

## Farms with strong citizen participation

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## D5.2 30 Case studies on rural newcomers, new entrants to farming and successors



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## Farms with strong citizen participation

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## Introduction

Since long there have been examples in which consumers or citizens actively participate in farms worldwide. There are different forms and degrees in which these citizens participate. One of the first examples is the Japanese teikei – meaning ‘cooperation’, ‘joint business’ or ‘link-up’ – where consumers purchase food directly from farmers. Teikei is closely associated with small-scale, local, biodynamic farming, and volunteer-based, non-profit partnerships between producers and consumers. Millions of Japanese consumers participate in teikei. While there is some disagreement as to the ‘first’ teikei group, the concept can be traced back to the mid-1960s, when a group of Japanese women banded together to purchase fresh milk. This Japanese movement towards consumer-farmer partnerships was driven by environmental issues and distrust of the quality of food in the conventional food system (Kondoh, 2015). Around the same time community farm initiatives also popped up in Chile during Salvador Allende’s administration (1970-73) as part of the co-op movement.

One of the specific organisation forms of citizen participation is Community supported agriculture (CSA). This US movement came up in the mid-1980s and was inspired by the ideas on biodynamic agriculture of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s. Little later the CSA movement found its way back to Europe (McFadden, 2021). The European CSA Research Group (2016) defines Community supported agriculture as “a partnership between farmers and the local community, in which the responsibilities, risks and rewards of farming are shared”. But there many more examples of ways in which citizens can strongly participate in farms. The degree to which citizens participate in farms and share risks vary. In this case study we address two of those promising practices in the Netherlands and Flanders (Figure 1).





Figure 1. Location of the two examples

Research is based on analysis of 20 interviews (see annex 1) with relevant stakeholders in both examples, relevant literature (both official and grey), open data available on internet and information on relevant websites. Two meetings have been organised on this case, one to discuss preliminary results to receive feedback to further improve the case study report (May 20) and one to present the final results with an interested public including respondents (June 17).

## Herenboeren Land van Weert (the Netherlands)

### Introduction

The Herenboeren Land van Weert farm is one of the farms under the umbrella of the Herenboeren Netherlands Foundation (*Stichting Herenboeren Nederland* or Herenboeren NL). This movement was inspired by Farming Communities in the UK. Herenboeren started as an initiative of a few conscious consumers from Boxtel. This group came up with the concept of a landlords' farm (the literal translation of *Herenboerderij*), had it researched and calculated. The basic idea is that 200 households ('500 mouths') are shareholders in a farm of around 20 hectares producing vegetables, fruits, a few pigs, cows and chicken. They are the sole shareholders and at the same time the owners and only customers of the farm: the farm only produces for the shareholders. They deposit a one-time sum of €2000 to become co-owner of the farm and additionally pay for a weekly package of fruits, vegetables, potatoes, eggs and meat. But the shareholder-members also have the option to choose a vegetarian package. The farmer is employed by the Herenboeren Netherlands Foundation; conditions and level of wages are agreed with the national organisation; the farmer's salary is charged to the operating costs by the local cooperative and is settled between the national organisation and the local cooperative. The size of the acreage of 20 hectares is based on the aim to achieve regenerative agriculture in which animals are part of the cycle and land is allowed rest. A local farm pays a one-off amount of €75,000 to Herenboeren Nederland. This is a compensation for all costs incurred in the realisation of a local farm. The first half is paid when the cooperative has raised sufficient money, the second half at the actual start of the farm. Thereafter the local farm pays a yearly fee to the national umbrella organisation contribution for annually purchased services (<https://landvanweert.herenboeren.nl/faq>, <https://www.herenboeren.nl/de-herenboerderij/de-baten-en-de-kosten>).

The Herenboeren Wilhelminapark in Boxtel (province of North-Brabant) was the first pilot. It was founded in 2013 and started operation in 2015. In 2014 initiatives in four more Dutch municipalities came up and the umbrella organisation Foundation Herenboeren Netherlands

was founded. Since then the concept of the Herenboeren farm spread around and initiatives for local farms popped up across the country. Herenboeren has since grown into a national organisation of professionals supporting local initiatives with expertise, both during establishment and operation of local farms. Examples are legal issues, automation, real estate matters, certification processes, cultivation plans, insurance, regulations and food safety. In 2020 eight farms are in operation (in Rotterdam, Tilburg, Breda, Boxtel, Soerendonk, Loenen, Apeldoorn, Weert) with many more coming into being ([www.herenboeren.nl](http://www.herenboeren.nl)).

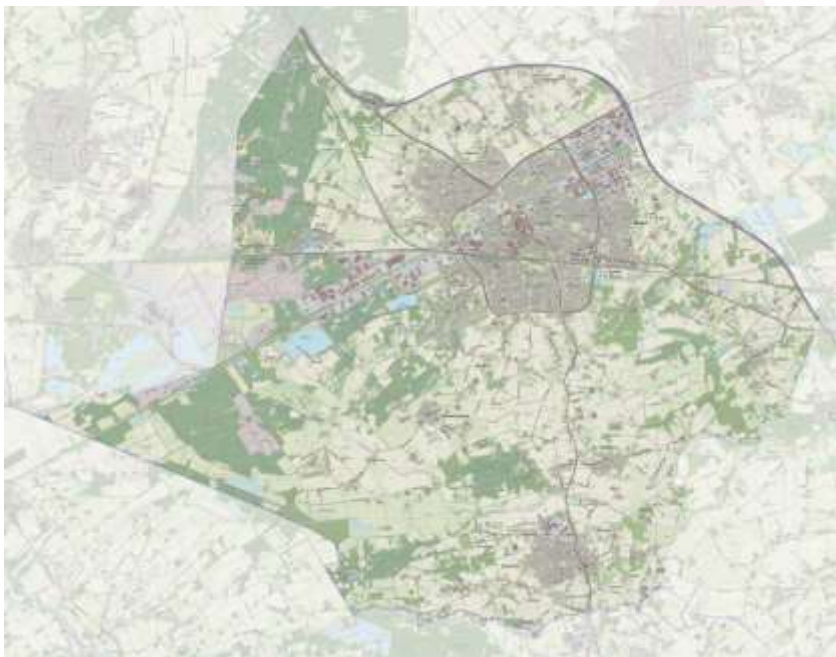
In 2017 a Green Deal (no. 213, Nature-inclusive land use Herenboeren) was signed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the province of North-Brabant, Herenboeren Nederland, the Marggraff Foundation (which acquired the land), the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, the municipality of Boxtel, the cooperative Herenboeren Wilhelminapark and the Agricultural University of Applied Sciences Den Bosch for the pilot farm in Boxtel (<https://www.greendeals.nl/green-deals/natuurinclusief-grondgebruik-herenboeren>, <https://www.herenboeren.nl>). Existing rules (from local to EU level) can (intentionally or unintentionally) hinder the sustainable development of nature-inclusive farming at a Herenboeren farm. An example is legislation on transport of pigs to the slaughterhouse. No distinction is made in it between transport of intensive pig farming to an industrial slaughterhouse and one Herenboeren pig transported to a local butcher. On the basis of the Green Deal these rules can be temporarily set aside with government permission which gives the farm room to experiment. The results will be used in further farms of Herenboeren and of small scale nature inclusive farming in general. The room for experimentation does not automatically mean that what is happening at Herenboeren Boxtel can also happen at other farms. The aim is that if it is allowed for Boxtel, it will soon be allowed for all other entrepreneurs who are working on making the sector more sustainable (NL\_BE3A/Int. 3).

## Local context

### Basic characteristics

One of the first Herenboeren farms to start operation was Herenboeren Land van Weert. It is situated in the South-East of the Netherlands, in the province of Limburg and in the municipality of Weert (see Figure 2) consisting of the city of Weert and five villages. The municipality is 10,554 hectares large of which 32.3% is in use as cultivated land by 130 farms (CBS, 2020). The Natura 2000 area 'Weerter- and Budelerbergen & Ringselven' (total surface 3,164 hectares) is partly located in Weert and partly in two municipalities in the bordering province of North-Brabant (<https://www.natura2000.nl/gebieden/limburg>). The altitude varies between 30-35 metres above sea level (<https://www.ahn.nl/ahn-viewer>).

The population size of Weert is 50,109 inhabitants; with a surface of 10,554 hectares this results in a population density of 4.75 inhabitants per hectare as compared to 5.17 for the Netherlands (CBS, 2020). The population in Weert is slightly older than average in the Netherlands (Figure 3). The average household size is 2.20, compared to 2.18 for the Netherlands (CBS, 2020). Figure 4 shows the size and estimate of the population size.



**Figure 2. Municipality of Weert**

Source: <https://www.gemeentenatlas.nl/>

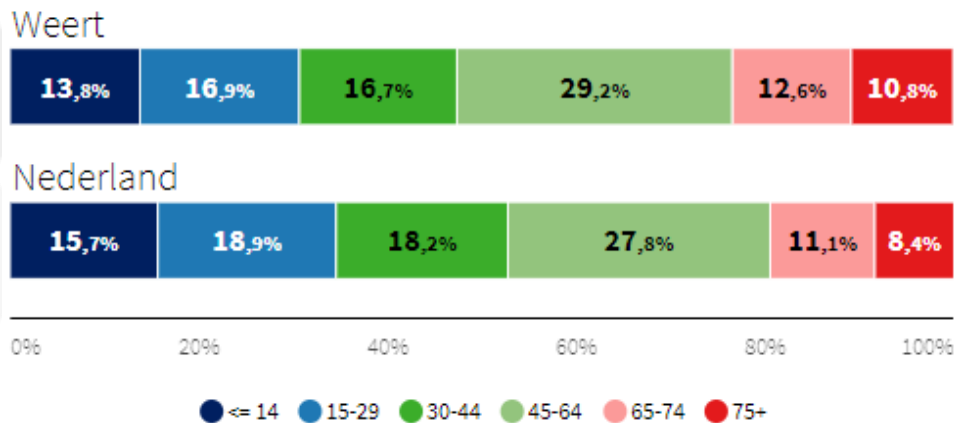


Figure 3. Population by age groups in Weert as compared to the Netherlands (2020, in percentages)

Source: CBS, 2020: <https://weert.incijfers.nl>

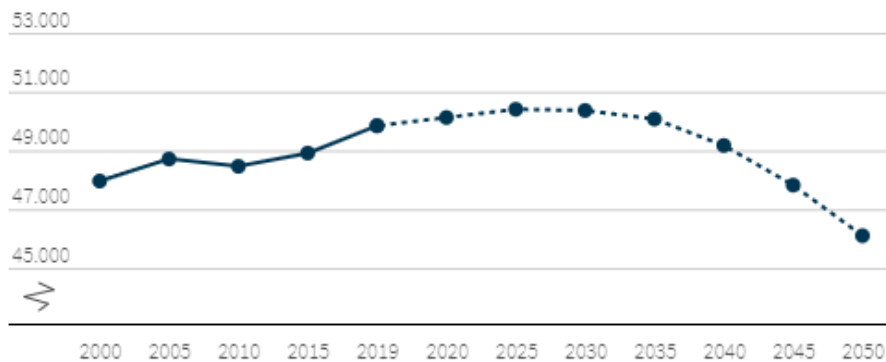


Figure 4. Population size (2000-2019) and estimate (2020-2050) of the municipality of Weert (in numbers)

Source: <https://weert.incijfers.nl/dashboard/prognoses> on the basis of ABF – Primos 2020

Table 1 shows data about the local education level as compared to the Netherlands: Weert has a smaller share of high-educated citizens compared to the Netherlands.

