing, mutual aid, intergenerational interactions), agronomic benefits (cultivated and aerated soil, presence of earthworms) and resource availability (tap water, home compost, electricity). In this way, two innovative agricultural projects have been set up.

Eight farms took part in the economic analysis, sustainability diagnosis and forage evaluation actions, in a partnership with the non-profit making associations

Fourrages Mieux (a soil analysis centre) and Michamps Agricultural Centre, which involved monitoring the weight of 200 animals.

Fifteen hectares will be sown with native flowering plants through a partnership between non-profit making associations Natagora and the LIFE Herbages programme.

Information and results collected from the activities of the project, as well as those of agricultural systems developed abroad, have been communicated by the partnership of the farmers' institute and their union through five training/information sessions.

## Key lessons

The project relied on the strong partnership established between the municipalities of the territory, the Wildlife and Forestry Department for the restoration of land, as well as with the Natural and Agricultural Environment Department and the non-profit making association Natagriwal for the implementation of management plans.

In the context of rapidly decreasing agricultural biodiversity and the difficulties in accessing agricultural land - problems that exist Europe-wide - all actions implemented by this project are applicable to other rural regions. Currently, numerous studies on forage autonomy, harvesting and sowing of prairie plants and adaptation of agricultural systems are taking place on a European scale to improve the ecological standing of agricultural land.

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## Additional sources of information

n/a