

Coordinating Collaboration: Key Driver for Thriving Agroecological Living Labs

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Introduction

This study aimed to establish the Praxisforschungsnetzwerk Hessen (PFN) / Farmer-Led Research Network Hesse (FLR) to address limitations identified in participatory research approaches in Germany. The network was designed to produce high-quality scientific output while ensuring strong stakeholder participation and motivation, making results both relevant for agricultural practice and scientific requirements. The PFN was conceived as flexible and responsive, able to reflect diverse stakeholder interests and enable dynamic, context-sensitive learning. **Very important was the question of where to place the coordination**, which is why the network was set up in three phases and started before funding proposals and specific research questions were developed, unlike other networks that are mostly established only afterwards. Local knowledge played a key role, particularly in identifying stakeholder needs and motivations, and in developing a network design tailored to the specific regional context of Hesse.

Methods

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was applied to identify stakeholder needs during the establishment of the network. The set up of the FLR network followed three phases, which are outlined as follows:

Phase 1

Defining framework conditions

- April 2018: Focus group study with farmers, researchers and advisors to determine preconditions for FLR setup
- March 2021: Placement of coordination at the Hessian Association for Organic Farming (VÖL e.V.)

Phase 2

Identifying and involving relevant stakeholders

- March 2021: Needs assessment survey with organic farmers - definition of motivation and resources
- March-May 2021: Focus group discussions with research infrastructures & advisors in Hesse - definition of interests and resources

Phase 3

Organizing subject-specific multi actor groups example: arable group

- April 2021: Definition of possible topics of interest within each subject-specific group of farmers and advisors
 - May 2021: Workshops for topic refinement
 - June 2021: Involvement of research infrastructure in the process
 - July 2021: Development of a research question
 - Okt 2021: Project proposal
- Project start



Results & Discussion

Focus group study: What criteria should the coordination office of the FLR network meet?

- Independent and long-term infrastructure is needed
- Coordination should be performed by personnel without conflicts of interest that can be trusted