Level of education	% Weert	% Netherlands
Low <sup>1)</sup>	31.74	28.38
Medium <sup>2)</sup>	42.95	41.48
High <sup>3)</sup>	25.31	30.15

- 1) The highest educational level attained is low education. This includes education at the level of primary education, VMBO, the first three years of HAVO/VWO and the entrance training, the former assistant training (MBO1).
- 2) The highest educational level attained is intermediate education. This includes upper secondary education (HAVO/VWO), basic vocational training (MBO2), vocational training (MBO3) and middle management and specialist training (MBO4).
- 3) The highest educational level attained is higher education. This includes education at the level of HBO and WO.

Table 1. Highest level of education op the population (15-75 year) in the municipality of Weert (2020)

Source: CBS Statline, 2020 (<https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline>)

Figures 5 and 6 show data on the local labour market: labour participation, unemployment and the composition of the occupational structure. Labour participation of the 15-25 year group is relatively high in Weert compared to the Netherlands (and unemployment relatively low). Wholesale and retail (G), health and welfare care (Q) and industry (C) are the main occupational sectors in Weert in 2019.

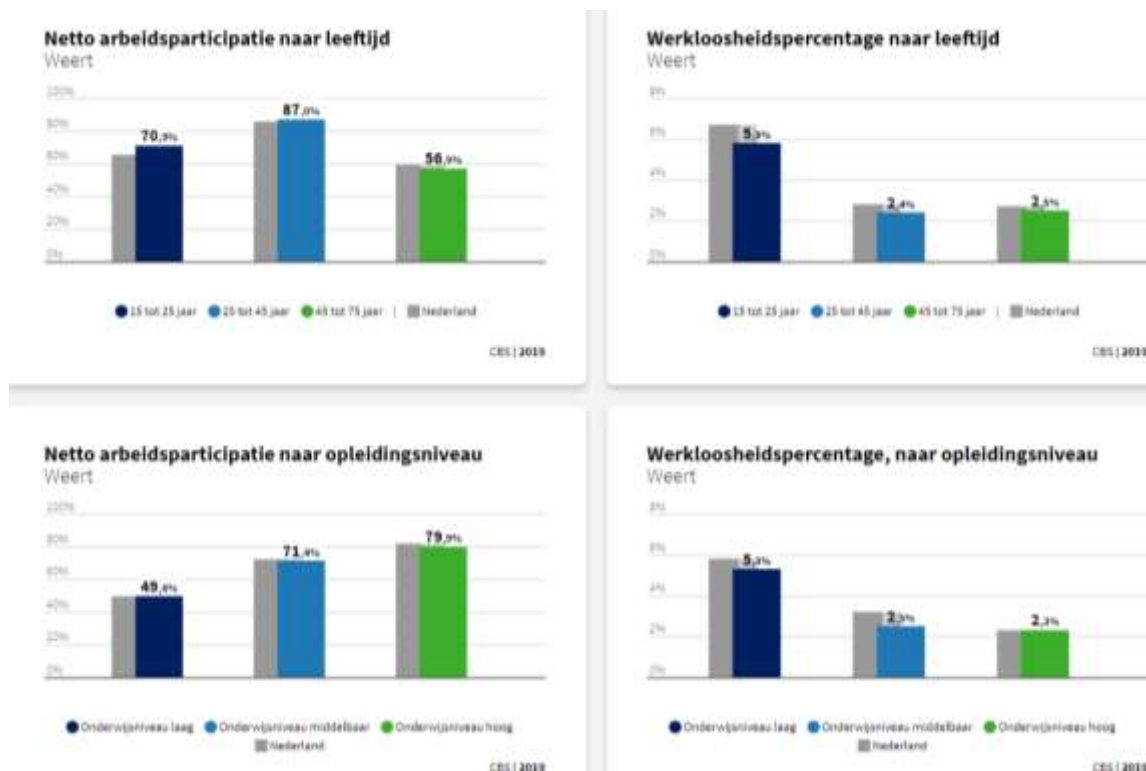
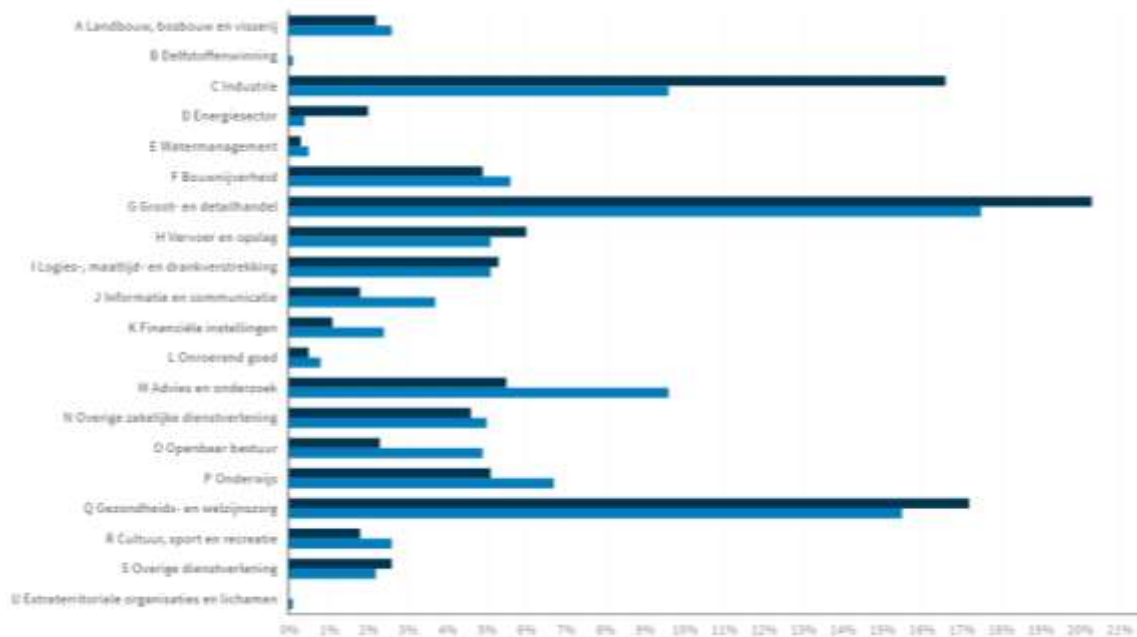


Figure 5. Net employment rate according to age (left top) and education level (left bottom) (Weert compared to the Netherlands) and unemployment rate according to age (right top) and education level (right bottom) (Weert compared to the Netherlands) (2019)

Source: CBS, 2019: <https://weert.incijfers.nl/jive>

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**Figure 6. Composition of the occupational structure of Weert (dark blue) compared to the Netherlands (light blue) (2019, in percentages)**

Source: <https://weert.inciifers.nl/jive>

### Context of the practice

Herenboeren Land van Weert is a Herenboeren cooperative-run farm with an acreage of 11.9 hectares. It is situated south of the Altweert hamlet (Figure 7). The height of the land varies between 32.51-33.98 metres above sea level. The area is part of high black soils with fine loamy sand. The land use zoning category in the municipal zoning plan is agricultural. The area has been in use as agricultural land for centuries and is located on the ‘slopes’ of the ‘Eiland van Weert’. It was already part of the transition from the agricultural lands to the wild, unexplored land to the west and south of the city around 1840 (Herenboeren Land van Weert, n.d.).





## Origin of the practice

As addressed in the Introduction the first Herenboeren farm started operation in 2015 in Boxtel which inspired a group of individuals in the municipality of Weert. This resulted in a marketing campaign bringing together a larger group of individuals. The Herenboeren strategy is to first look for members, then for land and then for a farmer. The reason to start with the members is that they are the future owners and consumers of the products of the farm. The objective of a Herenboeren farm is to feed 500 mouths, boiling down to approximately 200 households. At the development of the Herenboeren concept it was calculated that an area of 20 hectares is needed to do so: about 5 hectares for horticulture (production of vegetables), approximately 1 hectare for fruit, 10 hectare for grazing cattle and 2 hectares for pigs. The remaining acreage is used for extraction of animal feed which is usually outsourced to a contractor (NL\_BE3A/Int.3).

Participation of a household in the cooperative means that it becomes a member-shareholder and has to invest a one-off sum of €2,000; a one-person household invests €1,000. A household becomes owner of a share of the farm. Upon termination of membership the deposit will be returned but conditions apply, such as a membership period of at least three years. A shorter period might be allowed if there is a good reason or if there is a waiting list. For households unable to pay the €2,000 in one go there is the option to pay in eight instalments of €250. The one-off investment is then spread over a period of two years. But even with this option the investment at the start will make it very difficult for many lower-income households to join a Herenboeren farm (NL\_BE3A/Int.6). This investment of €2,000 per household upon joining the cooperative is used for a one-time investment sum of average €400,000 at the start of production which is to be used for the purchase of fruit trees, materials, water and irrigation facilities, yard paving and storage and if applicable shelter for livestock and start-up losses. It is also used for the one-time fee to Herenboeren NL.

After the actual start of the farm all members purchase a weekly food package from the farm for which they pay a weekly contribution per household member ('mouth'). Each local cooperative decides on the amount of the weekly contribution of a full and a vegetarian

package. In 2021 the General Meeting of Land van Weert set this contribution at €11 per household member ('mouth'). The Land van Weert food package contains five types of vegetables and eggs, supplemented with seasonal products such as fruit and nuts. It is vegetarian as the farm does not have livestock (yet), but it is regularly supplemented with a beef package from a local organic farmer. The cooperative hopes that animals will be added to the farm and that there will be a choice then between a full and vegetarian package. It is expected that a full package will then cost between €12 and €15 and a vegetarian one between €7 and €10 (<https://landvanweert.herenboeren.nl/faq>).

These weekly contributions feed the yearly exploitation budget. On the basis of the current amount of the weekly contribution of Herenboeren Land van Weert, the Herenboeren aim of 500 mouths (which is not yet the case in Land van Weert) this comes down to a budget of €286,000 (52 weeks x €11 contribution x 500 mouths) which has to cover the costs incurred by the farm and includes farmer's salary, lease of the land, purchase of seeds, plants and young animals (in the future), contract work if needed, maintenance and depreciation, organisational costs (as annual fee to Herenboeren NL) and consultancy costs. The farm is non-profit; If there is a surplus on the budget, members can decide to invest, save or make the package cheaper (<https://landvanweert.herenboeren.nl/faq>, <https://www.herenboeren.nl>). It is too early to evaluate whether the yearly exploitation budget covers all costs and sufficiently takes risks into account as the Land van Weert farm was only in operation for less than a year at the time of this research.

