

The Dairy Development Trap: How developing countries can learn from the experiences of Dutch dairy farming

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1. History of NL dairy farming

Intensification of dairy farming

Only 50 years ago agriculture in The Netherlands was quite similar to agriculture in many other (developing) countries today: large numbers of family farms that combine low-input crop production with various species of livestock for milk, meat, manure, traction and cultural manifestations. Until the early 1960's milking was done by hand, carts were pulled by horses, and fodder was dried as hay for the winter period, when the cattle stayed inside in rope-tied stables.

Since the 1960's dairy farming in The Netherlands has gone through a metamorphosis. The average number of cattle per farm has increased 7-fold: from 9 to 66 animals. Modern free roaming stables today can even keep up to 1000 animals. At the same time one man in 2007 produces 17 times the amount of milk that one man in 1960 produced. At the same time the number of dairy farms has decreased by 85%: from 180.000 farms in 1960 to 21.300 in 2007. (Table 1, Ham et al, LEI, 2010)

	1960	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005	2007
Dairy farms (x1000)	180	91.5	58	37.5	29.5	23.5	21.3
Total milkproduction (x1000)	6.721	10.286	12.525	11.280	11.155	10.827	11.134
Dairy cows (x1000)	1.628	2.218	2.367	1.708	1.504	1.433	1.413
# of dairy cows per farm	9	24	41	45.5	51	61	66
Milkproduction/farm (x1000)	37	112.5	216	301	379	460	522
Milkproduction (kg/cow/year)	4.200	4.650	5.300	6.610	7.420	7.550	7.880
Milkproduction (kg/ha/year)	5.500	8.864	12.512	12.018	12.340	12.560	12.980
Labor productivity (kg milk/hour)	8	37	72	89	108	128	141

Table 1: Dairy development in The Netherlands, between 1960 and 2007 (Ham et al, LEI, 2010)

What does all of this mean besides a major increase in quantity of milk produced on each farm? How was this achieved? In what way were farmers supported? Does this imply that farmers in 2007 earned 17 times more than their fathers in 1960? What hurdles were met on the way? What are the trends today? And what can be learned from all this for other countries that want to improve and modernize their dairy system?

This case study presents the history of dairy farming in the Netherlands between 1960 and 2010. It will first highlight the conducive policies that supported the transformation in dairy farming between the 1950's and 1970's. Then the side-effects that started to appear as from 1970's are mentioned, followed by the policies put in place to reduce these consequences. Finally the latest policies and trends will be mentioned, and the way local knowledge and farmer-driven initiative have again gained importance. I will conclude with the lessons that were learned on the way, which may be of use for dairy development in other countries.