

People with learning difficulties develop

“Care farms” combine care of the land with care of vulnerable people. Such farms exist in many European countries. In the Netherlands, the *Kiem* care farm has sixty years’ experience in involving mentally disabled people in agricultural activities. The farm sells a wide range of horticultural products, while the participants have found a worthwhile function in society.

Natasha van Dijk

In the south-east of the Netherlands, where patches of forest border on idyllic meadows, lies a small farm called the *Kiem* (meaning “germination”). The *Kiem* is the oldest biodynamic farm in the Netherlands, and is home and workplace for a community called Bronlaak. About 200 adults with learning difficulties, mental health problems and other special needs live, learn and work together with a staff of twelve families. It was founded in 1948 when parents of children with learning difficulties sought a place for them to live and work once they became adults. Life in the community is based around two ideas: biodynamic agriculture and anthroposophy. The latter is a philosophy which teaches that all people, no matter what their learning difficulties, have a healthy core element in them, giving rise to special abilities and talents. Biodynamics is a method of organic farming based on a holistic approach that regards soil, plants, animals and people as interrelated. Biodynamic agriculture has always been at the heart of the community, because it sees healthy food and care of the earth as important to people’s health and well-being.

Sixty years on, Bronlaak is now financed by the government as well as gaining income from sales of farm and artisan products. All residents join in at least one of the many work areas. These include a horticulture garden, a livestock farm with a cheese-making unit, and a managed forest. In addition, artisan activities include pottery making, wooden utensil carving, weaving, candle making, and growing flowers and perennial plants. A laundry unit and central kitchen are the other two work areas.

Daily routine at the *Kiem* horticultural garden

The *Kiem* garden (at 1.6 hectares) includes over 40 varieties of vegetable crops, seven types of fruits, and over 60 types of herbs. Honey is also produced. The day starts at 8.30 with a group planning meeting. The 22 adult participants sit together with four or five work supervisors in a big circle. Tasks are divided and the working day begins. At midday there is a break, and everyone continues with a different activity. Often in the early morning hours, vegetables, herbs and fruits are harvested and processed. In the late morning or afternoon, crops are weeded or hoed depending on the need. In the autumn months, compost-making is an important activity; in the wintertime, tools and infrastructure are maintained. Winter is also an excellent time to process all the dried herbs collected earlier, into herbal mixtures for teas, cooking, medicines, as well as for herbal oils and ointments. Work ends at 4.30 in the afternoon.

There are many things to consider when deciding about task division. As the garden produces a wide variety of crops as well as seedlings, there are many tasks to choose from. The levels of learning difficulties vary: some people can work rather independently while others are only able to push a wheelbarrow. Participants have various types of disabilities: there are people

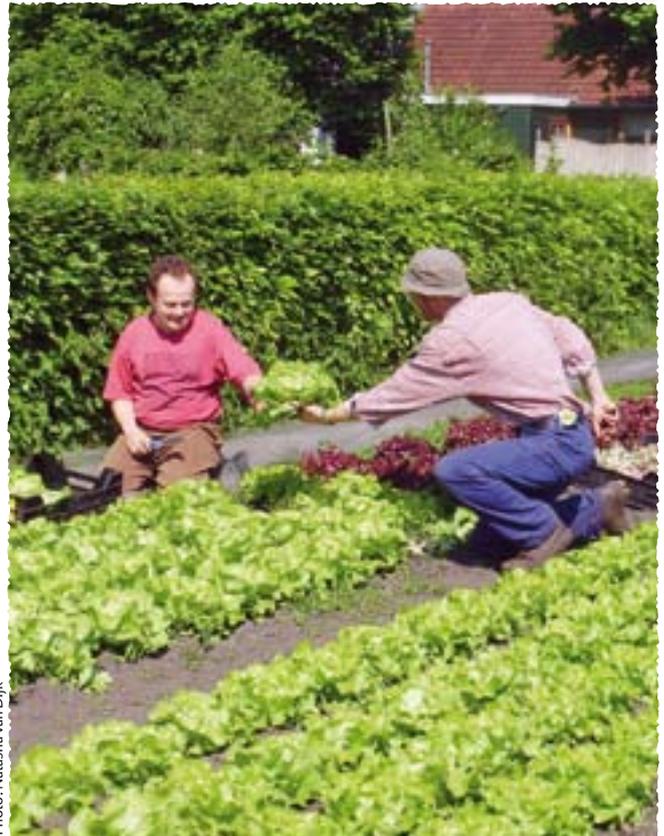


Photo: Natasha van Dijk

Two participants at the *Kiem* care farm harvest a variety of lettuces.

with Down’s syndrome, different forms of autism, mental disorders such as borderline syndrome, as well as physical disabilities such as visual limitations, deafness, and epilepsy.

All the horticultural products are marketed. First, the community’s central kitchen has a contract to buy a large daily share of the garden produce. The kitchen staff (which also includes participants) prepare meals for 210 people. Products are transported by horse-cart and managed by residents. A second market outlet is a local shop run by the Bronlaak community. This sells fresh and processed products from the garden and farm, as well as handicrafts. Customers are members of the community as well as outsiders, including local restaurants. Lastly, a number of external horticulturalists buy up to 10 000 of our seedlings per year.

Care farming in the Netherlands

The *Kiem* is an example of “care farming”, which combines care of the land with care of vulnerable people. Care farms seek to empower vulnerable people by developing their possibilities, strengths and potentials rather than focusing on their limitations – by engaging them in agricultural activities.