In January 2017 the Foundation Herenboerderij Land van Weert was set up as the precursor of the local cooperative. At that time there was not yet land and a farmer (radio interview, 2017; NL\_BE3A/Int.3). The cooperative was established in September 2018. When the Foundation started looking for suitable land, it was not a prerequisite that the farmer should live at the location itself. A first potential location was in ownership of *Natuurmonumenten* (one of the main Dutch nature conservation associations) but was dropped because of a number of issues like the fact that land was fragmented and *Natuurmonumenten* not yet very used to lease it for agricultural use. The municipality then proposed 10 locational options of farmers who wanted to stop their business. The final location was not one of these options, but the result of a direct offer to Herenboeren Land van Weert. The former farmer died and his heirs approached the Foundation. For Herenboeren access to land – and

not its ownership – is key, so the national organisation of Herenboeren facilitated the acquisition of 11.9 hectares by *Stichting Grondbeheer* (Foundation Land Stewardship) in October 2019 (Stichting Grondbeheer 2019). Stichting Grondbeheer is a 40-year old public benefit organisation acquiring agricultural land and leasing it to farmers for biodynamic agriculture. The original focus has been enlarged from biodynamic to organic, biodynamic and nature inclusive (NL\_BE3A/Int.1). The offer to the cooperative also included real estate, which could not be acquired by Stichting Grondbeheer. A private investor took care of financing the real estate related to the farm (by a 20 year loan to Stichting Grondbeheer).

In the process of acquisition and starting the farm, there were a number of information meetings for local residents and specifically for those living around the farm. There was resistance on this type of farm as residents feared increased mobility and nuisance by parking by the farm cooperative members and keeping animals on the basis of nitrogen emissions and opposed the application of permits. Preparations for cultivation started end of 2019 by the plantation of 2 hectares of fruit trees and fencing. Herenboeren NL was responsible for the vacancy of the farmer who started his job as farm manager in February 2020. He started cultivation in spring 2020.

The weekly food packages are collected by the cooperative members once a week on a fixed date on either the farm or one of the two additional pick-up points in the neighbouring hamlets of Nederweert and Stamproy. These two pick-up points help to decrease mobility to the farm. An additional measure to manage mobility is that cooperative members are asked to travel by bike (not by car) to the farm. Production started in 2020 with 150 member households (NL\_BE3A/Int.2), and counted 176 member households early 2021 (NL\_BE3A/Int.4). The aim is still to extend the number of households to 200. As the average age of the first 150 households is relatively high, actions are envisaged to attract younger households (NL\_BE3A/Int.5).

Because less land was available than the 20 hectares in the Herenboeren concept, keeping animals was not possible but the aim is still to increase the acreage to enable this. Keeping animals needs to be in line with regulations at different government tiers. As these permits need time and are challenging, this was another reason to put keeping animals lower on the list of priorities. The basic objective of Herenboeren to feed a maximum of 500 mouths (200 households) would mean that the farm should apply for a permit to the municipality to keep

of maximum of 25 pigs and 1,000 chickens. Because of current regulations in relation to PFAS (Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) restrictions and a recent decision by the Council of State (in Dutch *Raad van State*) on this issue, the farm will probably apply for only 4 pigs and 125 chickens when additional land becomes available (Gemeente Weert, 2019). An alternative could be nature grazing cattle (NL\_BE3A/Int. 2, 6 and 7).

## Actors involved

### **Stichting Herenboeren Nederland**

Herenboeren Nederland (NL) developed an overall concept for local cooperative nature-inclusive farms throughout the Netherlands and provides overall services for local farms during initiation and operation. It is a small professional organisation of 8 FTE with self-employed persons for specific services. It has a three-headed Board and a six-headed Supervisory Board. The idea for Herenboeren popped up in 2006 and resulted in the Foundation Herenboeren Netherlands (*Stichting Herenboeren Nederland*) in 2014.

Five phases are distinguished in the setting up and the operation of a local farm: orientation, concentration, design, realisation and exploitation (or operation). The role and tasks of the national organisation and the local initiative are clearly formulated. The national organisation 'unburdens' the local initiative as much as possible from issues as land and lease contract, local permits and zoning, legal and organisational aspects of the new local cooperative. As a contribution the local farm pays a one-off entrance fee of €75,000. In addition, the national organisation asks an annual contribution of €100 euros per member household, so €20,000 for a local cooperative, which is used for services as website, insurance, PR activities etc. There is currently discussion about the future organisation. Herenboeren NL is now a foundation, but it might become a kind of mother cooperative in the near future (NL\_BE3A/Int.3).

Since its inception some developments have taken place. At the start the weekly contribution of a household was based on cost price: the price for a product was compared with the shop price, whereas currently it is based on a cost sharing model allowing to focus only on the quality of a product. Another development is the way land is handled. Access to land is key and not land ownership for Herenboeren. To allow smoother availability and financing of land for local farms joint initiatives have been set up to facilitate land lease. Aardpeer is such a joint initiative combining Stichting Grondbeheer, Stichting Herenboeren NL, Stichting Wij.land and Triodos Regenerative Money Centre. They share their aim to improve the living environment and facilitate access to farm land for nature-friendly agriculture (NL\_BE3A/Int.1 and 3, <https://aardpeer.nl>). Another issue is the focus of the

movement. For the initiator a new way of food production was key at the conception, but since then the community building side of the movement (among local cooperative members) also proved to be essential (NL\_BE3A/Int.3).

### **Herenboeren Land van Weert**

Each local Herenboeren farm is run by a cooperative with members or shareholders. A Board is chosen from the members to manage day-to-day affairs. At least once a year there is a members meeting in which all members participate in decisions about budget, annual cultivation plan and – if available at the local farm – livestock farming, and which activities will be further developed on and around the farm. The cooperative employs a knowledgeable and experienced farmer (via the national organisation) who works on the land and runs the farms. When the farmer is sick or during busy times, he or she can enlist the help of nearby landlords' farms or hire contractors as the budget offers space for hiring labour. The members of the cooperative can also volunteer on the farm, but this is not obligatory (NL\_BE3A/Int. 2 and 5; <https://www.herenboeren.nl>).

Herenboeren Land van Weert started off when two local residents were inspired by a newspaper article on the Herenboeren concept in 2016 and started to develop the local initiative. With a number of other initiators they brought together interested households who signed a letter of intent. 150 letters of intent are considered a solid basis to establish the local cooperative according to Herenboeren NL and the cooperative was formally established in September 2018. Land and related real estate were acquired by Stichting Grondbeheer in October 2019 and leased to the local cooperative. The farmer came into service in February 2020 and the first distribution of food packages was in May 2020.

Apart from a seven-headed Board there are five working groups consisting of volunteers among the cooperative members: finance, real estate management, food exploitation, distribution of food packages and activities (such as catering, education, open days, social activities).

### **Stichting Grondbeheer**

Since its establishment in 1978 Stichting Grondbeheer (Foundation Land Stewardship) has had two goals: to free agricultural land from economic traffic and to improve and/or restore

the quality of these lands and ecosystems through biodynamic agriculture. Land is bought with donations and perpetual bonds from citizens and then made available to farmers on the basis of long-term leasehold contracts and a lease price which is based on the producing capacity of the land (<https://www.bdgrondbeheer.nl>). The principle of free land is also used in the collaboration with Herenboeren. The objective of biodynamic agriculture to produce vital food in a vital environment, whereby the biodiversity and quality of the soil increase every year, is not guaranteed by a control organisation but by the community at Herenboeren (<https://landvanweert.herenboeren.nl>). As addressed under Stichting Herenboeren Nederland, Stichting Grondbeheer is also partner in Aardpeer.

In October 2019 Stichting Grondbeheer and the Herenboeren Land van Weert cooperative signed the deed of purchase of 11.9 hectares and related real estate (farmhouse and barns). The agricultural land and buildings are leased to the local cooperative on the condition that biodiversity and environment are improved with sustainable agricultural methods (Stichting Grondbeheer, 2019). The land lease period is 26 years, as is common for agricultural land. A private investor borrowed Stichting Grondbeheer money for the related real estate; for Stichting Grondbeheer it was the first time they also acquired real estate and not only land (NL\_BE3A/Int.1).

### **Farmer**

The Land van Weert farmer is employed via Herenboeren Nederland in the function of manager (*'bedrijfsleider'*). He has a background in biodynamic agriculture (Warmonderhof: the major Dutch biodynamic agriculture vocational training) and worked several years on an English CSA farm. The Herenboeren Land van Weert farm is the first one with real estate and a farm house. As he did not live in the area the availability of a farm house was convenient for him and his family.

In regular agricultural education students focus on a specialisation, whereas biodynamic agriculture education focusses on mixed farming which is in line with the Herenboeren concept. Farmers without such a mixed farming background receive additional training by Herenboeren NL. A condition for appointment as a Herenboeren farmer is that he/she is prepared for continuous (additional) training, internships and coaching by and with colleagues and other experts. It is also a condition that the course initiated by Herenboeren

Nederland has been successfully completed (<https://landvanweert.herenboeren.nl/vacature>). Now that more local farms start operation Herenboeren farmers organise themselves by networking regularly and exchanging experiences; this started during Covid-19 times via Zoom meetings. One of the future options – once more local Herenboeren farms are in operation – might be to set up a cooperative of the local farmers instead of them being employed by Herenboeren NL (NL\_BE3A/Int.2).

One fulltime farmer is appointed for each local Herenboeren farm. In addition, there is financial room on the local budget for 0.5 FTE for labour to be hired during the season. In addition there is a budget for contract work. This all together comes down to about 2-2.5 FTE (NL\_BE3A/Int.3). The Cooperative members are not obliged to volunteer, but they are most welcome. To date, on each farm a group of volunteers has formed who are willing to cooperate. At Land van Weert the farmer heads them about three mornings a week. They help in the harvest and distribution of fruits and vegetables and occasionally in works on the land and the farm.

The farmer is autonomous in farming within the scope of the annual budget and cultivation plan. One of the local Board members of the cooperative is accountable in the Board for the farm production and in regular contact with the farmer. Currently this is someone who has been a farmer himself and allows the farmer sufficient autonomy in his job. If this would be someone with little background in agriculture and with another view on the needed relation between local Board member and farmer Herenboeren NL could play a role in support (NL\_BE3A/Int.2). The local Board is responsible for the local network as residents living around the farm, local citizens, municipality (permits) etc.

### **Municipality of Weert**

The municipality of Weert was involved in the initiative since 2016, both at the level of civil servants and administration, specifically Alderman Geert Gabriëls who was very enthusiastic about the initiative from the start (NL\_BE3A/Int.7). The Herenboeren initiative is in line with the municipal vision of future agriculture in which the products are grown close to the buyers. The municipality embraced the initiative and committed itself to facilitate in providing a location for information meetings during the start-up phase, potential options



for land and handling necessary local permits. Neighbouring residents objected the location and the municipality facilitated dialogue between the cooperative and the neighbouring residents. The municipality provided two subsidies on communication to the local initiative to enlarge their platform at the start (NL\_BE3A/Int. 6 and 7).

