



Deconstructing the ‘young farmer problem in Europe’: Towards a research agenda



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 August 2014
Received in revised form
14 January 2015
Accepted 19 January 2015
Available online 7 February 2015

Keywords:

Young farmer
New entrants
Farm succession
Ageing farmers
CAP reform

ABSTRACT

In this paper we assess the evidence for a ‘young farmer problem’ in Europe, deconstructing the underpinning arguments through a review of recent literature and statistical analysis of Eurostat figures. We find a major inconsistency between European policy documents, which conflate young farm holders with new entrants; Eurostat numbers, which focus on young sole holders; and the academic literature, which consistently demonstrates the importance of farming successors to farm business development. Analysis of Eurostat figures evidences considerable national differences in young farmer numbers, suggesting that there is no shortage of young farmers at national level in Germany, France, Switzerland, Finland, Austria, France, the Czech Republic and Poland. The apparent shortage of young farmers occurs in countries where small-scale holdings are more prevalent, particularly Portugal, Italy, Romania and Greece. The statistical analysis also demonstrates considerable differences in farm structure between old and new member states, and provides support for the contention that young sole holders are more likely to operate modernised, profitable farms. The authors argue that there is insufficient evidence to adequately inform debates about the role of young people in European agriculture, proposing a research agenda which includes more consistent conceptualization of the ‘young farmer problem’, targeted research on the role of young people in agricultural innovations, assessment of regional differences within countries, and identification of farm succession processes in new EU Member States.

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1. Introduction

The European Commission has identified a “distressing shortage of new farmers” (DGIP, 2012, p. 39), based on an assessment of statistical figures showing that the number of young farmers in the EU27 is declining and older farmers are not passing on their farms to the new generation at a sufficient replacement rate. Dacian Cioloş, the European Commissioner with responsibility for Agriculture and Rural Development since 2010, stated to a meeting of CEJA (European Council of Young Farmers): “If agriculture does not provide future prospects to young farmers, one might wonder what kind of future European agriculture has”, going on to comment that, owing to the loss of 3 million farmers in recent years: “This makes it important to move up a gear and put a proactive policy in place on a European level to support the arrival of new farmers in the

agricultural sector, allowing them either to create new businesses or take over a business, that is, a farm, whose owners have retired” (Farmer’s Guardian, 2012). Mr Cioloş was expressing a commonly held belief amongst policy makers and farming organisations, that there is a ‘young farmer problem’ in European agriculture, which requires policy intervention.

The perceived shortage of young farmers is part of an ongoing discourse about the aging of European farmers. National level schemes have been implemented since the 1960s (Bika, 2007), with early retirement systems institutionalised at European level in the CAP reform of 1992, through Regulation 2079/92 (Mazorra, 2000). Under the 2007–2013 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Measure 112 specifically focused on the establishment of new farms. By 2013, more than 126 000 young farmers had received support under this measure accounting for 75.8% of the reference target for 2007–2013, set up within the EC Common monitoring and evaluation framework (ENRD, 2014). The measure draws on a budget of €4.82 billion (€2.84 billion from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and €1.98 from national budgets) (ENRD, 2014). In the 2014–2020 CAP reform, this measure will

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continue: from 2015 all eligible young farmers entering the sector will receive an additional direct payment from the first pillar, which may be combined with set-up assistance under the second pillar (EC, 2013). In addition, Member States are given much higher flexibility in implementing the direct payments; funding allocated to selected schemes will therefore vary amongst the EU countries. However, early retirement schemes – widely recognised to be unsuccessful in increasing real intergenerational transfer (Mazorra, 2000; Bika, 2007; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011) – are being discontinued.

Aspects of the ‘young farmer problem’ have also had considerable attention within the academic literature, similarly constructed in relation to the larger issue of the aging farming population, as well as the future structure and practices of farming. Although clear that age should not be used as the sole indicator of farm performance or management practice, the academic literature includes numerous studies suggesting that the age of farmers plays an important role in farm business decision-making. Burton (2006) for example identifies age as a useful indicator for explaining variations in farm management strategies and social dimensions of the farm (such as the experience of the farm operator and his or her physical capability, stage of family development), but argues that a compilation of the age of family members working on a farm is a better indicator of farm structural features and managerial characteristics than the age of the principle decision-maker. This finding is consistent with other studies which have found that together with attitudes and beliefs, age relates to views on sustainability (Comer et al., 1999; Vanslebrouck et al., 2002), orientation towards sustainable and efficient agriculture (van Passel et al., 2007; Lobley et al., 2009), up-take of organic farming (Laepfle and Van Rensburg, 2011) and impacts on the welfare of animals kept on farms (Mann, 2005).