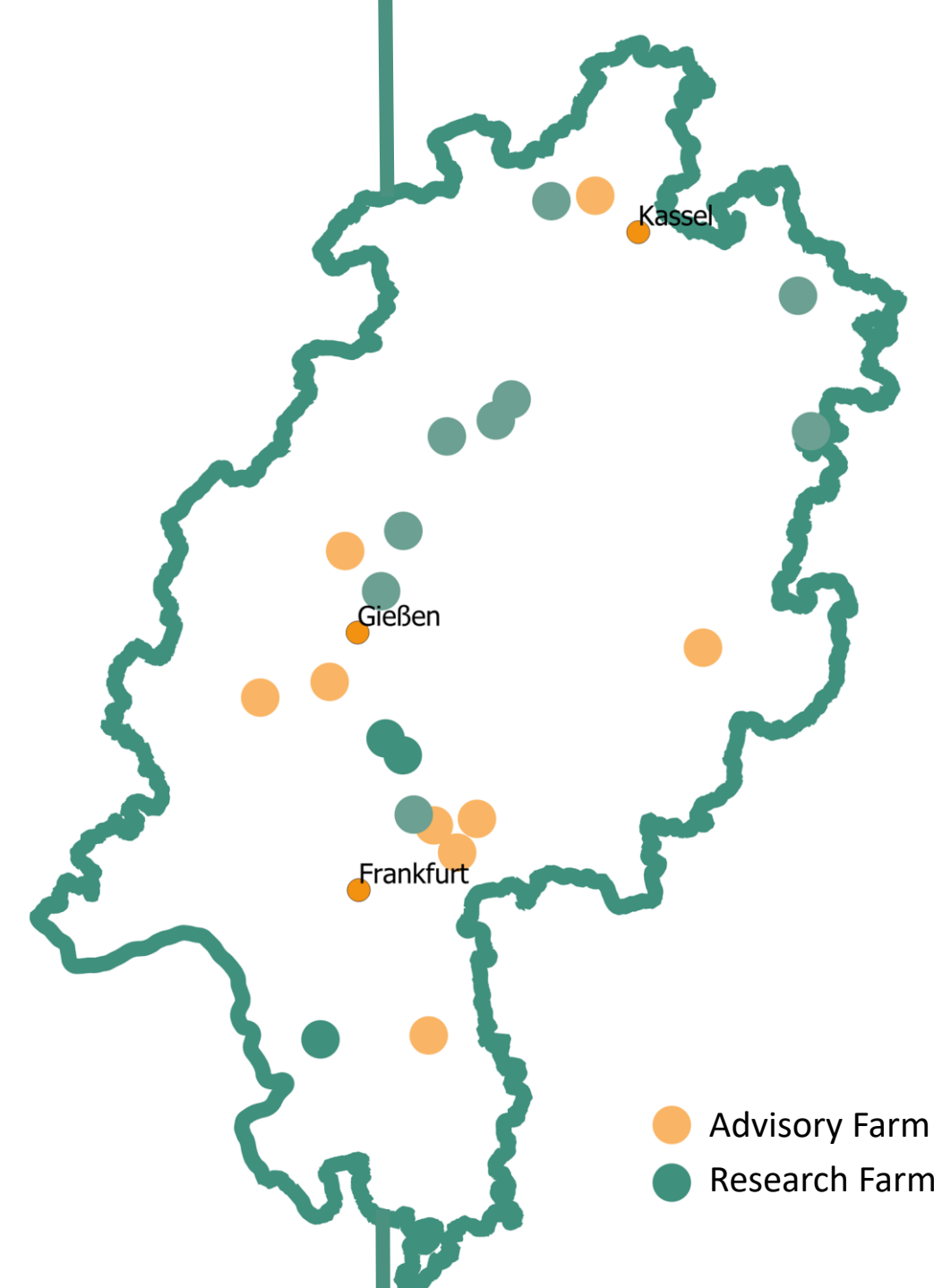


Figure 2: Location of farms participating in the Hessian network

What is the motivation of farmers to participate in the network?

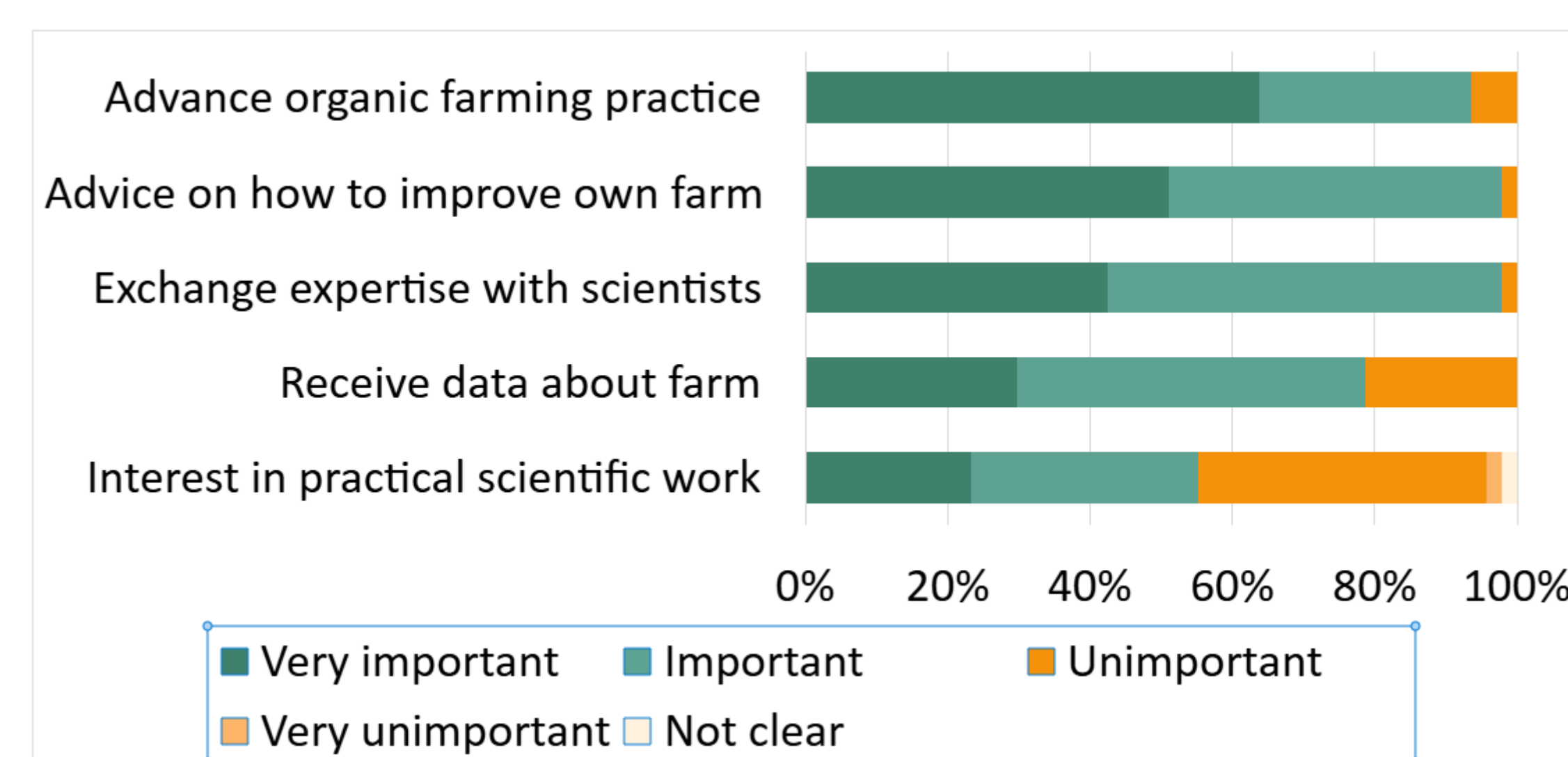


Figure 1: Evaluation of farmers motivation to participate in the Farmer-Led Research Network (n=52).