In 2016 the municipality published a Vision on nature and landscape (Gemeente Weert, 2016) which also addressed a vital countryside where agriculture, nature, recreation and built environment are in balance, with enough sufficient space to be sustainable. In 2020 Weert published a vision on Agriculture (gemeente Weert, 2020) with the title ‘Cooperating on diversity and quality; not more, but better’. The aim of this vision is to give direction to the ongoing transition and aim for the necessary sustainability of agriculture, within the possibilities offered by the municipality has to do so. An important point of attention for the development of the countryside is the expected vacancy due to agricultural businesses stopping. Herenboeren Land van Weert fits well in this vision.

There is some discussion about the extension of Land van Weert with keeping animals at a small-scale. The municipality has suggested Land van Weert to cooperate with third parties. Management of cows that are used to graze nature areas could be included in the farm instead of extending the farm acreage (with approximately 10 hectares) to keep animals for meat (NL\_BE3A/Int.7). The Green Deal which the first Herenboeren farm settled to tolerate certain deviations from formal legislation is not directly applicable to the Land van Weert farm. This is also due to the fact that there is some resistance from neighbouring residents.

### **Nature and Environment Centre IJzeren Man**

Nature and Environment Centre IJzeren Man (*Natuur- en Milieucentrum IJzeren Man*) is largely funded by the municipality of Weert (on the basis of project financing) and was offered to the initiators of the local farm as location for their information meetings. The aim of the centre is to reach out as much as possible to youth and adults to convince them of the importance of a nature-friendly awareness and a sustainable society (NL\_BE3A/Int.8, <https://www.nmcweert.nl>). The centre cooperates with 11 partners: with Herenboeren Land van Weert on education in the field of nature inclusive farming and on training of Herenboeren volunteers for local school children. The network function of the partners is

important to the centre and all partners. The centre has a small shop where surplus products and produces by Herenboeren could be sold in the future (NL\_BE3A/Int.8).

### **Province of Limburg**

The province of Limburg is hardly involved in Herenboeren Land van Weert, only by providing a subsidy in the field of improvement of biodiversity in the landscape in 2016. This covered part (€24,800) of the investment in orchard planting. The concept of Herenboeren is mentioned as a good practice example in nature-inclusive agriculture, agricultural landscape management and food communities by the province of Limburg in its Environmental Vision (provincie Limburg, n.d.).

### **Local residents (living around the farm)**

The farm area is situated near a hamlet and close to a villa park. A number of information meetings was organised to inform the direct neighbours. They feared potential nuisance by the new way of farming with many cooperative members and volunteers involved such as increased (car) mobility in a quiet area and increased emissions by animals. As a result measures were taken to address these issues: cooperative members are asked to travel by bike, two additional pick-up points for the food packages in neighbouring hamlets have been created and livestock is not yet included on the farm although a small number of chicken and pigs would have been possible. Chicken would then be housed in a mobile chicken caravan and the pigs would live outdoors. Communication with neighbours is on the agenda of the local Board (NL\_BE3A/Int. 2).

## Style of farming and activities promoted

What stands out from this example is the fact that members or shareholders in the cooperative own the local farm and that the farmer is employed by the cooperative (via the national organisation). The Herenboeren concept aims at local food production (the so-called 'short chain') and at a better quality of food production by focussing on nature driven food production. Herenboeren NL developed a matrix that guides the course of each local farm. This Matrix on Sustainable Food Production can be seen as a compass raising questions and providing input for choices to be made. One axis presents four context variables (soil, landscape, production and community) with four design principles (sovereignty, (bio) diversity, circularity and transparency) on the other axis (<https://www.herenboeren.nl>).

Each local farm has access to land with specific characteristics which will influence what can be produced locally. The farmer will propose a cultivation plan and related budget yearly in close cooperation with the responsible Board member and often on the basis of one or more surveys among cooperative members. This is subject to approval in the general meeting of the cooperative (NL\_BE3A/Int. 2 and 5). In general the type of production is very mixed with a selection of fruit and nut trees, soft fruits, vegetables, and animals (chickens, pigs, cows). This asks for a wide set of skills of the employed farmer. The quality of the production does not have to meet formal quality labels as it is only distributed to members of the cooperation. However there are conditions set by Herenboeren NL with informal checks by Herenboeren peer farmers (NL\_BE3A/Int. 2). The cooperative discussed in its general meeting what to do if there is a temporary overproduction of vegetables or fruits: a first step is to offer it to the food bank; a second to feed it to the animals and a final one to submerge it in the ground as fertilization. It will not be offered for sale as this will create an economic incentive which was deliberately removed from the Herenboeren concept (NL\_BE3A/Int. 4). The fact that the cooperative is the formal owner of the farm and because of the close relation between farmer and Board and cooperative volunteers, the farmer needs communicative skills. The farmer also needs skills on the demand side of production in order to be able to propose a balanced cultivation plan that meets weekly food packages, whereas a traditional farmer would probably focus less on demand and more on production only.

There will be few farmers who meet both technical skills for the mixed and nature-inclusive agriculture and communicative skills. This is why the national umbrella organisation – the formal employer of the local farmers – offers support and additional courses. In addition the farmers have organised themselves to exchange best practices.

## Synergies and networking

### Relationships with the local community

Initiators of local Herenboeren farms aim to attract nearby living cooperative members as focus is on local food production. The Land van Weert farm attracted middle-aged cooperative members and aims at younger households to fill up the intended 200 households. The opportunity to participate as a volunteer could be seen as a facilitator in local community building. Other than volunteering in food production, harvesting and distribution of food packages, other initiatives also pop up like sharing recipes, organising cooking workshops, processing food, nature and agriculture education for youth etc. These initiatives firstly aim at the own cooperative members but also entails cooperation with other local initiatives like the Nature and Environment Centre IJzeren Man, primary schools, beekeepers etc. A wider exposure within the local cooperative but also the wider local community is supported by a website and social media as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. On average local initiatives for a Herenboeren farm in more urbanised areas find it easier to attract interested households and more difficult to find land and in less urbanised areas the other way around (NL\_BE3A/Int. 3).

Starting this new type of farm also might arouse some suspicion among local neighbours and businesses. Unfamiliar with what it might bring, they fear the increase of people on the farm, car mobility, and another way of production and whether this might affect their living enjoyment. Further effort in informing local neighbours and businesses and involving them in the farm activities will help to create a balanced community.

### Networking established

The relation between the local farm Herenboeren Land van Weert and the national Herenboeren NL organisation is important. A local farm depends for some services at initiation and during operation on the national organisation. This will probably further evolve now that some local farms are actually in place. An example of new service provided is health and safety legislation and insurance for the volunteers. The future direction will

probably be such that Herenboeren NL will turn into a mother organisation and that services will be offered on the basis of a cafeteria model in which there is a choice between available services and where the local farm can choose the options that best suit the local situation (NL\_BE3A/Int. 3 and 4).

## Policies and institutional supports

European agriculture policy has long been dominated by a strong focus on large scale and intensive ways of food production. Both European and Dutch national agriculture policy are slowly moving towards more sustainable agriculture. Since 2019 when the EU issues stricter regulation on PFAS and emissions of nitrogen and ammonia policy at different tiers is increasingly protecting nature and landscape values and promoting biodiversity.

The fact that Herenboeren NL started as a national platform enables it to raise the innovative concept to the minister of Agriculture, join the national debate at all levels and form a lobby towards small scale, nature inclusive and more citizen supported agriculture. The fact that Herenboeren NL was able to sign a Green Deal for the first local farm will develop knowledge and hopefully new regulations which are more in line with this new type of farming which at a smaller scale. Current regulations are specifically strict on keeping farm animals. Whereas an average farm with a strong citizen involvement would mainly produce vegetables and fruits, the Herenboeren concept includes animals to close the loop. It is this animals' part of the concept which is not always in line with national regulations. Support by local policy and the local context is important: the municipality can help to facilitate in finding land, zoning and permit issues.

Local Herenboeren farms do not own their land, but usually lease it from an organisation. This can either be a private foundation or a nature or landscape organisation. Whereas in the past nature and landscape organisations had the tendency to acquire land and to give it completely back to nature, nowadays nature inclusive agriculture is also promoted on these lands. One of the private foundations is Stichting Grondbeheer which acquired the land of the Land van Weert farm. Land can be acquired from a farmer ending his business as in our case but it can also be public land owned by a municipality or province. We already presented the Aardpeer initiative which aims at developing financial instruments that generate money with which to buy land (section "Actors Involved").

## Policies activated, constraints and need of new policies

We already touched upon the fact that a lot of national regulation is based on large scale production oriented agriculture, which is especially problematic in relation to small scale keeping of animals at a farm. The input by the national Herenboeren platform at both national and local level together with other platforms putting smaller scale biodynamic and more nature inclusive ways of agriculture on the policy agenda and bringing a changed mind set of the public will further facilitate this type of agriculture.

What also would facilitate the increase of the Herenboeren type of local farms is the development of financial instruments with which citizens can contribute to acquiring agriculture land by issuing obligations, shares, crowdfunding by foundations etc. A suggestion in one of the interviews (NL\_BE3A/Int.1) was that it would be interesting to consider a similar system as in France (Socially responsible investment) where major investors and pension funds are required to invest 5% of their portfolio in projects with a social component. French pension funds announce a new SRI strategy also focussing on climate and sustainable development goals.



## Impact and perspectives

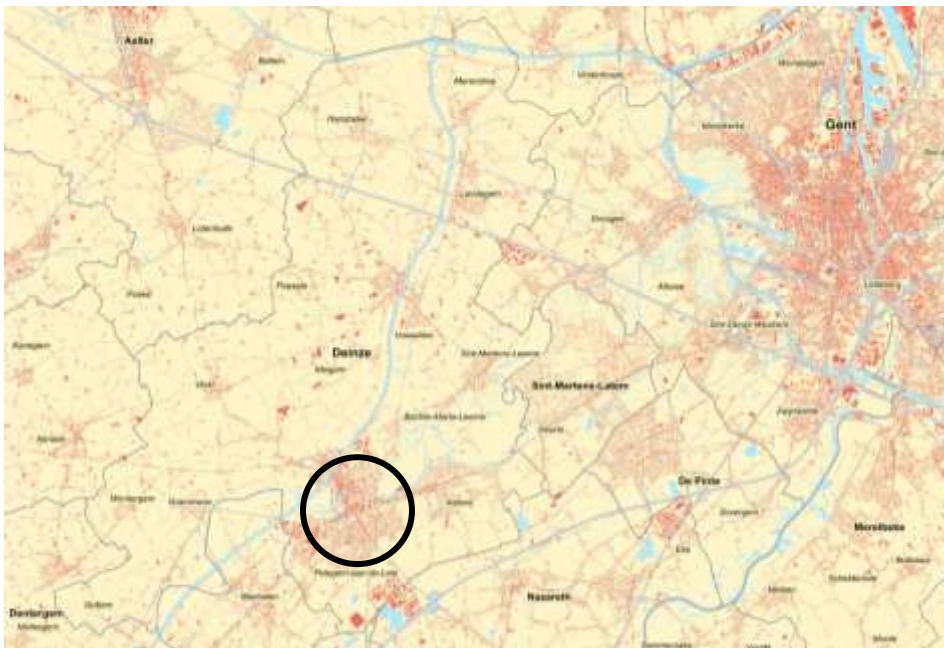
The Herenboeren concept will result in small scale local farms run by an employed farmer. The farmer does not need to invest in land and real estate acquisition and machinery, but receives a fair monthly salary and right to a pension and holidays. Whereas the trend is towards fewer and larger agricultural businesses with less employment opportunities for farmers, the Herenboeren concept opens up opportunities as farms are at a smaller scale and less capital intensive. In addition to focus on better quality of local food production the community building component of being a cooperative member of a local Herenboeren farm should also be taken into account.