In this paper we examine the evidence underpinning the definition, assessment and intervention into the ‘young farmer problem’ in Europe. Our intention is not to critique the support measures, but to assess the underlying assumptions about the numbers of young people involved in agriculture in Europe, and the potential impact the age of farmers can be expected to have on agricultural practices. To do so, we combined an assessment of recent academic literature addressing the age of farmers, new entrants, farm succession, structural changes to agriculture, and multifunctional transitions with a statistical analysis of Eurostat figures from 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2010. Owing to the constraints on data available at the European level, we focus on numbers of young farmers in relation to older farmers, the relationship between age and farm size, and the relationship between age and farm business performance. We also consider supra-regional differences, assessing difference between northern and southern Europe, and between long-term and new member states.

In the following section we explore the construction of the ‘young farmer problem’ from European policy and academic perspectives. We then report on data and findings based on our analysis of Eurostat statistics. In particular, we critique the utility of age as an indicator of agricultural sector sustainability, and the perception that a shortage of young people in agriculture is ubiquitous throughout the EU27. We then conclude with a discussion of the implications of findings for future farming in the EU, and present a research agenda.

2. Deconstructing the ‘young farmer problem’

2.1. The ‘young farm problem’ in European policy

The ‘young farmer problem’ as defined by the EU rural development policy relates to the perceived role of young farmers in

economic revitalisation of the countryside. Although the number of young farmers entering the sector is expected to reduce owing to the industrialisation of agriculture, the numbers of young farmers identified in recent Eurostat figures is perceived by the European Commission analysts as being too low. However, the ideal ratio of younger to older farmers is not explicitly identified. What constitutes the ‘problem’ is the assumed loss of potential that young farmers and new entrants bring to the agricultural sector. As such, the ‘young farmer problem’ in Europe is identified in relation to a modernist agenda for agriculture, whereby greater efficiency and innovation lead to higher levels of production and economic development.

The measures adopted by the European Commission to enable young people to enter farming are broadly consistent with this approach. Beneficiaries applying for support within Measure 112 must be under 40 years of age, be setting up an agricultural holding for the first time, have the necessary skills and competencies, and submit a business plan (EC, 2005). Recent supports also include modernisation of agricultural holdings; early farmer retirement, vocational training and information events; food quality schemes; and cooperation in the development of new products, processes and technologies in the agricultural sector. Policies which support economic development of farming resources not directly related to primary production, such as diversification into non-agricultural activities and LEADER approaches are also identified as supporting young farmers (DGIP, 2012). Notably missing from efforts to support young farmers are any mention of the role of young farmers in maintaining the environment or participating in agri-environmental measures. The modernist agenda thus emphasises increased production, diversification of farming activities and rural business development.

A review of the criteria for defining young farmers in European analysis identifies four key problems in European discourses about young farmers. The first is the inconsistency between definitions used in Eurostat classifications and those used in young farmer support measures. The data underpinning European assertions of a young farmer problem (i.e. who are young farmers and how many of them there are in Europe), rely on Eurostat classifications, in which the young farmer is also a sole holder, not necessarily a new entrant, but must be under 35 years of age. This definition is based on the construction of age intervals that are used in the Farm Structure Survey (under 35 years, 35 to 44, 45 to 54, 55 to 64, 65 years and over). In contrast, the official definition of the ‘young farmer’ provided by Council Regulation (EC) No 1698/2005 on support for rural development, describes the conditions for supporting young farmers, who are defined as: “under 40 years of age, possessing adequate occupational skills, setting up on an agricultural holding for the first time, the farmer is established as the head of the holding” (EC, 2005: Article 8). This definition is used in national rural development plan measures which are aimed at setting up aid programmes to facilitate the establishment of young farmers. As such, it is not possible to compare up-take of support measures to the total numbers of young sole holder farmers because the definitions are not consistent.

The second problem is that in EU legislation, young farmers are conflated with new entrants. The ‘young farmer problem’, as discussed at European level, is alternately a ‘sole land holders under 35’ problem in terms of statistical evidence and a ‘new entrants under 40 problem’ in terms of policy response. While young farmers and new entrants cannot be expected to be mutually exclusive, neither are they synonymous: new entrants can be of any age. The limitation of supports to new entrants under the age of 40 indicates that older farmers setting up an agricultural holding for the first time may represent examples of new entrants in agriculture, but do not appear in the official statistics. The same holds true

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