ESRS 2025
WG17: Studying the societal aspects of social ecological transformations in rural areas

Social dynamics and maturity of Farmer Clusters to enable social-ecological transformations

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Image: Flevolands Farmer Cluster, The Netherlands | Taskscape Media

FRAMEWORK

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Summary

- The Framework project
  What are Farm Clusters (FCs)?

- Exploring FC maturity

- Factors shaping maturity

- Examples

The Framework project

- The project is funded by EC under the Horizon Europe call
- Looking at measures to conserve, promote and enhance biodiversity leading to adoption of sustainable farming practices at a landscape scale
- The project consortium is made up of eighteen research organisations, NGOs and small businesses stretching across Europe from Estonia in the north to southern Spain

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valuing biodiversity...

with people across our food system.

What are Farm Clusters in the Framework project?

1. Farm clusters (FCs), primarily established to promote socio-ecological transformation in rural areas, at a landscape scale.
2. They focus on monitoring ecological parameters, evaluating agricultural practices especially innovative methods and technology.
3. Promote the building of social capital.
4. They are formally established with a governance structure and facilitator.
5. Formed of neighbouring farmers and unlike LLs no external stakeholders.
6. Key point is they are farmer lead, following farmer suggestions experts and training are sourced.
7. The project has 11 FCs established over 9 countries.

Where are the farm clusters in the Framework project?
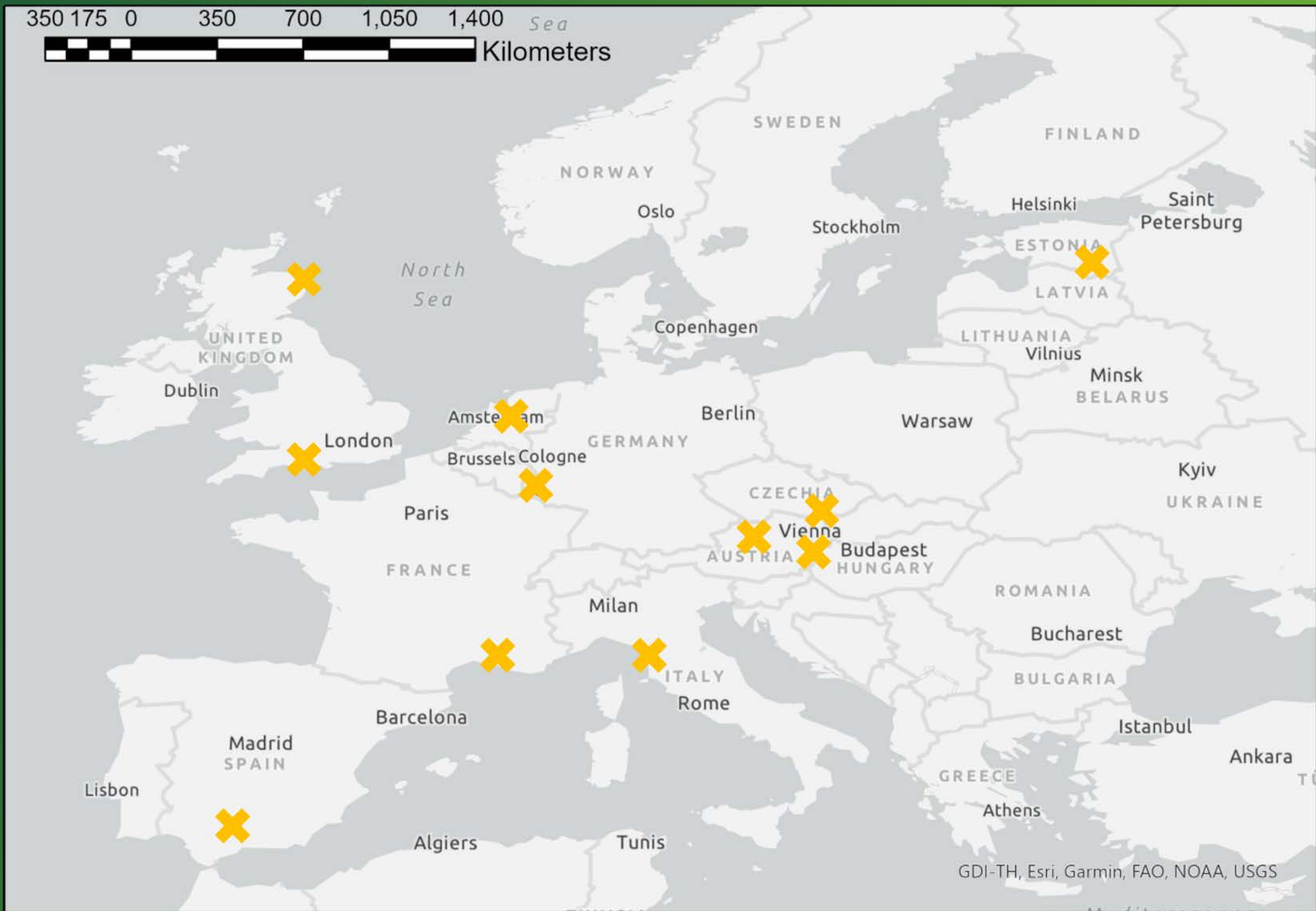
Location of eleven FCs across Europe.