## De Wassende Maan (Flanders/Belgium)

### Local context

#### Basic characteristics

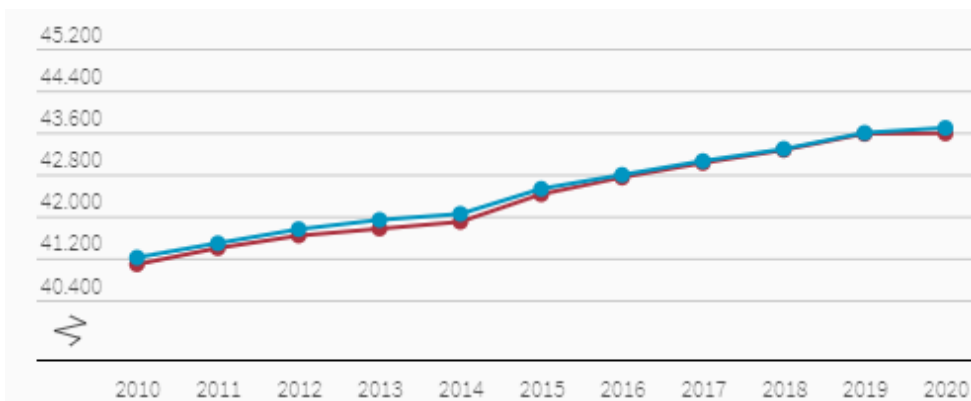
The farm estate, shop and offices of De Wassende Maan (DWM) are located in Astene, which is part of the municipality of Deinze. The current acreage of 22 hectares is located partly in the municipality of Deinze and partly in the municipality of Zulte, which is southeast of the city of Gent in the Flanders Region, in the province of East-Flanders (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8. Location of De Wassende Maan farm (red) in the municipality of Deinze (black)**  
 Source: <https://www.geopunt.be/>

In January 2019 the municipalities of Deinze and Nevele merged into one municipality called Deinze. Where possible we will use recent data for the new merged municipality (and indicate so). If no recent data is available we will use data of the pre-merged municipality of Deinze as the farm estate is located in that municipality. The merged municipality of Deinze is 12,742 hectares large, while before 2019 it was 7,553 hectares. In 2020 74.5% was zoned as agricultural land, as compared to 57.7% for the Flemish Region

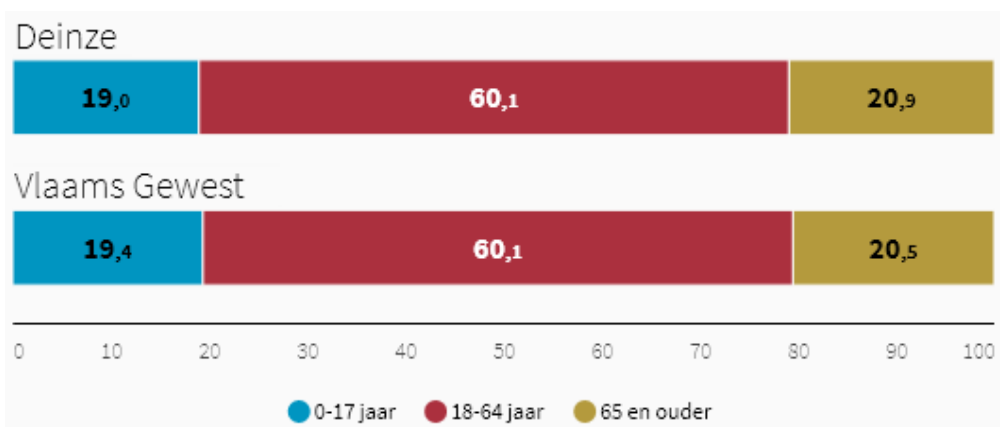
(<https://provincies.incijfers.be/dashboard/dashboard/landbouw>). The Natura 2000 area ‘Zandig Vlaanderen Oost’ (Sandy Flanders East, total surface 3,377 hectares) is partly located in Deinze (<https://www.natura2000.vlaanderen.be/gebied/zandig-vlaanderen-oost>). The altitude varies between 5-15 metres above sea level (<https://nl-nl.topographic-map.com>). In 2020 the population size of Deinze was 43,580 (Figure 9) resulting in a population density of 3.42 inhabitants per hectare (as compared to 4.88 for the Flemish Region). The breakdown of age categories compares well to the Flemish Region (Figure 10). The average household size is 2.31 and comparable for the Flemish Region (2.32) (Rijksregister, provincies.incijfers.be). Figure 11 shows data on the employment rate, which is slightly higher in Deinze than in the Flemish Region.



Blue: total number of inhabitants according to Rijksregister and official statistics  
 Red: official statistics of the total number of inhabitants

**Figure 93. Population size (2010-2020) and estimate (2020-2050)**

Source: various sources 2010-2020 (<https://provincies.incijfers.be/dashboard/dashboard/bevolking/>)



**Figure 10. Age categories of inhabitants in Deinze compared to the Flemish Region (Vlaams Gewest) (2020 in percentages)**

Source: Rijksregister, 2020 (<https://provincies.incijfers.be>)

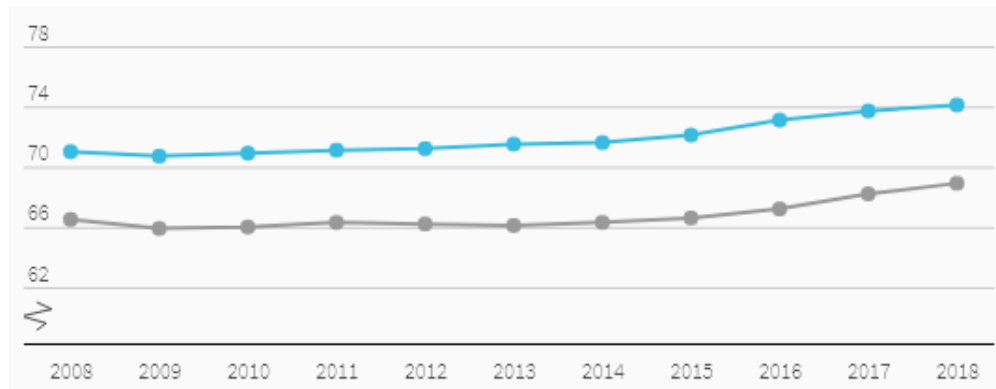


Figure 11. Employment rate for the population of 15-64 years of Deinze (in blue) compared to the Flemish Region (in grey) (in percentage for 2008-2018)

Source: VAR/ provincies.incijfers.be, <https://provincies.incijfers.be/dashboard/dashboard/economie>

In 2019 58% of the unbuilt area in (pre-merged) Deinze was in use for agriculture which is higher than for the Flemish Region (47%) (Figure 12). In 2016 when an agricultural typology map was made of Flemish municipalities, Deinze was characterised as ‘intensive livestock farming and cattle’ (<https://provincies.incijfers.be/dashboard/dashboard/landbouw>). The number of businesses with agricultural production in (pre-merged) Deinze decreased from 367 to 315 in the period 2011-2019 (Figure 13). In 2020 there were 8 organic producing agricultural businesses and 7 had home production ([provincies.incijfers.be](https://provincies.incijfers.be)).

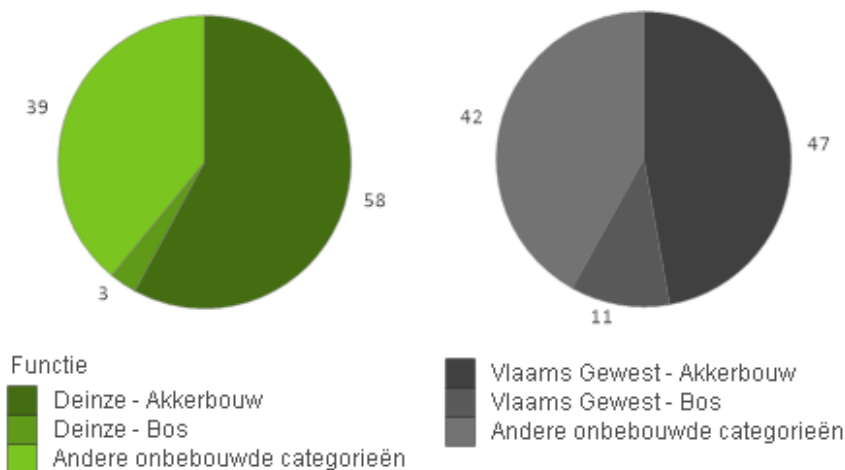


Figure 12. Shares of agriculture (dark green/grey), woods (middle green/grey) and other unbuilt categories (light green/grey) (in percentages, green for (pre-merged) Deinze and grey for the Flemish Region) in 2019

Source: <https://provincies.incijfers.be>

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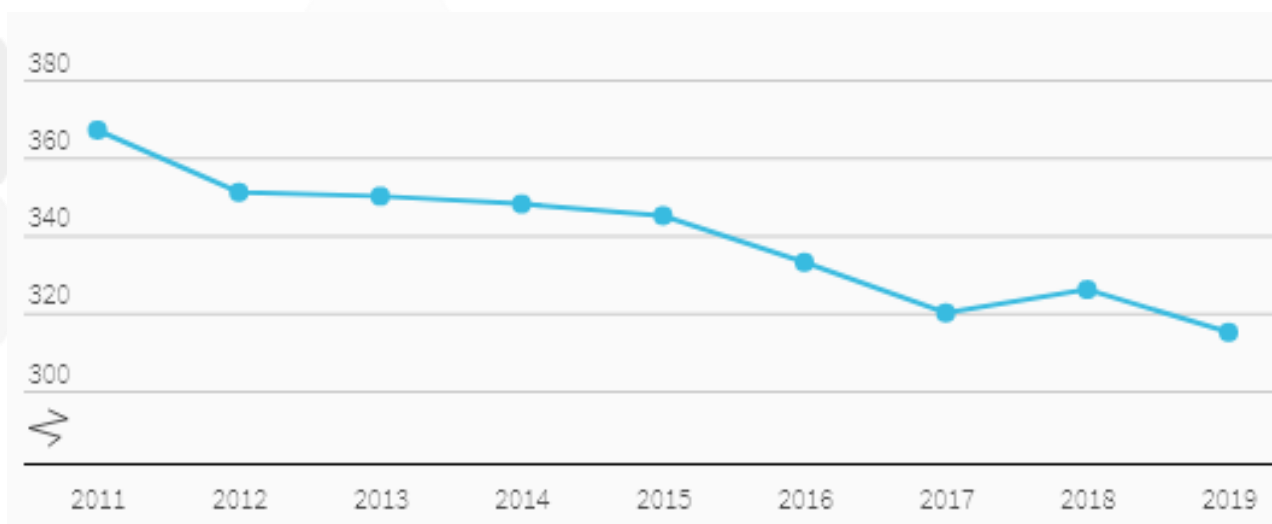


