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Analysis of the innovation journey and the role of interactions in networks in the agricultural sector

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Innovation is widely recognized as being an important strategic tool for companies to increase their competitive advantage. Hereby, networks are an increasingly important external source for the necessary knowledge, ideas and financial resources. The main contribution of this paper is to shed light on how different network partners can explain or facilitate the different types of innovations in the agricultural sector. In contrast to other studies, we make a distinction between all four types of innovation: product, process, marketing and organizational innovation. Furthermore, we investigate the whole innovation journey, embracing the entire innovation process from inception to the implementation of the innovation. Thus, this study has the objective to gain insight into farmers' innovation journey and the role of interactions in networks for successful innovation in order to enable a better support of the sector's further development.

The study is based on 28 in-depth interviews with farmers spread over five subsectors in Flanders (northern Belgium). For this research, the innovation journey analysis was used in order to capture the complex and contextual nature of the farmers' innovation journey.

Our most important findings are that different network partners are required for different types of innovation and that sectors could learn from each other in particular for market and organizational innovation. Hence, our study delivers a first set of valuable insights and implications for farmers, network coordinators and policymakers. Farmers must be aware of the importance of partner suitability and network heterogeneity for the innovation type they are aiming at. Furthermore, farmers have to be aware of the fact that efficient networking is not the optimisation of single relationships independently of each other, but instead the management of synergies and coordination of all relationships in an efficient way. In addition, network coordinators should set up a clear strategy and communicate for which innovations their network can advise and help the farmer.

These first conclusions should be further proven and supported by future research in order to draw general conclusions for the agricultural sector. As the sample of our study is limited to 28 respondents spread over five subsectors, it is necessary to increase the sample size to achieve a representable sample and to include more subsectors. In addition, the study is limited to the Flemish region and literature in other countries about this subject is scarce. Hence, other researchers are encouraged to investigate other regions in Europe and the world and compare them to the Flemish results.