- The Farmer Cluster concept, was originally developed by the GWCT in association with Natural England, to help a number of farmers work more collaboratively together in a defined area, enabling them to collectively work towards caring for the soil, water and wildlife, at a landscape scale.
- Although farm clusters have been successfully used in England, it was novel in many other project countries, including Scotland
- Leading to the FCs developing heterogeneously and reaching different levels of maturity since their inception in 2020.

Evaluation of maturity levels and influencing factors:

Approach to the evaluation of the FCs outcomes

Following Velten et al. (2021), we used <u>five outcome dimensions</u> to evaluate the FCs:

- Achievements of the **social, environmental** and **economic goals** of the FCs.

- **Durability**, defined as an assessment of the actual or likely endurance of an FC and its achievements, despite changing conditions (e.g. ceasing of FRAMEwork project).

- **Acceptance** of the FCs, defined as an 'assessment' of the degree to which an FC is supported or opposed by the involved and other affected actors.

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Methods used:

- Explorative multiple case study analysis:

  - Data collection: <u>Common enquiry framework</u> established as a baseline for comparative analysis of the 11 FCs

  - Data analysis: Consisted of 3 steps – involving both a <u>case-oriented</u> and <u>variable-oriented</u> approach in each step of the inductive analysis – to identify factors shaping the outcomes of the FCs, the linkages between and the dynamic nature these factors of each FC by assigning maturity levels to each of the identified factors

Factors shaping the outcomes of the FCs

- **Governance** – structures and processes set up in the FCs to support and shape group activities and outcomes.

- **Leadership** – presence of a person (e.g. lead farmer) and / or organisation to provide momentum and advance cluster activities.

- **Facilitation** – role of the cluster facilitator (and/or facilitating team) for supporting and shaping group activities and outcomes.

- **Group characteristics** – characteristics that may support or challenge collaboration.

- **Context** – including economic, cultural, social and political context within which the FC operates.

In practice, these five factors / conditions shaping the outcomes of the FCs are dynamic, interact and complement each other.