Figure 43. Number of businesses with agricultural production in (pre-merged) Deinze in 2011-2019

Source: <https://provincies.incijfers.be/dashboard/dashboard/landbouw>

## Origin of the practice

De Wassende Maan is a cooperative-run farm with an acreage of 22 hectares. The soils in the region can be characterised as sandy and loamy (<http://www.geopunt.be>: soil map). The farm was founded in 1979 by Kristien De Witte who gave up her career as a teacher to start biodynamic farming by leasing 1 hectare agricultural land in a very informal way. Her motivation was that she was discontented about traditional agriculture. The name 'De Wassende Maan' – which can be translated as the Crescent Moon – was inspired by the poetry collection 'The crescent moon' by Rabindranath Tagore. The crescent moon is the moon during the two weeks after new moon. The word crescent here means 'to increase' or 'to grow' (<https://www.dewassendemaan.be>). The initiator's main objective was biodynamic food production (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a). A number of volunteers joined her, most of whom did not have an agricultural background. In 1986 De Wassende Maan acquired the biodynamic food production label Demeter as first Flemish farm (<https://www.dewassendemaan.be>). Later on a group of two to five farmers run the farm as self-employed farmers. Early 1990s Kristien De Witte had to withdraw from the farm and she handed it over to others. In 1999 a non-profit association (*vzw* or *vereniging zonder winstoogmerk*) was set up to be able to purchase an additional 1.6 hectares of agricultural land in Deinze. In addition a cooperative (*cvba* or *coöperatieve vennootschap met beperkte aansprakelijkheid*) was established to which the land was leased. The cooperative is also the landowner of 2.5 hectares including the estate with shop, offices and barn.

Since the very start Kristien De Witte distributed her vegetables by car to customers (Van Boxel & Schlaman, 2008). She also sold them from her barn on Saturday mornings. In 1990 this practice grew into a small shop where the produced vegetables were sold. Since then it was been enlarged a number of times (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a). In 1995 De Wassende Maan was the first to start vegetable subscriptions or bioboxes in Flanders. This concept was inspired by the Swiss example of Le Panier. By subscription of consumers to a weekly portion of biodynamic vegetables (and fruits), the farm was assured of a fixed and predetermined purchase and was able to shape a cultivation plan without having to depend on wholesale. Around that same time the barn from where vegetables were sold was turned into a farm

shop where the bioboxes were distributed as well. As the number of bioboxes increased pick-up points in the region (including close-by Ghent) were added to the shop. For this purpose a truck was bought in 2008 which was equipped for 1,200 vegetable packages (Van Boxtel & Schlaman, 2008). Since 2015 the shop also sells other organic and ecological products than own produce. Since then DWM produces for bioboxes, the shop and wholesale (<https://www.dewassendemaan.be>). In 2010 sale to wholesalers became more important because of an increase in the agricultural acreage. As this proved to be insufficiently lucrative, a few years later it was decided that from then only surpluses would be delivered to wholesalers and that there would be more focus on bioboxes and sale through the shop. Another part of the motivation to do so was that the latter two need a wide range of crops whereas wholesalers need a focus on a limited number of crops (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a).

### **Current practice and organisation**

Early 2021 DWM cultivates in total 22 hectares of biodynamic agricultural land: 5 hectares in Astene including farm, shop and offices, surrounding fields and five large tunnel greenhouses and 17 hectares in Deinze and Zulte with land for arable farming of vegetables. The acreage of 22 hectares is split in 2.5 hectares in ownership of the cooperative (including shop, offices and barn), 1.6 hectares in ownership via vzw DWM, 17.9 hectares leased through various private individuals or companies (16.9 hectares on the basis of a 10 years contract and 1 hectare on the basis of seasonal lease (1 year)). The farm grows around 50 different types of vegetables such as red and white cabbage, Brussels sprouts, palm and kale, potatoes, sweet corn and pumpkins. In the greenhouses vegetables as lettuce, radish, fennel and tomato are grown. During winter around 400 chickens are kept there, which loosen the soil and provide natural fertilization. Ownership of land falls into different categories, most of it is leased, 2.5 hectares in ownership of the cooperation and 1.6 hectares in ownership of the non-profit association (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a).

The vegetables and fruits subscriptions or bioboxes have experienced an explosive growth: from 420 bioboxes at the start in 1993 to 1,450 early 2021 (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a). The biobox service is now well organised with people compiling the packages, others distributing them by two trucks to the pick-up point holders (around 50 early 2021) and volunteers at the pick-

up points. Customers can collect their biobox four days a week at one of the points. They have a choice from different types of bioboxes (size of vegetables box, fruits box, vegetables plus fruits box, potatoes box and weekly or two weekly). Produce is sometimes not sufficient all year around to provide sufficient vegetables for the many bioboxes. When compiling them firstly the own products are chosen and for the remainder products from fellow farmers nearby are purchased. If that is not sufficient either, products are ordered from wholesalers. Bioboxes and the shop are part of the same company. If the biobox makers face a shortage, they collect products in the shop and if there is a surplus, that product will go to the shop (Van Boxtel & Schlaman, 2008, <https://www.dewassendemaan.be>). The people running a pick-up point at their shop often see this service also as publicity for their own shop (NL\_BE3A/Int.6a).

The shop is a little supermarket with organic and ecological products and has three areas: a cooler place with vegetables, one with dry goods and cooled items and one with processed food and non-daily products (Van Boxtel & Schlaman, 2008). It started a fifth enlargement (from 150 to 300 square meters) early 2021. Expansion of the range of products is often at the request of the customers, as well as on the basis of surveys where customers are regularly asked about their opinion on the product range. Survey results are also used as feedback to the farmers on their cultivation plan. Customers value the local availability of vegetables and fruits and the freshness of the products (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 3a). Because of the fact that the shop is independent – and not part of a larger retail chain – some activities such as marketing campaigns or software take more effort (NL\_BE3A/Int.2a). New is the webshop which is available to customers of a biobox to complement it with additional products from the shop.

DWM is predominantly a farm producing for direct sale through the shop and bioboxes. A small share goes to wholesalers. But activities and collaboration in supportive fields are also undertaken. Examples are collaboration with initiatives that guide people with disabilities, such as De Vierklaver, Zonnehoeve Living and the Christoforus community. Surpluses of biodynamic vegetables are donated to vulnerable families through some collaborative projects as Family Replacement Home Gandae vzw (Ghent), the giveaway shop Rode Lotus in the Brugse Poort (Ghent) and Food Bank Deinze (<https://www.dewassendemaan.be/een-bedrijf-met-een-hart>). There is also a cooperation with a school in Deinze where children



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with support by a volunteering organic farmer and a teacher help on the farm weekly as part of their education. Since mid-2020 there is also a farm path: a mapped-out path around the fields with twelve educational panels explaining different aspects of agriculture on DWM. This path was subsidised by the province of East-Flanders. it contributes to nature and landscape education, serves as a substitution for regular requests to the farmers to organise guided tours around the farm and contributes to customer loyalty (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 6a).

## Actors involved

### Organisation

DWM started as a small scale volunteer based initiative which gradually evolved into the current professional practice with an association (vzw) and a cooperative (cvba). The team of farmers is part of the professional staff headed by a coordinator. In addition to the farmers there is a team on the shop and one on the bioboxes. The business is run by a cooperative company with limited liability (cvba) and a non-profit association (vzw). This is comparable with many organic farms with a strong input by the community in the region which have a double structure like DWM (NL\_BE3A/Int.8a). We will explain more about each of these below.

### Farmers

At the start Kristien De Witte was the only farmer, but gradually others came in to join her. With the establishment of the cooperative a varying number of 3-5 farmers was involved as self-employed farmers. In the first years two of the farmers would have a seat in the Board of the cooperative. Since 2015 there was a change in the status of the farmers; some of them preferred not to be involved as self-employed but have the full employee status. This status means that employees are insured of pre-agreed wages and are entitled to pension and holidays. Since 2016 all farmers have the full employee status and they are not necessarily shareholder in the cooperative (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 5a). The farmers team has always been flexible with new farmers coming in regularly and others leaving. Although there have been formal job applications most of the new farmers join after a traineeship at the farm (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 5a). The team of farmers is assisted by seasonal workers who are recruited from a permanent pool of 20 people. Over the years the team of farmers at DWM has proved to be a breeding ground for young people, some of whom originally did not have an agricultural background. They gain a first farming experience at DWM and after a few years they might decide on moving and starting a farm in France, a CSA farm in Ghent or elsewhere while others stay (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 8a, <https://www.dewassendemaan.be>).

At the start of DWM the farmers mainly lived together on the farm. Nowadays all farmers live elsewhere and not on the farm estate. Two young people living in tiny houses on the estate take the role of concierge when the farmers are not there. The farmers agree upon a division of labour. For example, for irrigation of the fields they are now well equipped technologically: the farmers are able to operate this remotely by computer from home. During season the farmers coordinate the distribution of weekend activities on the fields among themselves. But coordination of tasks can sometimes be challenging (NL\_BE3A/Int.8a). The farmers see it as a surplus that customers are close-by the agricultural production (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 5a).

### **Cooperative De Wassende Maan (cvba)**

The Cooperative De Wassende Maan was set up as a Cooperative company with limited liability (*Coöperatieve vennootschap met beperkte aansprakelijkheid* or *cvba*) in 1999 (Belgisch Staatsblad, 1998). The cooperative is the landowner of 2.5 hectares including shop, offices and barn. Early 2021 the cooperative counted 290 shareholders, most of whom have either a biobox subscription or are customer in the shop (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a). The Board of directors counts four persons.

People can subscribe as cooperative member or shareholder with a minimum of three shares with a fixed price of €270 per share. After formal approval by the Board of directors, the subscriber will be registered in the register of shareholders after which he/she will receive a certificate as a copy of this share register. At a first subscription, shares have to be kept for at least two years. Each shareholder is given a vote in the General Meeting to outline the company's policy. The voting right per shareholder is limited to 10% of the votes present or represented at the General Meeting (art. 28 of the statutes: <https://www.dewassendemaan.be/ja-ik-word-ook-cooperant>). Each shareholder receives a number of benefits: 3% discount on all purchases in the shop, biobox or webshop, 20% discount on workshops by DWM, invitations for activities on the farm such as guided tours, harvest moments etc. and a dividend if the General Meeting decides so (<https://www.dewassendemaan.be>). Shareholders meet twice a year; once a year is obligatory to approve the annual accounts. A second meeting is added to discuss strategic issues and to use the shareholders as a sounding board. Four times a year shareholders

receive a newsletter, which also ensures more involvement by the shareholders. Shares can be sold (1) by selling them to an existing or new partner (the Board of directors can mediate in this) or (2) by resigning from the cooperative which must be requested in the first quarter of the fiscal year (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a and 2a, <https://www.dewassendemaan.be/ja-ik-word-ook-cooperant>).

