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## ► To cite this version:

Lisa Vincent, Benoît Dedieu, Pierre Gasselin, Nathalie Hostiou. Navigating Transitions: Exploring the Diversity of New Forms of Agricultural Work in France. Systemic change for sustainable futures, IFSA, Jun 2024, Trapani, Italy. hal-04794996

**HAL Id: hal-04794996**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04794996v1>**

Submitted on 21 Nov 2024

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## **Navigating Transitions: Exploring the Diversity of New Forms of Agricultural Work in France**

Lisa Vincent<sup>a</sup>, Benoît Dedieu<sup>b</sup>, Pierre Gasselín<sup>c</sup>, Nathalie Hostiou<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*UMR Selmet, Univ Montpellier, CIRAD, INRAE, Institut Agro Montpellier, [lisa.vincent@supagro.fr](mailto:lisa.vincent@supagro.fr)*

<sup>b</sup>*UMR Selmet, Univ Montpellier, CIRAD, INRAE, Institut Agro Montpellier, [benoit.dedieu@inrae.fr](mailto:benoit.dedieu@inrae.fr)*

<sup>c</sup>*UMR Innovation, Univ Montpellier, CIRAD, INRAE, Institut Agro Montpellier, [pierre.gasselín@inrae.fr](mailto:pierre.gasselín@inrae.fr)*

<sup>d</sup>*Université Clermont-Auvergne, INRAE, AgroParisTech, VetAgroSup, UMR Territoires, F-63000 Clermont-Ferrand, [nathalie.hostiou@inrae.fr](mailto:nathalie.hostiou@inrae.fr)*

### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explores the changing landscape of agricultural work in France, with a specific focus on transitions. The political emphasis on agroecological transition within the 2014 Law for the Future of Agriculture underscores the pursuit of a triple performance—economic, ecological, and social. Thematic analysis reveals four main categories of new forms of agricultural work. Firstly, "New farms" encompass diverse structures, such as collectives of non-family farmers, micro-farms, alternative projects, and firm-based agriculture. Secondly, "New workers" highlight shifts in the agricultural workforce, with increased professional mobility, diverse profiles, and various employment contracts. Thirdly, "New tasks and activities" showcase innovative practices, including changes in crops, non-agricultural income sources, and shifts in animal-related tasks influenced by regulatory, market, and societal demands. Finally, "New work organizations" detail transformations in farm work structures through outsourcing, collective initiatives, and collaborations with non-agricultural stakeholders. Practical implications stress the need for adapted extension systems, while theoretical considerations emphasize the simultaneous examination of structural and individual perspectives. The study suggests multiple transitions in French agriculture—agroecological, demographic, digital, etc.—potentially resonating with similar trends in non-agricultural professional sectors.

### **Keywords**

Work – Agriculture – Farm – Worker – Activities – Work organization

### **Purpose**

Agriculture is currently facing ecological, demographic, and economic challenges. In response to these issues, the concept of "transition pathways toward sustainability" is being widely discussed. In France, there is a political focus on agroecological transition (AET), a project embedded in the Law for the Future of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry adopted in 2014. AET transition is one of the drivers of change in the work of farmers and farmworkers (Dedieu et al., 2022). This includes changes in the professional world (Coquil et al., 2018) i.e. norms, values and indicators that guide action, as well as changes in the concrete tasks done by farmers (less chemical, short supply chains, etc.) and their working conditions (Duval, Blanchonnet and Hostiou, 2021). However, other

transitions, including demographic, digital, dietary, and climate-related shifts, are also underway and are impacting the work of farmers.

Work in agriculture is therefore changing, due to the emergence and development of new forms of work (farms, workers, etc.). They can help meet the major challenges facing agriculture today, such as renewing the agricultural workforce, increasing the sustainability of farming practices, and improving working conditions, etc. These new forms of work are multifaceted, highly heterogeneous and still largely unknown. This article aims i) to identify new forms of agricultural work through expert interviews, using the case of France as an illustrative example of OECD situations, and ii) to understand the factors driving their emergence as well as their consequences on income, working conditions, professional identities, and the meaning of work.

### **Design/Methodology/Approach**

Our research methodology focused on qualitative semi-structured interviews, which were thematically analyzed and complemented by a literature review about work in agriculture (Dedieu, 2019; Malanski et al., 2022). The group of interviewees consisted of 21 French agricultural experts including 13 senior researchers from various disciplines, such as ergonomics, agronomy, animal science, economics, geography, and sociology. They are recognized for their research and publications on agricultural work and played active roles in facilitating discussions and debates on innovation, AET, and work in agriculture at both national and international levels. The remaining eight interviewees were agricultural development stakeholders, some of whom were specialized in specific regions or production sectors, or were actively engaged in national networks focused on agricultural work.