# Maturity levels of all FCs: exploring the five crucial factors
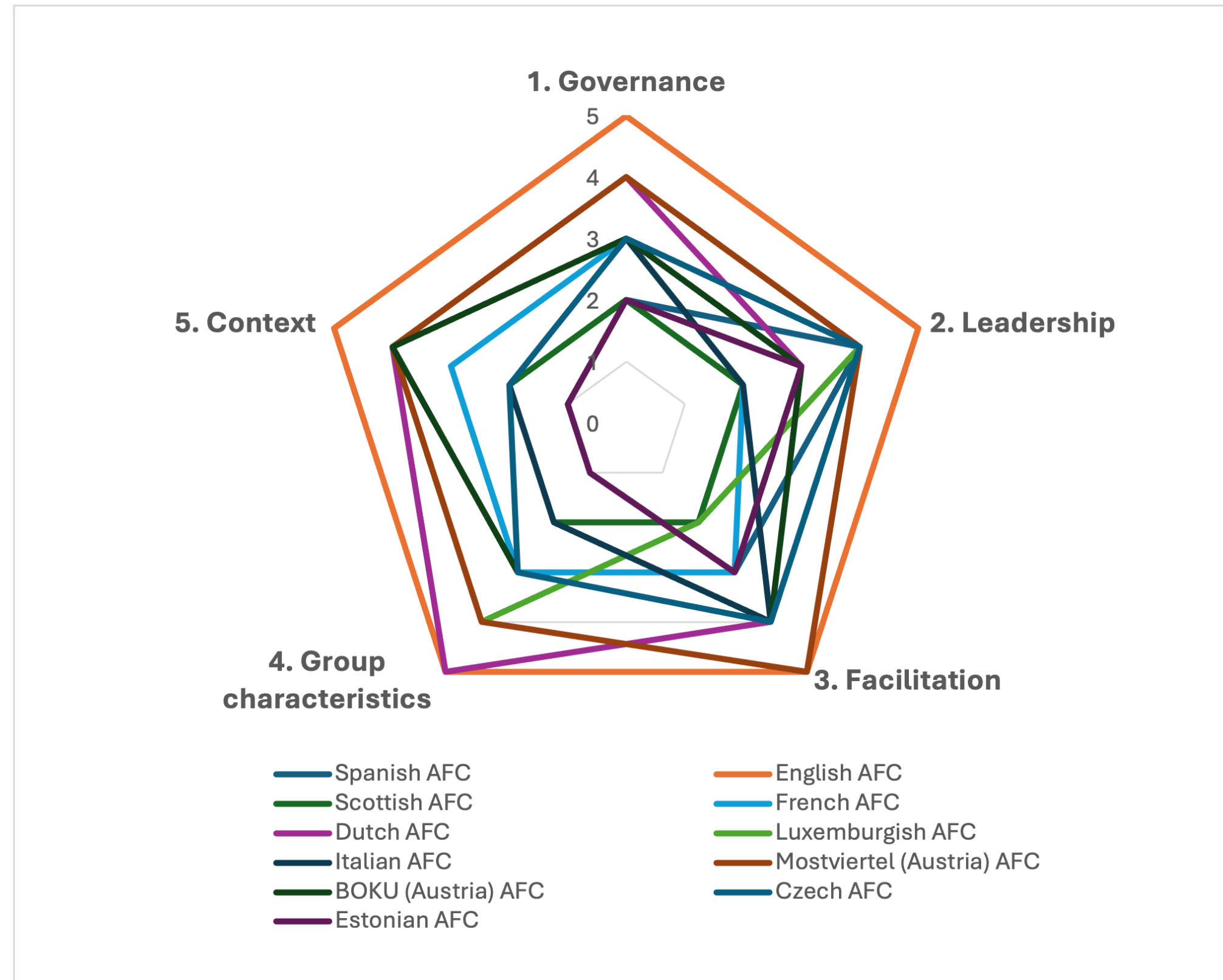
- The English cluster could be described as an 'archetypical example' with high levels of maturity across all 5 factors. This is not surprising since English FCs have evolved and have been supported (e.g. via the Countryside Stewardship Facilitation Fund) for about a decade.

- Favourable **contextual variables,** such as a national policy framework and a supporting network of actors, enabled the lead farmer to motivate his neighbours to join the cluster. A facilitator was invited and put in place, as well as governance structures and processes, which enabled the cluster to move forward together. Other clusters in the area to lead peer support during initial establishment.

