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Sagiter

Exchanging agro-ecological knowledge between farmers:

Existing methodologies in Flanders, Belgium

In the Sagiter project, we try to find methodologies to share agro-ecological knowledge. Especially farmers knowledge is focused on, because this knowledge isn't shared enough in common education.

In Flanders most of the agro-ecological farmers are working as organic farmers. Of course there are some exceptions, but in most cases they also ask the official control for organic farming, because it's a way to get some subsidies and a higher remuneration for their products.

So agro-ecological knowledge and knowledge on organic farming are mostly shared within the same pattern. Especially the formal ways of formation are the same, as well in agro-ecological themes as in organic farming as such.

We try to explain two existing ways of sharing agro-ecological knowledge. Officially it is limited to organic farming. That's a restriction, but on the other hand, we're glad that the Flemish government supports this kind of training.



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1. Farmers become advisors

In order to stimulate organic farming, the Flemish government supports individual advising to farmers. This type of advising is as well focused on the technical aspects as on management themes. Especially concerning the conversion to organic farming, the farmer needs an intensive process of accompaniment.

In order to achieve these goals, the Flemish government has elaborated a complete system of recognizing experts, conditions to get these subsidies, maximum amount of subsidies etc. The complete description of this kind of support can be read on the site of the Flemish Government. Unfortunately, it's only written in Dutch...

<http://lv.vlaanderen.be/nl/bio/subsidies/bedrijfsadvisering>

What makes this support special, is the way experts are selected. Traditionally, this type of advising is restricted to agricultural engineers and technicians, with official diplomas etc. This kind of knowledge certainly is recognized, but beside this, also farmers can be recognized. All of them have to pass a kind of examination, to prove their knowledge on organic farming. It doesn't matter whether you have diplomas or not. You just have to prove you know something about organic farming. This recognition is specified for each sector. If you only got experience in cultivating vegetables, you can become advisor in horticulture.

The names of recognized farmers or advisors are published on the site of the agricultural department. Once you agreed as farmer with an advisor, you can make an agreement and specify how often you expect to ask for advice.

Depending on the category of farmer (young farmer, farmer with experience...) you get a different amount of subsidies (75% or 50%). In any way, as farmer you have to pay part of



the costs yourself. But you got advice from a another farmer, with experience. And that's very efficient.

Flanders is a small region, and the organic agriculture in Flanders is even smaller. It's obvious that we haven't so many advisors. But the system is really put into practice. For some farmers it can be usefull, because the're thinking to get retired and try to pass on their knowledge. For others is an interesting way to realize some extra income, e.g. during wintertime, when there is time to focus on another type of work. In any way, this is an existing formula to exchange agro-ecological knowledge between farmers.

2. Farmers networks



Besides the individual advising of organic farmers (and future farmers), Flanders has a system to support farmers groups. In each sector of organic farmers, there are some existing networks (horticulture, dairy cows, cattle, arable crops, fruits, small fruit...). The farmers union of organic farmers, gets some money to support those networks.

In theory those farmers groups have to organize themselves. They can organize reunions as often as they want. That can be with or without some exterior people. Sometimes an expert



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on a certain theme is invited. Sometimes the network collaborates with universities or other scientific institutions. So farmers can deliver data to the researchers, they can steer the research with their input and questions. And on the other hand the results of the scientific research gets easy to the farmers.

<http://www.bioforumvlaanderen.be/biobedrijfsnetwerken/>

But the most important aspect of the farmers networks is the exchange of knowledge between farmers. This often happens on an informal way, while visiting each other's exploitation or farm. Sometimes they are drinking or eating something together and while talking to each other, they are exchanging some specific knowledge. An important aspect of it is the visiting of each other's farms. The meetings are mostly organized at the farm of one of the participants. So information is also exchanged, by looking to each other's fields, animals etc.

The individual farmers aren't subsidized to participate in those network. But the farmers union and experts are supported to facilitate the networks. Although farmers are really convinced about the advantages of the network, it seems to be difficult to be self-supporting. Farmers really like the exchange of knowledge, but they don't always are prepared to organize it themselves...