



## IPMWORKS National Workshop Belgium

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**Type: face-to-face**

**National Focal Point for Belgium**

**Reporting person for this meeting: Simon Lox**

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### **Participants:**

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- Stefanie Delbeke (Boerenbond, Advocacy)
- Clara Sciffer (ILVO, Research)
- Sofie Darwich (Inagro, Research)
- Hilde Wustenberghs (ILVO, Research)
- Simon Lox (ILVO, Research)
- Dirk Butaye (BASF, Industry)
- Mathias De Backer (Vegaplan, Certification)
- Jonas Bodyn (PCG, Research/Advisory)
- Barbara Manderych (ALZ, Government)
- Pieter De Graef (SALV, Government)
- Laure Triste (ILVO, Research)
- Jan Hanssens (Ardo, Industry/Advisory)
- Sabien Pollet (Inagro, Research)
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### **1. Agenda**

1. Presentation: Introduction IPMWORKS, goal of the meeting
2. Presentation: Why hubs?
3. Presentation: Hub functioning
4. Discussion: Barriers IPM, scaling deep and scaling out hubs
5. Presentation: Policy recommendations
6. Discussion: Sustainability hubs, scaling up hubs
7. Lunch

## 2. Outcomes on Session 1: Validation of the IPMWORKS recommendations

### Indications from FEUGA:

**Establishing a HUB:** These factors address the correct way to establish a HUB, analysing the process of identifying potential members, frequency of communication, geographic proximity of HUB members and the creation of a comfortable and safe environment. The skills that a HUB Coach should have for the good development of the group's activities are also considered.

- How should the HUBS be customized to address obstacles in your local context?

In Belgium the vegetable sector are cash crops. This raises three difficulties to the set-up of hubs and the application of IPM: 1) spraying is seen as an 'insurance', because spraying too little could mean a big financial loss (ex. 15.000 euro/ha turnover on Brussels sprouts in comparison to 100 euro/ha for wheat); 2) the competition between growers is very strong, hampering the sharing of innovations and good practices; 3) the diversity between vegetable growers (different kinds of vegetables, farm sizes, markets, etc.) is too big to group them in relevant and comparable groups. The hubs of Jolien and Jonathan work with intensive cash crops and thus show the possibilities, but it requires more work to build trust and show the added value of knowledge exchange.

Because many growers outsource their IPM strategies to contractors, these contractors should be involved more in the hubs. Although that this is very sector specific, e.g.. in soft fruits growers don't make use of contractors for their crop protection strategies, while in arable crops grown for feed farmers do this much more.

**IPM adoption through knowledge exchange & Successful demonstrations:** To enhance the adoption of IPM, fostering knowledge exchange through peer-to-peer interactions is crucial. Peer exchange becomes a vital conduit for familiarizing stakeholders with IPM practices, addressing concerns, and dispelling misconceptions. It serves as a powerful mechanism to alleviate fears related to the effectiveness of alternative control methods and potential cost implications. By empowering stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and skills, peer-to-peer learning becomes an instrumental force in promoting the widespread adoption of sustainable and effective pest management practices. The strategic use of facilitation tools further amplifies the impact of these interactions, facilitating a seamless and productive exchange of insights and experiences among stakeholders. These factors further deepen the details detected during the project that favour a correct development of the demonstration events such as the identification of topics of interest for the HUB, the exchange of success stories and the use of facilitation tools for a better engagement of the hub members.

- How can demo events and HUBs further drive the adoption of IPM practices?

By dropping the 'IPM is exclusively a reduction of spraying' argumentation. IPM is about more than (not) spraying, but also about plant health, soil health, etc. The hubs can broaden the understanding of the range of measures of what IPM might be. Both farmers and advisors are in need of seeing the results of complex IPM strategies on real farms, because science produces opposite results and does not integrate IPM practices into strategies to prove their effectiveness. In general, there is a lack of evaluation of effectiveness of both CPP applications and other IPM practices. E.g. for vegetable growers there is a big need to communicate some 'red points' for which different sorts of IPM practices are needed. At BoerenBond they communicate the integrated and multi-faceted nature of IPM a lot, but they notice a lack of practical results to show the efficacy.

Because of the complexity of regulation and of IPM (e.g. having less CPPs available makes controlling pests much more complex and difficult), and because the up-scaling of farms is putting pressure on farmers' available time to spend on IPM, farmers are putting full trust in external advisors and contractors. Both advisors linked to CPP industry as independent advisors have the tendency to prescribe more CPP applications than needed to respectively reach sales targets and to 'play safe'. Hubs could provide a second opinion, give the opportunity to compare spraying schemes, and provide examples of how things can be done differently.