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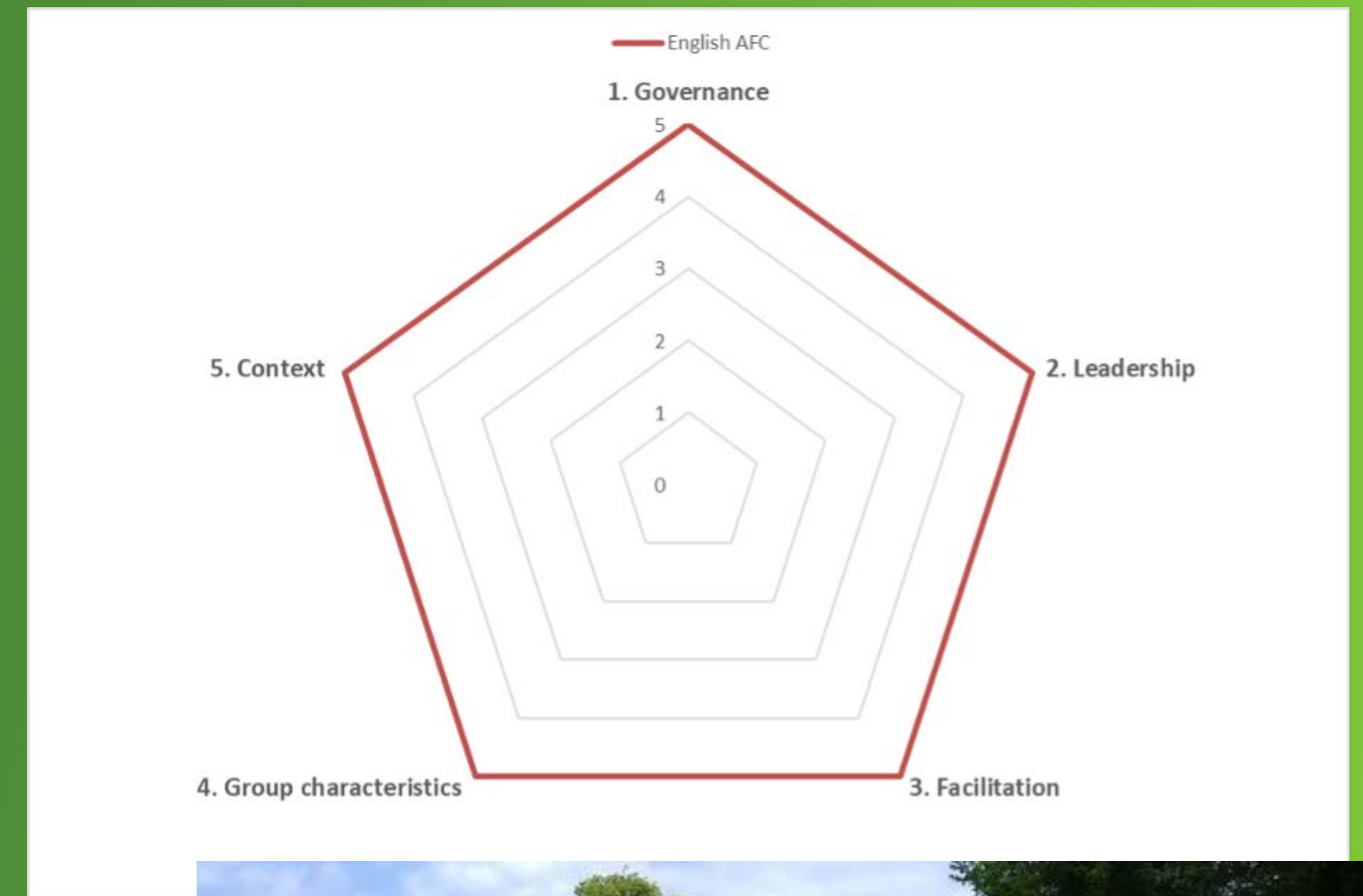
- Unfavourable **group characteristics** and **contextual variables** challenge the FC to implement **governance structures** or **leadership** despite **skillful facilitation.**

