

# BGood and connect; creating new strategies for sustainable connection between society and livestock farming

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**Abstract :** *Modern urban demands on agriculture and the rural answers to these demands aren't always connected. The project BGood searched for new ways to re-establish the connection between the livestock industry and society. By gathering inspiration from other domains, by creating heterogeneous networks from inside and outside livestock industry, new inspiration and actual initiatives were created. Project participants welcomed the new networks and new ideas, and were able to use the new insights in their daily work. The three main roads to reconnection were: focus on identification, talk about food, and acknowledge new agro cultural values. The overall conclusion was that the gap between livestock industry and society can be bridged. Communication with society, instead of communication towards society has it's consequences. A stronger connection results in stronger involvement and feedback. Responding to these more explicit demands is a key competence when it comes to adaptive management in farming and food systems.*

**Keywords:** *animal production, society, communication, identity, image*

## Introduction

Most Dutch livestock farmers will claim they live up to societal and consumer demands. They produce within the boundaries set by law and deliver the goods following the demands which the food chains express. Never the less modern urban society has more demands when it comes to handling of animals or usage of rural space. The rural answers to these demands aren't as effective as they should be. A growing gap between animal production methods and perceptions of society is the result. This limits the strategic space for agro entrepreneurship. The Animal Sciences Group (ASG) of Wageningen University and Research Centre started the project BGood. Goal of the project was to look for new ways to re-establish the connection between the livestock industry and society and to stimulate actual implementation. Thus creating space for innovation and adaptation to social and consumer demands.

## Methods

The Bgood activities followed three main steps:

1. **Working 'Outside-in'** : Inspiration en involvement from outside the agricultural sector was gathered. 24 People who had little or no connection with Dutch livestock industry, were interviewed on bridging gaps in their own working field. People interviewed originated from domains like religion, mediation, public broadcasting, politics, (chemical)industry, ICT. The interview technique used was appreciative inquiry (Whitney and Bloom, 2003) so that not only information, but also involvement was harvested.
2. **Developing strategies for improving image and identity:** The interviews were distilled into a list of valuable quotes. These quotes were used building stones for developing new strategies. The project team developed a balanced portfolio, with nine example strategies. The portfolio was filled with strategies aimed on changing the view of society on animal production (image) and changing the behaviour of the livestock industry towards society (identity) (Birkigt and Stadler, 1986).
3. **Creating idea ownership in existing regimes:** BGood aimed at creating involvement of 'strategic actors' within the existing regimes (Geels, 2004). The prime movers from farmer organisations, product boards, animal defence organisation were interviewed. Finally a large scale network meeting was organised, where 130 people from inside and outside the livestock production shared views, ideas and experiences about reconnection on a face-to-face basis. Goal of the meeting was to create a breeding place for innovative strategies and to generate mixed networks which would take initiative to bring the new ideas into practice.

## Results

The main eye-openers acknowledged by participants of the large network meeting were:

1. **Focus on identification:** The focus in communication should be on a person (the farmer) and not on a system (the farm). People want to identify themselves with a person and not with the high technological solutions presented by the agricultural production chains. Communicating experience instead of pure facts helps to further strengthen the identification. Nowadays the majority of society is more interested in feel-good and reality actions and wants to be entertained. Entertainment is the 'open door' to get to the people. In the Netherlands the TV program farmer wants a wife is the blockbuster of the TV season with 4 mill. viewers each week.
2. **Talk about food:** The every day and principal connection between agriculture and society is 'food'. Its value in communication is underestimated by producers. Farmers should start to think of themselves as food producers, not as animal care takers (Pork producer in stead of pig farmer). A complexity is that the food production chain is one of the most complicated production chains. Consumers should become more part of the food production chain and re-own a part of (the responsibilities) in food production. A challenge is to break the taboo that meat originates from live animals. The 'urban attitude to food' tends to forget that you have to kill an animal to eat the meat. Breaking the taboos can be more easily done with children than adults. (Jamie Olivers school dinner project in the UK).
3. **Acknowledge agro cultural values:** Farming is more then producing food. For many it's more then a job. It's a way of life. The farm has strong cultural values in reconnecting people to the food, land and nature. With that perspective farmers can help urban society to re-discover the mental value of escaping the urban culture, and getting in touch with rural values again. With that, there is also the need to re-discover the current values and foundations which form the justification of pig, poultry and dairy production sectors nowadays. The old adage 'no more hunger' is not a valid foundation anymore for these sectors in developed continents such as Western Europe.

## Conclusions

The BGood project created a heterogeneous network of more then 150 people involved in bridging the gap between livestock production and society. The network consists of: farmers and cooks, policy makers and NGO's, public media and agricultural communication professionals. People involved in the BGood network told us that a grown insight in societal perspective on animal production and new contacts outside the own sector were their most valuable results. The project also resulted in initiatives of small heterogeneous networks with partners from both inside and outside the livestock farming industry. These networks show the first steps of bringing new strategies and connection in practice. They also show the struggle that comes to surface with actual connection. Communication *with* society, instead of communication *towards* society has it's consequences. A stronger connection results in stronger involvement and feedback. For adaptive management, the ability to respond to actual societal and consumer demands is a key factor. When there is a lack of contact a defensive response is often seen (explaining why the demands are not realistic, or the accusations are not true). In contact one has to overcome this defensive approach. The art is in creating an open ear on both sides of the gap and in transforming the new feedback in new identity and image. The input of 'agro mediators' which can bring two parties together is a good option. To create actual change on a larger scale, the new initiatives need (mental and financial) support from the existing organisations within the regimes. Without this support the risks of fall back are significant.

## References

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