Demonstrations give the opportunity to farmers to share their stories, to show the bigger picture of an IPM strategy in a farm management. Farmers trust examples of other farmers that have been implemented on real farms more than any other advice.

In a hub the needs are defined bottom-up. This is a unique chance to define needs for advice and research to help their practice. Many other initiatives struggle to get good results out of such participatory agenda setting. Inagro has a growers advisory board in which the growers themselves can define the agenda of research, but it are mostly frontrunning farmers who join this board and so we do not capture the needs of the less innovative and committed farmers. The planning meetings of Jolien show that it takes some time in a hub to understand the opportunities of what can be asked, developed and put on the planning in a hub. This way IPM practices get more attuned to the farming practice. The quality and relevance of what you bring in a hub should be high to keep farmers motivated to commit to the hub. There are other opportunities to question farmers for their needs like trade shows and study days.

Onions and potatoes for example have a growing farmed area in Belgium, but this trend has not yet been supported with extra advisory services. These groups with a lack of advisory might be extra eager to join a hub.

Group certification like the LEAF mark and the Global Gap label has been tried before in Belgium (and worked well?) and also the certification agencies have the possibility in Belgium to certify farmers with the LEAF mark. Access to a certified label might help to raise awareness with consumers and also raise the price of these products, but could also have the adverse effect of lowering the price of other uncertified products. In Belgium the IPM certification is already quite extensive in general for conventional farmers.

For some pests and diseases it could be that if one farmer is not effectively treating them he/she might infect also the neighbours. Hubs could help to organise IPM strategies on landscape scale and to put peer pressure on the lagging farmer.

Young farmers need a lot of experience. Hubs are a good opportunity in this generational turnover to build some expertise by learning from more experienced members in the hub and by visiting other farms.

Policy measures, such as accounting credits for the Phyto license by joining a hub, might help to attract the 'unreachable' farmers to the hub and broaden their scope of opportunities to implement IPM. Other incentives for different target audiences to join the hubs should be thought of.

**Barriers:** In this section, we delve into the analysis of barriers identified so far during the project, aiming to discern both the distinctions and commonalities across various countries hosting the workshop. Several barriers have been identified that impact the seamless functioning of the HUBS. A

primary challenge is the clash with work calendars, as farmers, engrossed in their daily activities, often find it difficult to participate in demonstration events or complete surveys. Additionally, Hub coaches face hurdles in outreach efforts due to a lack of communication skills, particularly in creating social media posts, videos, and engaging with media. The fear of embracing new practices, rooted in concerns about potential yield loss, stands as another significant barrier. Moreover, there is a need to demystify IPM, as it is often perceived as complex when many IPM measures are already applied by farmers unknowingly. Addressing these barriers is essential to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of HUBS in promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

- What are the main barriers you identify to scale up the IPMWORKS methodology?

Labour shortage is one of the biggest challenges in Belgium to adopt different IPM practices. Examples are mechanical weeding that takes more time to go on the field or working with beneficials that take more time to both monitor and maintain them (although that research has shown that tomato growers have less stress with beneficials, because spraying might be needed every two days, while with beneficials they are more constant when they are established). The statement has been made that also organic growers are not enthusiastic about scaling up according to the goals of the green deal, because of the lack of labour availability (and because there is limited consumer demand and retail question).

Some IPM practices like the use of beneficials are very knowledge intensive. Growers already have difficulties to identify pests. More knowledge about the ecology of a farm and the impact of beneficials would require much more time and knowledge. BASF claims that beneficials could work in closed environments, but that it is much harder in open fields and that the effects of flower strips and hedges is limited in distance. Also the cost of buying beneficials is very high. Ardo has visited the 'farm of the future' in the Netherlands who make use of strip cropping and they also saw limited effects. Growers hold a disbelief concerning beneficials, there are many doubts. E.g. Aphids multiply too quickly to only count on beneficials.

Because of the reduced availability of CPPs, some pests are growing resistance to certain CPPs. For many pests there is no other solution yet than using CPPs, or the pest pressure has come in an urgent phase. A lack of diversity in CPPs has adverse effects on CPP use.

The quality demands of the retail and food chain, often lead to adverse effects and barriers to certain IPM practices. In Flanders some sectors are in negotiations with the food chain to discuss the quality demands. E.g.. thrips in leak should not be perceived as a problem. The same counts for zucchinis with abnormal shapes due to viruses.