During the first years the Board's role was not very steering. Due to the withdrawal of the initiator and some others the role of the Board of directors came in because the statutes require so. Since then the role of the Board has been upgraded (NL\_BE3A/Int.8a). Until now the Board of directors meets monthly. There are plans to restructure the organisation of the cooperative to bring the Board of directors more on distance and to introduce a daily staff management with managers of each staff team headed by the coordinator. An amendment of the statutes will be proposed to the shareholders on an additional general meeting in September 2021. The major cause for the amendment is legal (as required in Belgium) but it will be used to change other issues in the organisation at the same time. The organisation will be turned into a network structure and become less hierarchical. It will then switch from a cooperative company to a cooperative with a social purpose (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a).

### **Non-profit association (vzw)**

The non-profit association (*vzw* or *Vereniging zonder winstoogmerk*) De Wassende Maan was established to acquire 1.6 hectares of land in 1999. The *vzw* enabled financing this purchase and leasing it to DWM under the condition that cultivation of the soil would be reserved exclusively for biodynamic agriculture (NL\_BE3A/Int.8a, <https://www.dewassendemaan.be/vzw-de-wassende-maan>). Since this land acquisition the non-profit association did not have an active role.

Since a few years the operation of the non-profit association has been expanded as to also cover the volunteers' activities such as the construction of the nature path (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a). It is now not only a vehicle for agricultural land ownership, but also an umbrella for the volunteers' organisation. A group of about 15-20 shareholders performs unpaid work and meets on average monthly. As the cooperative is not supposed to employ volunteers, their activities fall under the umbrella of the non-profit association. The non-profit association pays their insurance and takes care of costs or other issues related to the volunteers. Their

activities do not concern the agricultural production but are additional like pruning trees and constructing the farmers' educational path (NL\_BE3A/Int.2a).

### **Professional staff of DWM**

Three teams can be distinguished within the staff: (1) farmers, (2) shop and (3) bioboxes headed by a coordinator and with someone for finances and general administration and someone for marketing and public relations. Before 2017 the staff was managed by a coordination team. This was replaced by a single overall coordinator who relates the different activities within DWM – agricultural production, shop, bioboxes, webshop etc. There are currently 24 staff members (17.3 fulltime equivalents of whom 10.8 women and 6.5 men) who are all employed by DWM cvba. Staff members are not necessarily shareholders in DWM cvba: most are not. There is a general employee meeting every six weeks (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a and 2a). As explained above there will be a shift in balance between Board of directors of the cooperative and the staff as a result of a professionalization process within the company (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 8a; DWM cvba, 2020).

### **Customers**

Customers are mainly tied to DWM through loyal purchasing. Some customers are also shareholder in the cvba. At the start of the business the Friends of DWM used to work voluntarily in the fields. Currently this bond is less intensive as the farmers prefer to handle the agricultural production themselves. One of the reasons is efficiency as they it more efficiently to work with employees. As the DWM shop is near the residential area of Deinze many customers use the shop for their daily shopping.

### **Municipality of Deinze**

The farm estate of DWM is located in the municipality of Deinze. Agriculture is an important sector in the municipality, but staffing and local policy on agriculture is only limited. Although the city of Ghent is an inspiration in the field of sustainability and food production, the way Deinze addresses this takes another stand. Since 2019 the municipality has revived the Agricultural council. Different agriculture stakeholders have a seat and it serves as an advisory board to the local administration. Initiatives brought forward by the council are the

farmers market and the yearly LEF (Local, Ecological and Fairtrade) bicycle tour to promote locally produced and processed products (NL\_BE3A/Int. 9a, 10a and 11a). Contact between municipality and DWM is limited as there is no need for additional permits; there are no animals and the 400-450 chicken during winter time do not necessitate a permit (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a).

### **Municipality of Ghent**

Ghent's political administration is politically left which has a strong impact on its sustainability policy. The city is very progressive in this and although Deinze-Astene is a separate municipality, this influences the urban region as Ghent is an important part of the biodynamic food sales market via the many pick-up points of the bioboxes (NL\_BE3A/Int.2a). As part of the city's strategy towards more sustainability Ghent launched a food strategy called 'Gent en Garde' in 2013 with three focus points: (1) a more visible, shorter food chain, (2) more sustainable food production and consumption and (3) reduction and maximum reuse of food waste as raw material. Food is also one of the major themes in the Climate Plan 2020-2025 (Stad Gent, 2014, 2020; NL\_BE3A/Int.4a). There is a Food Council with its own yearly budget (by the municipality) to support innovative food projects. Support often goes to urban agricultural projects or social agricultural projects. DWM received one of these grants to work on a programme to process harvest surpluses into long-life products that can be sold (NL\_BE3A/Int.4a).

There is no formal consultation structure on issues as agriculture or sustainability with other municipalities in the urban region of Ghent as this is not a compulsory field of intermunicipal cooperation. Reason is that there are hardly municipal responsibilities in the field of agriculture in Flanders (NL\_BE3A/Int.4a).

### **Province of East-Flanders**

At provincial level the most involved department related to DWM is the Department of Agriculture and Rural Areas (*Landbouw en Platteland*). European policy largely determines the agricultural sector and its impact on rural areas. This European policy is then translated into Flemish policy. The province develops policy that is insufficiently covered at higher levels of government and which intends to facilitate business climate and to increase liveability

and perceptibility of that rural area. The five Flemish provinces try to harmonise their policy on agriculture as much as possible. Provinces are by far the most important financier of applied scientific research in agriculture and each province has one or more specialised centres. As Flemish municipalities are relatively small in size, the province also acts as a documented discussion table, where municipalities can turn to with questions and information (interview respondent province). It also provides information on new forms of agriculture for agricultural businesses (Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen, 2019). It is also the province – more than municipalities – that has a budget for grants for improvements in rural areas. In this context it supplied a small subsidy to DWM to build an educational farm path (NL\_BE3A/Int. 2a).

## Style of farming and activities promoted

DWM is a good example of the innovative strength of one or more pioneers or initiators inspiring their environment and growing little by little towards a professional company within a network of sympathisers. It was a pioneer in the field of biodynamic agriculture in Flanders in the late 1970s, it was the first to obtain the Demeter biodynamic quality label and to introduce a (two) weekly biobox subscription in Flanders. Together with comparable farms in the region they set a movement of better awareness of good quality food produced locally. The two-fold organisational structure with a non-profit association (vzw) and a cooperative company with limited liability (cvba) has proved solid and was gradually adjusted to its current needs and wishes. Also the structure with agricultural production, shop (and webshop) and bioboxes is one which can be found elsewhere too in Flanders.

The shareholders in the cvba have a formal meeting once a year to approve the annual accounts (and a second on strategic issues). Land ownership is covered either in the vzw or leased. The Board of directors of the cvba is formally in charge of the operation of DWM but the overall coordinator acts as managing director. The team of farmers is responsible for the cultivation plan but on the basis of input by coordinator, managers of the shop and bioboxes and survey results by customers.

The style of farming of DWM is biodynamic agriculture. Sprays against diseases or insects and fertilisers are not used. The basis of this agricultural system is a rich soil life, which is stimulated at DWM by minimal natural fertilization and ample crop rotation. A lot and constant variation of vegetable types (in a cycle of 7 years) prevents diseases from accumulating in the soil. The soil is rarely ploughed but raked loose to ensure that the thin top layer with rich soil life does not end up in the oxygen-poor substrate. The soil is left fallow with green manures such as grass clover, rye and vetch (<https://www.dewassendemaan.be>). Farmland is on sandy soil which is susceptible to desiccation. Future measures to address this issue are the planting of a wood embankment to stop drying winds and to plant more trees for shade, and to mulch if necessary to prevent the soil from drying out (NL\_BE3A/Int. 5a)



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As introduced earlier DWM uses the biodynamic cultivation method under the Demeter food production quality label and is organic certified. In the context of this certification DWM is checked annually by two control bodies according to the guidelines of the European biodynamic label. For the purpose of the Demeter label there is a group of five biodynamic farm businesses that visits each farm every two years. Colleagues spend a whole day for a visit on the basis of a questionnaire and a self-evaluation. These are discussed critically after the visit with representatives of the other farm businesses. These visits also serve as a source of inspiration because of the exchange of information (NL\_BE3A/Int.5a, <https://www.dewassendemaan.be>).

## Synergies and networking

### Relationships with the local community

The initiator lived in the area when she started DWM on a small piece of land. It attracted a small group of sympathisers, some of whom from the local community but more from a wider region. The sale of biodynamic vegetables profits from the fact that the farm is located near the city of Ghent. Other than on the estate there is one additional pick-up point for the bioboxes in Deinze, but most of them are in or near Ghent, showing the great interest for organic vegetables here.

The shop attracts local residents as it is located near residential area, but there are also many from a wider region. The fact that it is located on a farm makes it an experience to do one's shopping. The location near residential area makes it also important to take neighbours into account in agricultural activities (such as the location of a compost heap) (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a and 5a). A wider exposure in the wider local community and for reasons of marketing information is provided by a website and social media as Facebook and Instagram. DWM puts energy in bonding with the local community by organising for example an annual Open yard day. Neighbours, customers, shareholders and other stakeholders and interested parties are invited to have a look on the farm and get acquainted with the shop and other services (NL\_BE3A/Int.2a). The activities and collaboration with organisations in care, vulnerable families and education which we introduced in section "Actors Involved" are also examples of the relationship with the local community.

### Networking established

DWM is not part of a larger network of comparable farms or businesses. However, there is informal consultation and exchange with colleagues such as Kollebloem and Zonnekouter, two farms which are also cooperative based farms and involved in biodynamic agriculture with bioboxes and a bioshop. The same goes for the Landwijzer which is responsible for biodynamic agriculture education in Flanders. DWM has no ambition to be very active in networks such as BioForum or related (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 2a). DWM is more related in



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networking of the city of Ghent than in its own municipality. This is because of the strong and pro-active policy focus of Ghent on sustainable agriculture.

## Policies and institutional supports

DWM started as a small voluntary practice which slowly evolved into the current business. It was an example for others who cared for biodynamic food and served as a breeding ground for young people who wanted to become involved in this new life style and work environment. It did not depend on public polices and institutional support to become as it is now. The fact that the location is near Ghent with a population and administration which is open to a more sustainable society enabled its growth.

The legal context was important to set out the current organisational structure with a non-profit association – vzw De Wassende Maan – on the one hand and the cooperative company with limited liability – cvba De Wassende Maan – on the other. The cvba with shareholders provide capital, management and supervision and the vzw is the holding for land ownership, staff and volunteers. In 2009 the company faced major investments and decided to attract more shareholders. The result was an increase in the number of cooperative shareholders and collected a capital of about €150,000. Another way to collect capital for investment is via crowdfunding such as for a damaged tunnel greenhouse (2017) where use was made of crowdfunding platform Socrowd (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a). Triodos Bank has also financed a number of the company's investments (<https://www.triodos.be/nl/projecten/de-wassende-maan/4988>). One of these investments is the shop renovation. The choice for the Triodos Bank is a deliberate one as the company opts for more ethical financing (NL\_BE3A/Int.1a).