- In the FC, olive groves are extensively and organically managed both by <u>hobby and commercial olive growers</u>. Their <u>divergent views and values</u> related to the control of pests reportedly <u>hinder the cluster from jointly moving forward</u> in defining biodiversity targets and cluster activities.
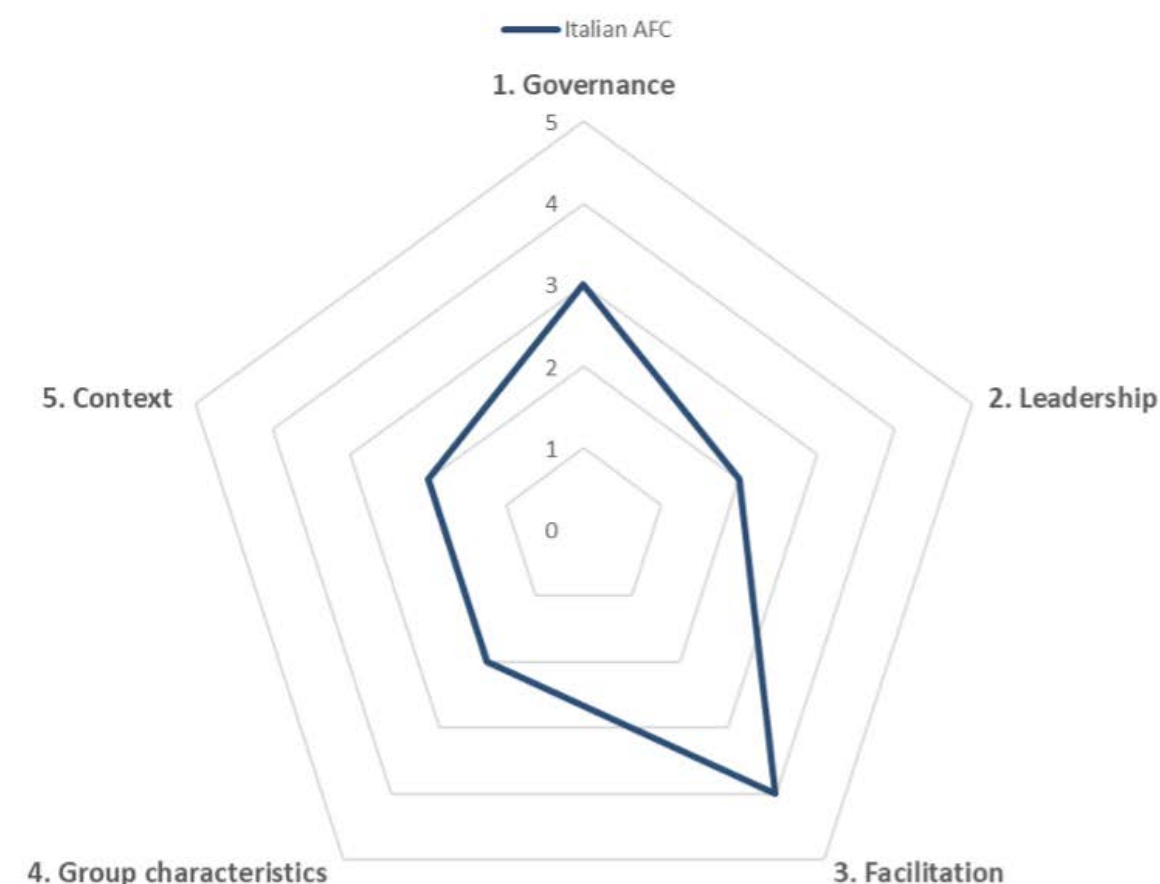
Dutch cluster

- **Institutionalised governance structures** and **processes,** a **like-minded group of farmers,** and a **favourable policy context** support the cluster in collective decision-making, at least regarding implementation of AES funded measures.

- **Diligently targeted** and **engaged facilitation** seems to motivate farmers to learn more about biodiversity and potential measures that could be implemented voluntarily to support biodiversity.

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- **Cultural context** and **group characteristics** prevent the cluster from living up to its full potential.

- **Influential lead farmer** and **engaged facilitator** motivated farmers and local stakeholders to jointly develop and put into place a biodiversity path that showcases biodiversity sensitive farming measures implemented by the farmers supporting biodiversity, learning and cluster cohesion.

Implications for policy and practice

- Outcomes of bottom-up FCs across Europe differ greatly depending on pre-conditions (policy context, trust, norms, pre-existing networks) -> to establish effective collaboration in some contexts will require substantial resources and time.

- FCs do not necessarily need high levels of maturity in all dimensions to achieve their goals.

- The maturity framework can serve as a guiding tool for FCs to reflect on their maturity in realising the five factors and whether this aligns with their goals .

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Thanks for listening!

Image: Basse Durance Valley Farmer Cluster, France | INRAE/ GRAB

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