The share of pricing for food products that goes to the farmers is too low to invest time and money in applying labour and cost intensive IPM practices or to invest time and costs in learning new practices.

It remains difficult to share farm data and especially financial data. This makes it difficult to compare the cost effectiveness of IPM strategies. Although the hub of Jolien did compare spraying schemes anonymously and did get very interesting results from this comparison. Also Ardo did such an exercise and found that in the same crop there was a range between 370 – 900 euro/year cost of CPPs. BoerenBond organises farm networks to learn and share on financial management and sees that this works much better in the livestock & dairy sector than in the vegetable sector. With some growers there is competition, a culture of individuality, and a fear to admit mistakes, which hampers exchanges between growers.

It was stated that pest/disease warning systems are not precise enough hence growers will always need to stay in touch with the field to evaluate the actual circumstances. Often the warning system is too late and thus cannot be used as a threshold for spraying. This does give low trust in warning systems and DSS. Other opinions claim that farmers work a lot with these systems.

There is a need for a transition period and not the fast-paced change if there is not even a consistent solution to control pests. The hubs consist of pioneer farmers so their examples should not be taken for granted and obliged by policies. The philosophy of IPM also means adaptiveness of strategies to local contexts, needs and capacities and so this takes time to find solutions for every farm.

### **AKIS & Similar activities**

- Which AKIS actors are the most experienced in IPM in your country? Which groups show a higher degree of interaction (networking) with other actors, fostering the exchange of information and knowledge on topics of common interest?
  - BASF and other CPP industries provide advisory
  - BoerenBond, the farmers agency provides advisory and negotiates with other agro-food chain partners and informs growers with stories of other growers in e.g. their magazine
  - Food industries with grower associations, the fresh market and other growers cooperations provide advisory and negotiate with other agri-food chain partners
  - SALV is an advisory organ of the government to assemble knowledge from stakeholders and provide policy advice to the government.
  - Research stations provide advisory
  - Certification agencies provide advisory
  - Government provides information

For some crops there is more advice available and interaction with other actors in the food chain. There are opportunities for cross-sector initiatives to address common issues. Ardo and Inagro for example have an agreement to organise field- and study days on the research centre to address cross-sector topics and exchange information. There will also be a meeting on that day where growers can express their needs. This is an opportunity to ask growers why hubs would be interesting for them, what they expect from hubs. The fresh market and other growers cooperations should also be involved.

Young farmers have WhatsApp groups in which they exchange information very fast.

Demonstrations are a common thing in Belgium. Many actors organise demonstrations.

## **3. Outcomes on Session 2: IPMWORKS strategy for Long Term Sustainability**

### **Indications from CONSULAI:**

#### **Funding opportunities**

The cost of a hub coach is minimum 20-50% PME.

Options discussed without final conclusions are:

- As with the DEPHY example it was discussed what happened with the taxes on CPPs. This is governed on Federal level, but it is unclear what happens with this money.

- As with the LEAF example it was stated that for some crops it already happens that the farmers pay the cooperative to organise advisory services for its members. The option to put a label (e.g. PestiRed) on it was also discussed. The hubs could fit in the operational program of growers cooperations. Everything in the GMO policies is 50% funded and 80% if it has environmental goals. But there are sectors without growers cooperation who will miss these opportunities, for example arable crops (which is one of the biggest agricultural areas in Belgium)
- About labelling it was discussed that growers in Belgium are already very advanced in IPM and so that there should be more campaign by supermarkets and VLAM (agency to promote Belgian food) to promote local food to Belgians and make them aware of the IPM efforts farmers make.
- Research centra could take up hubs in their basic functioning to translate their scientific outcomes to advice. This already happens partially, for example Inagro has a board of growers who co-define the research needs from farmers and to disseminate results. In the Netherlands growers co-fund research and also define the agenda.
- There used to be many learning networks and advisors financed by the government, but due to financial cuts these were stopped.
- Multiple research centra organise focus groups, demonstrations, study days, etc.

### **Policy discussions**

Due to the polarisation the SUR is put on hold, but it will probably be discussed in the next legislature. On the one hand, this is a missed opportunity: in Belgium there is already a good translation of the SUR/D in National policies and so the SUR was a chance to create a more equal playing field in Europe. On the other hand, the legal text as it was, was not acceptable. It was for example not clear how the SUR would be financed. Anyway, the stringent regulations will be coming from EFSA.