

## PRESS RELEASE

Date: 26<sup>th</sup> June 2023

Title: **Exploring Flanders' agricultural diversity: A journey through three generations of farms**

Last week, Guillermo Pena, a researcher at the Alliance of Bioversity International and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), visited Leuven to explore Flanders' agricultural diversity by touring family farms in Tienen, known for its sugar factory (Tiense Suikerraffinaderij) and located 20 km from Leuven. The selected farm, with a history managed by the second, third, and fourth generations of Remi Avermaete and Simonne Goossens, who moved from Ghent to Tienen in the early '50s, encompasses three farms, each covering over 400 hectares in close proximity. These farms, while facing common challenges and bottlenecks, reveal interesting differences in their strategies.



**Fram's profiles.** Stijn Avermaete combines arable crops with fruit production. He has invested heavily in precision farming. He uses GPS technology and advanced software to monitor his land. This way, he is able to reduce inputs and at the same time maintain high yields. He applies no tillage practices. He shows us several prints of data on soil health and explains us the administrative burden that is put on farmers. If you want to stay competitive in the sector, you need to invest in innovation and technology. For his apple orchard, Stijn recently made the conversion from conventional to organic. He has mechanized most of the work in the orchard, from pruning to harvesting. His production is sold for processing. Furthermore, Stijn invested in a vineyard and has processing facilities on his farm.

Next stop was just 300 meters away, at the farm where Philippe Avermaete works with his father on the farm. On this farm, four generation live together. Philippe's wife Nele also takes care of the communication and developed a website [Beenshoeve](#). She regularly posts the activities on the farm on Instagram. It is an arable farm producing among others sugar beets, potatoes, and wheat. And although Philippe's father used to participate – some decades ago – in the international plowing championship, Philippe has successfully introduced no tillage practices on the farm. They invest in modern machinery which has a significant return on investment, both economically and from an ecologic perspective. Also, they have a large shelter to store manure. Philippe hopes to have, someday, animals on the farm as well making the entire farm more circular.



The last stop took again no more than ten minutes walking, where the two brothers Ludo and Wim Avermaete, as well as their parents Etienne and Flora welcomed the guests. They run a farm with mainly arable crops and a smaller fruit orchard. They grow a considerable number of potatoes, but also carrots and

onions. Also here, we see the investment in modern machinery, though some scepticism towards no tillage practices of their neighbours.

**Topics discussed.** All farmers clearly believe in the need to modernize and invest in precision farming. This is the only way to be able to manage a large-scaled arable farm. Moreover, it also helps to become more sustainable. The increase in sustainability is tangible. It allows for example a reduction in the use of pesticides and fertilizers. Both Stijn and Philippe are very enthusiastic about the no tillage practices, which has increased the soil health significantly.

Another topic on the table was labour. Especially for fruit harvesting, labour is an issue. Cost of labour in agriculture has increased dramatically over the last decades, while the productivity of the workers in the orchard has gone down. Labour for the work is very competitive to student jobs, though youngsters are not very keen to do the work in the fields. Stijn explains us that in peak moments, he needed almost 100 people for the harvest. They often come from Eastern Europe, and you need to offer them accommodation as well. Wim and Ludo acknowledge the challenge of finding motivated work force in the orchard. Having seasonal labour from abroad is not evident, and it brings a lot of worries and administration. That is one of the reasons for Stijn to mechanize.

We also discussed the access to land. In this region, land prices go up to 60.000€ for one hectare. If land is sold, competition is high, not just from farmers but also from people outside the sector. This is an issue we see all across Flanders. Tienen is just a couple of kilometres from the Wallonia, the French speaking part of the country. However, as explained by the farmers, buying or working on that land, implies getting familiar with a completely other administration.

Among many other topics raised, we also talked about education. There is an urgent need to improve education for farmers. There are so many opportunities, but farmers are hesitant to apply them. If education already integrates these practices, at least the young generation would get familiar with them and will more easily apply them once taking over the farm.

**Future prospects and challenges.** On all three farms, we talked about the future. How do they look ahead? Stijn understands that Flemish farmers move away from Flanders, starting farms elsewhere in Europe. His younger brother moved to Germany where he runs an organic sheep farm [Hof Hubertusblick](#). Stijn also mentions the enormous differences in the land market. Even in France, you can

easily find plots for less than 10.000€/ha. Wim and Ludo leave the question on the future in the middle. We see two young girls – Wim’s daughters – playing on the farm. Maybe they will one day take over, maybe not. Philippe, the youngest one, is hopeful. Sure, there are many hurdles and challenges for the sector and climate change will certainly continue to impact farming, yet he believes that there is a future for farmers in Flanders.



We closed the day in De Hoorn, in Leuven, which allowed us to show Guillermo something of the beer culture of our university town.

### Participants:

Guillermo Pena, CIAT  
 Tessa Avermaete, KU Leuven, the granddaughter of Remi and Simonne Philippe Avermaete and Nele Kempeneers, farmers  
 Ludo and Wim Avermaete, farmers  
 Stijn Avermaete, farmer

Clara Gambart, KU Leuven, Laboratory of Tropical Crop Improvement  
 Theresa Gerber, Margo Heremans, Erika De Keyser and Mertijn Moeyersons from KU Leuven, division bioeconomics  
 Riet Nijs, photographer