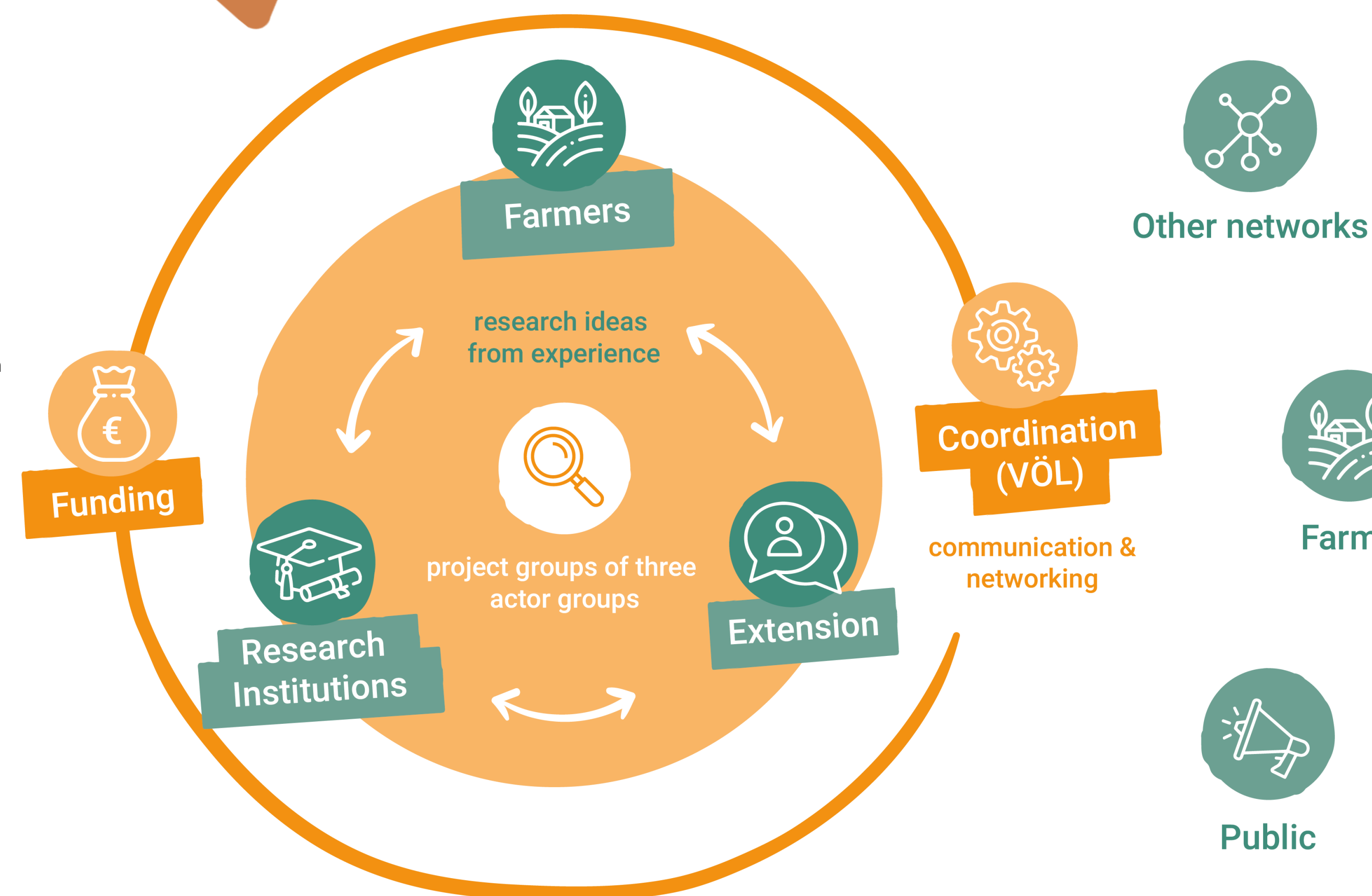


Figure 3: Stakeholders involved in the FLR network Hesse.

- Farm-centered structure:** Around 30 ecologically managed Farms form the core of the FLR Network, driving research questions and field trials.
- Co-creation process:** Continuous exchange between farmers, advisors, and researchers ensures practice-based and scientifically sound results.
- Regular meetings:** Subject specific groups meet at least twice yearly online; an annual event unites all groups for collaboration and exchange.
- Central coordination:** VÖL Hessen e.V. manages the network, communication, and cooperation with other research networks and promote visibility, dialogue, and dissemination of results. The needs assessment showed that farmers are primarily motivated by advancing organic farming. Hosting the network within this organic farming association aligns with farmers' interests, strengthens links to policy, and enhances the societal impact of participatory research.

Conclusion The FLR Network places farms at its core, ensuring research that favors practical needs while meeting scientific quality standards. Coordinated by VÖL Hessen e.V., it fosters continuous exchange, strengthens links between research, practice, and policy, and advances organic farming through participatory research projects.

Funded by:



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