

Ben White & Jan Douwe van der Ploeg

## Changing demographics and smallholder futures

A vibrant, earth-friendly smallholder-based agriculture depends – among other things – on the willingness of young rural men and women to take up the challenge of farming. In the past decade since IAASTD's publication, three interrelated aspects of changing rural demographics have been a cause for concern in relation to the prospects of smallholder-based farming futures.

The first is the ageing of farming populations, all over the world. In many countries (high, middle and low income) in a timespan of only three decades the proportion of farmers under age 35 has halved while those aged 55 and over have doubled. Second is the widely-reported aversion of today's relatively well-educated young rural men and women to farming futures. And third is these young rural people's increasing spatial and sectoral mobility (White, 2020).

Young people's aversion to farming is often seen as a main cause of the rising average age of farmers. But is it true that young people no longer have sufficient interest in engaging in farming? This assumption is largely based on data constructed by state administrative systems (Ploeg, 2013), and this can create its own problems. For example, there may be many farms that are legally still owned by 'an old patriarch' but which, in practice, have been already run for quite some time by one or more of the children. In national statistics, such farms appear to be run by an aged farmer without a successor and doomed to disappear. Then there is the opposite case, of the many young men and women who would like to start farming but cannot get access to the land (Rete, 2012: 36), some of whom migrate elsewhere in order to make their dream come true. They too do not appear in the statistics. In summary, farms with youngsters and youngsters wanting to farm are too often filtered out of statistics.

**Over the past 30 years, the proportion of farmers under age 35 has halved.**

We also have to take into account that officially produced statistical trends are *averages*, which can conceal important countertendencies. We will briefly discuss here two such countertendencies. Organic agriculture, at least in the Northwest of Europe, and perhaps also elsewhere, offers such a countertendency. The percentage of organic farms that pass to the next generation is nearly twice as high as conventionally managed farms (Vijn, 2010: 22-23). Even more intriguing is that a substantial number of organic farms give birth to two or more new

organic farms that are run by the children. This is easy to explain: on the whole incomes are better in organic farms, debts are lower and the people involved experience more joy and satisfaction in their jobs. However, all this escapes from statistics.

Another countertendency resides in the so-called *inflow*. Mathematically, the decrease in the number of farmers is the aggregate of the outflow and the inflow: the outflow represents the number of farmers who stop farming (and who are not succeeded by one of their heirs) and the inflow is the number of people who enter the sector and start farming. Census data give the difference between the two, but normally do not detail the specifics of either:

### Twice as many organic farms pass to the next generation than conventional farms.

There are a few, exceptional, data bases that allow us to assess both the inflow and the outflow. These show intriguing tendencies and countertendencies (Ploeg, 2017). In 1980, the Netherlands had 71,426 farms with grazing animals. Ten years later this number had declined by 7,012 (i.e. circa 10%). This reduction was the *net-result* of an outflow of 16,353 farms and an inflow of 9,341. If we only look at the net result, the overall reduction of 7,012 farms, this almost automatically reaffirms the thesis that farms are *inevitably* disappearing. But a closer look shows that there is a large inflow, more than the aggregate decline, that includes young as well as elder people starting to build a farm. Studying this inflow would generate, we believe, useful insights on how these people can be supported in creating and further developing a farm.

Comparing levels of inflow in the Netherlands for different decades shows a slowdown in this inflow. This evidently reflects changing institutional and economic conditions. If incomes were higher, working hours less, regulations less asphyxiating, and rural services better, the trend could probably be reversed. Here again it applies that a careful empirical inquiry into these evolving conditions and their interaction with the everyday life experiences of young people could help to identify critical levers for change.

In surveys of rural youth aspirations in Asia, Africa and Latin America, when young men and women are asked some form of the question “what would you like to do when you grow up?”, they overwhelmingly mention secure, salaried work while farming comes far down on the list. However, if the same surveys ask “what would make farming an attractive option for you?” farming emerges as a possible option – if land and inputs are available and if farming is at least partly commercially oriented and combined with other income sources in pluriactive livelihoods. Young people’s desire for an economic existence independent from their parents is strong, and they express a clear understanding of the constraints which make access to land and to successful farming difficult, at least while they are still young.

It is not surprising, then, that so many rural school-leavers opt for trajectories of migration and non-farm work. But this is not necessarily a once-for-all, permanent decision. Many of today's "young farmers" are in fact former out-migrants who have then returned to the village and to farming (White, 2020: Ch. 5).

Global awareness of the economic, social and environmental advantages of smallholder farming over industrial farming is evidenced by the UN's International Year of the Family Farmer (2014) and the recent launching of the UN Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028. "Putting family farming and all family-based production models at the focus of interventions", according to FAO, "will contribute to a world free of hunger and poverty, where natural resources are managed sustainably, and where no one is left behind" (FAO-IFAD, 2019: 8). Most governments, however, have withdrawn more and more from their role of supporting small-scale farmers and rural development generally (HLPE 2013), and continue to give free rein to large-scale agribusiness ventures.

**Young people's desire for an economic existence independent from their parents is strong.**

A generationally sustainable revitalization of smallholder farming means recognizing rural youth not as instruments of development and growth ("human capital"), but as subjects, actors and citizens. It means providing land and other agrarian resources to young men and women would-be farmers while respecting the interests and needs of the older generation. There are many examples of government and NGO programmes aiming to promote the transfer of land between generations (not necessarily between parents and children), or to provide young would-be farmers with access to unused or public land at low cost (White, 2020: 131-2). In Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST), systems of collective tenure and communal governance and explicit recognition of young people's role in farming have provided both economic and non-economic benefits for young people, and improved the present and future livability of the Brazilian countryside (Gurr, 2017: 256).

Initiatives to support young farmers should include both, those from farming backgrounds and newcomers, male and female, and should take into account the characteristic patterns of youth trajectories today, especially their multidirectional mobility and pluriactive livelihoods combining farm and non-farm incomes. This requires creative promotion of opportunities for young rural men and women to engage in farming, and investment in infrastructures making rural areas attractive places for young men and women to live and work.

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