Until the 1990s, few care farms existed in the Netherlands. The combination of agriculture and social care is a promising concept. It contributes to the diversification of agricultural production, while also providing an alternative innovation for the health care sector, which subsidises the enterprises. At present, there are 900 care farms in the Netherlands. About 8000 vulnerable people work and sometimes live on these farms. The target groups of care farms are very diverse, ranging from people with physical disabilities, psychiatric problems, suffering from mental breakdowns or Alzheimers disease, drug addicts, long-term unemployed people, or ex-prisoners undergoing

confidence through care farming

rehabilitation. The National Support Centre of Care Farms has developed a quality trademark for its members, which guarantees a minimum level of care and safety standards.

Some lessons learned about care farming from the *Kiem*:

- People need meaningful tasks in their lives. In our garden this is clear: we supply fresh food products to meet a daily demand from society. Everybody contributes in his or her own way and level. The garden provides meaningful work that empowers the participants because they are given responsibility, no matter how small. Meaningful work allows people to learn to make their own decisions, for instance being able to choose between different tasks. This is fundamentally different from so-called “day-care” activities, where people simply pass the time of day and often have few goals or little perspective.
- All workers are part of a small, but important, social network which includes the Bronlaak community, staff, vulnerable participants as well as shop customers. People meet each other, not because of their disabilities, but because as a group, they are responsible for a healthy, tasty and beautiful product. Furthermore, people with and without learning difficulties have to co-operate and interact with each other – which is not always easy. Social events are also celebrated with the larger community of Bronlaak.
- A sense of equality is key. Work supervisors at the *Kiem* have degrees in both horticulture and pedagogical care and are important role models, but they do work together with participants on common tasks. There is also a healthy level of pressure to ensure high quality standards. Working together also means communicating, chatting, singing, celebrating, quarrelling, and sometimes even fighting together.
- People are empowered by a safe environment. Working in an agricultural setting makes people more aware of the rhythms of nature, aside from daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms. Everybody needs rhythm in their lives, but people with special needs are particularly comforted by the feeling that they are in a safe and constant environment.

Finding a place for people with special needs in society

Having a small community like Bronlaak, where safety and care for vulnerable people are guaranteed, fulfills the needs of many people. This is often referred to as the “reversed integration” model. At Bronlaak, people live in a community, but others also live and work there. Outsiders are explicitly invited to visit the beautiful landscape (walking and cycling routes are found there) and to attend cultural events.

The opposite of this is the strongly promoted model of “integration”. From the 1980s onwards this called for vulnerable people to be integrated into all aspects of society. In earlier centuries in the Netherlands, the “fools” (as they were then called) of each rural community did have a special place in society, including participation in agricultural activities. But by the end of the 19th century, they were institutionalised, and in the 20th century, society took on the attitude that people with disabilities were abnormal. In the 1960s, liberty and democratic rights movements took place, resulting in the call for equal civil rights and integration of all people in all aspects of life. However, in practice, our society is not yet prepared for this idea. For example, employers lack sufficient incentives. Social isolation is very common among many of the people who live in so-called “normal” neighbourhoods. This integration model does not work for many people, particularly the most vulnerable. Looking at the model practised at Bronlaak, we see people engaged in worthwhile activities, having a job, and being respected and appreciated.

- Working in an agricultural environment has a strong therapeutic value. The workers have to face the challenges of the elements, such as bad weather, sticky soil, getting dirty hands, carrying heavy loads, and the never-ending weeds. Overcoming harsh elements helps people to develop skills and good attitudes. Although some participants are motivated from the beginning, others need to be motivated to keep working. But we all do get a sense of pride when, for instance, 70 tonnes of compost are prepared at the end of December. We celebrate this with a small ritual; adding biodynamic preparations to the heap of compost, and telling a Christmas story. Sometimes, however, it is concluded that a person would fit better in another work place, such as the pottery or weaving workshop because he or she needs a more confined space, for instance, than in the garden.

Limitations of care farms

Everyone should be rewarded for the job they do. A limitation of most, if not all, care farms in the Netherlands is that participants are not paid for the jobs offered. People with special needs, unlike the farm staff, do not receive a salary. This deserves more investigation: if you take people seriously, no matter what their level of functioning, financial reward in the form of a salary should be provided. At present, all participants do receive a social security allowance from the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, but this does not carry the same status as a “salary”.

In our society, individualism, a demand-driven care system, and the growing level of bureaucracy challenge the value of learning and the quality of professional supervision. Care professionals are pushed more and more into the role of administrators, because of the high level of accountability and quality certification processes demanded by government.

Participant development

It is clear from the experience of the *Kiem* that care farms can provide a means for vulnerable people with learning disabilities to grow and develop, particularly when they participate for a longer time. Those who have worked in the garden for many years become physically and mentally stronger. Shy and sensitive people, damaged by social exclusion in the past, have also become much stronger and less vulnerable as they experience respect from others. The participants in the *Kiem* garden usually have such serious learning disabilities that they need to work in a “safe” environment all their lives. However, other vulnerable groups, such as ex-prisoners or those suffering from nervous breakdowns, can go on to become integrated into society. For them, working on a care farm is more like temporary therapy.

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This article is the personal view of the author, and is not necessarily that of the Kiem farm or the Bronlaak community.