Where available and if needed DWM makes use of subsidies by public bodies, such as the province for the farm path and the European Social Fund of the EU for a project to further professionalise its personnel policy, to better align it with available competencies and further shape the process towards more self-management (<https://www.esf-vlaanderen.be/nl/projectenkaart/de-nieuwe-maan-0>).

## Policies activated, constraints and need of new policies

DWM is constantly looking for improvements. It started a shop enlargement early 2021. There is also a plan to add extra storage space and to renovate the space where the packages are packed. Another major plan is the further expansion of the agricultural acreage with 3 hectares. DWM is in contact with cooperative and foundation De Landgenoten on the issue of land expansion. This land is adjacent to the acreage around the estate. De Landgenoten will acquire the land and lease it to DWM. It will bring the total acreage around the estate to 6.5 hectares. A water pump will be installed and the area will be integrated ecologically with trees etc. (NL\_BE3A/Int. 1a and 8a). De Landgenoten acquires agricultural land with money of shareholders and donors and lease it to organic farmers on the basis of career-long contracts. It also manages land or advises land owners how to cultivate their land sustainably. Capital for land acquisition by De Landgenoten comes in via shares and gifts (money and land) (<https://www.delandgenoten.be>).

The fact that DWM mainly cultivates vegetables (and some fruits) and only keeps a limited number of chicken during winter means that stricter regulations by the EU and the Flemish Region will not touch considerably the business operations. This are mainly addressing emissions from livestock. Although traditional agriculture still dominates the debate at European and national levels, there is a slow movement towards more sustainable ways of agriculture. These will further stimulate initiatives such as DWM.

## Impact and perspectives

DWM is a good example of how citizens can strongly be involved in farm production by having them becoming shareholder. By including both farm production, direct sale of the farm produce via bioboxes and shop and adding additional products and services, a complete package can be offered to citizens caring for organic food and sustainable production.

The evolution from a team of self-employed farmers to one with the full-employee status is one which relates to this specific case, but not necessary to comparable cases elsewhere in Flanders. The fact that the team of farmers and seasonal workers and trainees serves as a training pool for young people interested in biodynamic farming was not planned but an interesting side effect of the dynamics of the farming team. It helps young farmers to become skilled, to determine how they want to develop as a farmer and then possibly decide if they want to move on to their own farm or another farm.

## Analysis of and conclusions on the two examples

The Herenboeren Land van Weert and De Wassende Maan (DWM) are both inspiring examples of farms where citizens are involved in different ways. We will summarise the main elements of each before we draw conclusions on a number of common issues.

### **Herenboeren Land van Weert**

Herenboeren is a relatively young initiative which started as an overall concept and now is being implemented by initiating local Herenboeren farms across the Netherlands. Herenboeren NL follows a structured approach in setting up local initiatives. In urbanised areas finding interested households is not as difficult as finding land, while in less urbanised areas it is the other way around.

The concept includes both vegetables, fruits and livestock (chicken, pigs, cows) produced in a nature-inclusive way and aims at an acreage of 20 hectares. Around 6 hectares is needed for the horticulture and fruits, the rest is intended for the animals the extraction of fodder. A local farm aims at setting up a cooperative with 200 households as shareholders which acts as the owner of the farm. Shareholders pay a one-time entrance fee and a weekly contribution for their food package. Agriculture produce is only distributed among the members and is not meant for sale. In the view of Herenboeren it does not need food production quality labels as there are internal food production checks. In addition to the focus on healthy food supply community building (cohesion in the shareholder members' group) is an important aspect.

An important characteristic is the focus on access to land and not ownership. The fact that local farms do not own farm land, means that they will have to lease it from another organisation. To secure this access to land, lease by organisations as *Stichting Grondbeheer*, landscape organisations, private foundations or local and regional governments is needed with reliable and long term lease contracts to provide legal certainty. The concept also does not depart from availability of a farm house on the acreage; the farmer does not necessarily live on the farm. Farmers are fully employed by the national organisation and report to the Board of the local cooperative. Farmers regularly exchange expertise among each other,

often under the umbrella of the national organisation. The national organisation has expertise available for the local initiatives and the farms and remains involved during business operations. For example by 'buying in' specific expertise from the national organisation.

The local farm of Herenboeren Land van Weert has an acreage of 11.9 hectares and no animals. It includes a farm house and barns. Although real estate is not a prerequisite it is very convenient for a farmer with animals (which is not yet the case in Land van Weert) and for storage, composing the packages and meetings of the members. Volunteering members often participate in farming activities but this is not compulsory and contract work is an option.

The local policy context can be helpful in finding a suitable location for a farm as well as facilitating the necessary permits. The fact that the Herenboeren concept includes animals sometimes hinders granting of necessary local permits in light of hindrance for local residents and nitrogen emission issues. Also the fact that national legislation on livestock is based on larger scale farming makes it difficult to adapt to the small scale at which a local Herenboeren farm works with animals.

### **De Wassende Maan**

DWM developed from a small scale private initiative into a professional organisation. A first 1 hectare was leased, followed by other plots of leased or owned land. Currently 4.1 hectares is in ownership (of which 1.6 hectares by the vzw DWM and 2.5 hectares by cvba DWM), the rest of the acreage is leased by private owners on the basis of 10 years' contracts, 1 hectare is leased on seasonal basis (1 year). There is currently there is debate on land acquisition by De Landgenoten which will lease it to DWM vzw. The current agricultural acreage is 22 hectares mainly for production of vegetables and some fruits by a team of five farmers.

DWM was gradually professionalised by setting up a cooperative with shareholders cvba and a foundation with land ownership, staff employment and volunteer services. Also the team of farmers was subject to change in terms of employment status (from self-employed to full employee status). Interesting is the fact that there is a team of farmers at work. They coordinate their activities amongst themselves. Over the years the team of farmers has



proved to be a breeding ground for young people, some of whom originally did not have an agricultural background and might move further after some years.

DWM combines production of vegetables (and some fruits) with direct sale via bioboxes and shop and small scale supply to wholesalers. The shop offers a diverse range in the offer of biodynamic and organic products to customers. Production and sale are not exclusively for the shareholders in the cooperative. Customers in the shop, subscribers of the bioboxes and shareholders are independent of each other. The expertise on biodynamic agriculture and how to bring this on the market via bioboxes and a shop inspired other initiatives. Other than in the Herenboeren example DWM has a food production quality label (Demeter).

Because of the relative small scale and the fact that there is no livestock makes it relatively independent from the local policy context with regards to permits. A sufficiently large potential market nearby with conscious – often urban – citizens with respect to sustainable food production is probably a prerequisite for the good functioning of a business as De Wassende Maan.

## Conclusions

Interesting issues arising from the two examples are the following:

- Both examples aim at short food supply chains and farming on a nature-inclusive respectively biodynamic basis. They differ in the way this is elaborated. Herenboeren Land van Weert only produces for its cooperative members. At DWM everyone can buy products in the shop and subscribe to a biobox: they do not have to be a shareholder in the cooperative. Also at Herenboeren Land van Weert the members are obliged to a weekly purchase of their package, whereas this is more flexible at DWM. More than DWM, Herenboeren aims to supply their customers with a complete package of vegetables, fruit, meat and eggs, because that is the purpose of the farm: the farm belongs to the shareholders and they should be able to obtain fresh produce from their own farm. DWM strives for a wide range of vegetables and other organic products, and it is up to the customers what they choose to buy from the farm.

- The organisation of the farm and the way in which citizens are involved differs: Herenboeren Land van Weert has a local cooperative which falls under the national Herenboeren NL organisation. DWM organisation has a hybrid organisation with a cvba with shareholders and staff employment and a vzw with land ownership and volunteers' services.
- The two examples both aim at access to land via lease (as compared to land ownership). While in the Herenboeren example this is one organization leasing it to the local farm on a long-term basis, the situation of DWM shows a fragmented picture with shorter and longer term contracts by mostly private landowners.
- The formal position of the farmer in both examples is a full employee status. This has advantages as a fair wage and access to compensation in case of illness, pension and holidays. But there should be attention to secure an independent way of working for the farmers.
- On a Herenboeren farm one farmer (with additional contract labour and help of volunteers) works on around 20 hectares, of which 6 hectares for vegetables and fruits and the rest of the acreage for animals and extraction of fodder. On DWM farm five farmers work on 22 hectares for vegetables and fruits; in this latter case volunteers are not involved.
- Housing for farmers on their land is an issue to address: where the Herenboeren concept does not depart from housing on the estate, the Herenboeren Land van Weert farm offered a house for the farmer (with additional barns) which is considered as a surplus value. In the DWM example the farmers do not live (any more) on the estate, but another solution was found with a concierge role for young people living in tiny houses on the estate.
- Both examples show that there should be attention for additional education on this type of farming which asks for broad skills: in the Herenboeren example the farmer will have to deal both with the production of vegetables and fruits and livestock whereas agricultural education is often aiming at specialisation. In both cases additional learning is offered either by the national Herenboeren organisation or in case of the DWM by the other farmers in the team and Landwijzer.

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- The fact that there is a strong citizen involvement often asks additional skills from the farmer and from others involved in the farms. These include a strong awareness of the sale market (on the basis of the short chain principle) and good communication skills. These communication skills are needed in citizens' involvement, working with volunteers and providing information via website and social media.

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**Interviews (radio):**

Herenboeren Land van Weert (2017), Interview Joost van der Stappen (Secretary Board) in radio programme 'Puur Natuur' (radio WeertFM), (March 23, 2017).

## Annex 1. The List of interviews

Code	Gender	Role	Place and date of the interview
		<b>Herenboeren Land van Weert</b>	
NL_BE3A /Int.1	male	Board Stichting Grondbeheer	Online, 7-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.2	male	Farmer Herenboeren Land van Weert	Online, 8-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.3	male	Board Herenboeren NL	Online, 8-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.4	male	Ex-chair Board Herenboeren Land van Weert en co-initiator	Online, 8-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.5	female	Cooperative member and volunteer Herenboeren Land van Weert	Online, 8-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.6	female	Policy advisor, Municipality of Weert	Online, 11-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.7	male	Policy advisor, Municipality of Weert	Online, 11-1-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.8	female	Natuur- en educatiecentrum IJzeren Man, Weert organization	Online, 18-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.9	female	Natuurvoedingswinkel Ut Muuelentje shop	Online, 19-2-2021
		<b>De Wassende Maan</b>	
NL_BE3A /Int.1a	male	De Wassende Maan organization	Online, 2-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.2a	male	Cooperative member De Wassende Maan	Online, 15-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.3a	female	De Wassende Maan shop	Online, 16-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.4a	female	Service environment and climate, municipality Ghent	Online, 17-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.5a	male	Farmer De Wassende Maan	Online, 18-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.6a	female	De Wassende Maan organization	Online, 19-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.7a	male	Oxfam Wereldwinkel (pick-up point bio packages Wassende Maan)	Online, 19-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.8a	female	Board of directors cooperative De Wassende Maan	Online, 22-2-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.9a	female	Officer, Municipality of Deinze	Online, 4-3-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.10a	female	Expert, Municipality of Deinze	Online, 4-3-2021
NL_BE3A /Int.11a	female	Expert, Municipality of Deinze	Online, 11-3-2021

Table 2- Interviews