

## SUMMARY

Despite economic and regulatory incentives to transition to more sustainable soil management, many farmers across Europe have still not tried such practices or been motivated to change behaviour for the long-term. Complex social factors affecting farmers can be a cause of this.

SoilCare investigates and promotes the use of Soil-Improving Cropping Systems (SICS) to improve soil quality for positive effects on sustainability and profitability. SICS are a holistic approach to soil management, consisting of long crop rotations and an 'integrated' combination of inputs and management techniques.

Here we present how policy makers can support farmer networks to strengthen social capital in order to encourage the uptake of SICS practices.



**Advice sharing**



**Demonstration farms**

## POLICY OPTIONS

Building social capital has been shown to positively affect the uptake of innovative practices in farming. The following can increase uptake of sustainable soil management:

- Support information providers that farmers respect and trust e.g. farmer influencers or advisers
- Support development of diverse networks which include farmers and non-farmers
- Support farmer networks that are open to trying new things – e.g. innovative farmer networks
- Address power inequalities (e.g. farmer to landowner) through expert facilitation of multi-stakeholder groups and long-term contracts

**Building trust**  
through long-term contact and contracts can help SICS uptake



# Social capital elements needed for SICS uptake

Research has highlighted four main components of social capital that can affect the uptake of sustainable soil management by farmers. These components & policy options for strengthening social capacity include:

🌱 **TRUST** is key. If a farmer does not trust the person or institution providing information, they will probably think it is not trustworthy either. Farmers trust information from those who they feel are in a similar position e.g. other farmers, rather than researchers, government employees or environmentalists. This is partly because they feel other farmers know and understand their goals and values more than “outsiders”. Distrust can occur through lack of information or contact consistency, whilst reciprocating trust in farmers actions can help to build relationships.

🌱 **CONNECTEDNESS** affects our behaviour. Having diversity within your network really helps spur innovation. For instance, if farmers are part of a wider community network, such as EU Operational Groups, they learn from other farmers as well as agronomists and environmental advisers. Not being connected with a wider network outside of your immediate locale can stifle innovation.

🌱 **NORMS** are shared expectations about how people should act. The norm for innovation – feeling it is OK to try something new – is important for farmers to be encouraged to use more sustainable soil practices. Studies across a range of countries have shown that farmers are more willing to change practices if their peers also do so. However, this can also present a barrier if peers have had negative past experiences or perceptions of more sustainable practices, e.g. conventional farmer group views of organic farming.

🌱 **POWER** is linked to position and knowledge. Power and trust can be seen in agricultural landlord - tenant relationships, where landlords make overarching farm management decisions. Longer-term contracts and encouraging transparent knowledge exchange are good ways to redistribute power equality and create greater transparency, fairness, and procedural justice.



**Knowledge exchange**

**Norms  
to innovate**  
for SICS can be built  
through working with  
demonstration farms  
and  
better connecting  
farmers

## Routes to increasing Social Capital

Incentivising cooperation and collaborative approaches in a range of contexts can be effective for fostering the four key components of social capital described overleaf. European Union grants are available and some national government programmes and advisory systems facilitate interactive groups. For example, [EU Operational Groups](#) on soils provide support to enhance connections between farmers, to advisors and researchers. However, focus is needed to make SICS the norm, whilst addressing power inequalities for managing soil health. Supporting trusted, unbiased external agencies as facilitators will aid the development of multi-stakeholder soil management groups.

Read the full paper at: <https://emeraldopenresearch.com/articles/2-8/v2>

For more SoilCare info see: <https://www.soilcare-project.eu/resources/deliverables>



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