

Beyond the Fields: The Hidden Mental Health Crisis in Agriculture

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Abstract

This article presents the research results of the AgriMental Erasmus+ project entitled "Human Sustainability and Psychological Wellbeing in Agriculture" carried out within the cooperation partnership programme in vocational education and training (VET) with project reference number: 2025-1-FR01-KA220-VET-000357068

The purpose of the AgriMental project is to facilitate cooperation between partners from France, Italy, Cyprus, Greece, and Türkiye with regard to investigation of mental health issues faced by agricultural workers, creating innovative coaching methods, and developing VET solutions aimed at improving psychological wellbeing and human sustainability in agriculture.

Introduction

Recent research highlights mental health indicators as a crucial dimension of occupational sustainability among agricultural workers (EU-OSHA, 2025). Farmers across Europe are exposed to multiple psychosocial stressors, including economic instability, climate change uncertainty, social isolation, and irregular working schedules, extended working hours, and demanding physical labour (European Commission, 2024). Nevertheless, despite the strategic importance of agriculture for food security and economic development, the psychological wellbeing of farmers remains significantly under-researched and insufficiently integrated into vocational education and training (VET) systems and occupational health and safety frameworks.

In this context, the AgriMental Erasmus+ project —conducted national analyses in Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, and Türkiye in order to evaluate the current state of psychological wellbeing among agricultural workers, examine the availability of support systems, and assess the applicability of existing coaching models for promoting human sustainability in agriculture

Structural Characteristics of the Agricultural Workforce

It was revealed that the agricultural sectors in the analysed countries are characterised by aging workforce and unstable employment situation.

According to the reports provided by the national organizations, in 2023, the number of individuals who worked in agriculture in Greece was 492,000 people or 11.8% of all employment. In Cyprus, there was a significant portion of agricultural workers who were over 55 years old; besides, there was a lack of young people in the workforce.

In 2024, according to French statistics, there were about 1.26 million agricultural workers (828,221 employees who received salary and 431,497 employees whose employment was based on informal conditions). A characteristic feature of agricultural sectors in France was that the employment in agriculture was rather seasonal and 64.7% of all agreements were temporary. About 47.9% of all agricultural workers worked 3 months or less per year.

Similar trends regarding employment can be observed in Italy, where, in 2024, there was more than 1 million agricultural workers who were dependent on another individual and more than 414,000 self-employed. About 89.6% of all dependents were on the basis of a temporary agreement. Traditional employment relations were dominant in the agricultural sector of Türkiye where most farmers had more than 10–20 years of working experience.

Mental Health Issues in Agriculture

As follows from the results obtained during national analysis, agricultural workers suffer from increased stress, anxiety, and psychological pressure.

According to the information taken from TRACTOR data in the French national report, in 2024, there were 1,088,561 managers of farms in France, of which 84,507 or 7.76% suffered from depression. In particular, depression among female farm operators and agricultural workers dealing with livestock was very common. Other studies confirm that 30% of farmers face psychological problems and 75% have mental exhaustion.

An important problem in the agricultural sector is the increased risk of suicidal behaviours. For example, in France, the suicide risk among individuals aged 15–64 who were working in the sector of agriculture was 60% higher compared to the average for the country. As for the category of self-employed farm operators, suicide risk was more than 100% higher compared to other individuals.

Italian statistics confirms that farmers, foresters, and fishermen have significantly higher risk of suicide compared to other occupational categories, especially when it came to temporary or fixed-term agreements in agriculture, when suicide risk was 1.36.

As for Greek and Cypriot farmers, data on occupations-specific characteristics is insufficient. According to European statistics, 50–70% of agricultural workers face work-related stress and 25% experience burnout; this trend was confirmed in Cyprus.

Finally, Turkish survey data shows that out of 20 interviewed farmers 15 people had high level of work-related stress, 16 suffered from weather-related stress, 15 were experiencing emotional stress due to instability in the market, 14 felt lonely, and 15 were anxious about the future.

To sum up, one can conclude that the results of the conducted analysis show existence of mental issues among agricultural workers.

Conclusion

Based on the conducted analysis, increased awareness of mental health issues in agriculture should be encouraged in Europe. In particular, farmers from Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, and Turkey face several issues associated with well-being and sustainable development. Such issues may relate to such matters as aging, unemployment, adverse climatic conditions, economic instability, loneliness, workplace inappropriateness, and others which continue to remain among the most serious problems of European farmers.

Moreover, there is insufficient data on organized initiatives aimed at providing agricultural workers with mental health counselling and treatment. While there are certain programs in France, other participants in the study resort to unorganized mental health clinics that are not capable of helping agricultural workers cope with their psychological issues. Also, vocational education and training programs in agriculture do not have enough information related to psychological skills of workers.

However, there remains a significant potential to organize preventive and educational activities based on coaching and peer mentoring. The fact is that the majority of farmers participating in the research were interested in getting help in terms of addressing mental health problems, building networks and developing occupational skills.