To analyze the diversity of these new forms of work, we have developed an analytical framework that addresses the following points:

- Why is this form of work considered new?
- Which transformations does it induce in the following categories: (i) Technical and economic performance (capital, resources, etc.), (ii) Farmers' and farms' legal status (self-employed, spouse collaborator, agricultural cooperative, worker cooperative, etc.), (iii) Organization (work organization, interaction with various stakeholders, etc.), (iv) Professional Identity (standards, values, skills, professional worlds, etc.), (v) Other relevant aspects.
- What are the determinants of this new form of work (agroecological transition, digital agriculture, market positioning, etc.)?
- Why is this new form of work interesting? : (i) New analytical framework? (ii) Development issue? (iii) Emerging trend?

The interviews underwent thematic analysis using Taguette software (Rampin and Rampin, 2021). Categories were constructed incrementally as the analysis progressed. The new forms of work were classified into four categories: new forms of farm structure, new profiles of farmers and agricultural workers, new tasks and activities and new work organizations.

## **Findings**

### *New farms*

Experts have presented a diversity of new forms of farms, particularly i) those managed by collectives of non-family farmers (e.g. three or more non-related farmers), ii) micro-farms (e.g. 1 hectare of market gardening, embedded in short chain supply), iii) farms opposing to the dominant agricultural model in France (where agricultural production is tied to a comprehensive life project, which often conflicts with the practices of conventional farmers), and iv) firm-based agriculture (involving dissociation between capital, land, and work).

The consequences of the emergence of these new categories of farms on work are diverse. Most of these farms involve a large number of workers, requiring effective human resource management, collective work ability, and considerations for income sharing. Remuneration varies significantly among workers and across different types of farms. Each of these new forms of farms claims to address the challenges facing agriculture. For instance, with more farmers working on a same farm, tasks can be rotated, enabling everyone to have vacations and weekends off. Conversely, establishing very small farms allows for reduced investments and thus lower indebtedness for assets. Farm advisers express a sense of being unprepared to assist these projects, as their innovative forms often do not align well with existing assistance or agricultural support mechanisms.

### *New workers*

The agricultural sector is also experiencing a renewal through its workforce. Experts have observed an increase in professional mobility, with more individuals entering farming activities later in life (over 40 years old) and leaving earlier (before retirement). In certain small and/or collective farms, an increasing number of individuals, including a growing proportion of women, are taking up farming without experience or background in agriculture. The experts also noted that the proportion of salaried workers has significantly increased, with a wide variety of profiles and contracts : hired either directly by farms or through subcontracting structures, encompassing various positions, from farm laborers to new functions such as assistant project managers.

It appears that these new workers are less directly tied to a single farm. A low level of investment (small farms) or employee status enable agricultural activity for short to medium periods without committing to lifelong engagement. Experts have emphasized the importance of fair recognition for some often overlooked workers, such as women, waged workers (especially seasonal workers), and animals (some experts consider animals to be workers, or partners in human labor).

### *New tasks and activities*

Farmers are implementing innovative practices on their farms, which are renewing both agricultural and non-agricultural activities. For instance, farmers are diversifying their activities by introducing new agricultural crops or non-agricultural sources of income such as energy, processing, and local marketing. Some farmers transitioning to agroecology reduce or eliminate pesticide use,

while others stop plowing and opt for soil conservation through cover crops. Animal-related tasks are changing due to legislative changes in farming conditions and the return of wolves to France. These modifications require heightened monitoring and surveillance of animals, resulting in additional workload. In order to improve relationships with society, agricultural advisors and unions recommend that farmers communicate about the realities of their profession. This can be achieved through direct sales, farm visits and social media. Finally, the experts noted that the increasing use of digital technologies is driving the transformation of agricultural work. This includes spending significant time analyzing data and performing machine maintenance.

The emergence of these new tasks can be attributed to various factors, such as regulatory changes (animal welfare, interdiction of certain pesticides), market shifts (evolving demand), societal demands (environmental protection, animal welfare), or farmers' preferences, including increasing revenues, reducing working hours (e.g. 'once a day milking'), and/or reconnecting with animals, nature, and consumers. Adopting new practices requires time for training and adaptation to become operational. Implementing these new practices often requires a substantial investment of time in observing crops and animals.

### *New work organizations*

The organization of work within farms is being transformed by various factors including the rise of outsourcing, the establishment of new collective structures (farmers' markets, small dairy cooperatives, methanizers, hay dryers, or pig maternity units), the arrival of new machines such as milking robots, as well as collaboration with non-agricultural stakeholders like local authorities, associations, and industrial partners.

Workers may specialize in specific tasks (robots, management, sales, etc.) based on their skills and preferences. The highly collective nature of some work arrangements underscores the importance of interpersonal skills, as it often involves reconciling divergent interests. These new forms of work organization may arise from a desire to reduce working hours (tasks sharing, robots), cut costs (stores, dryers), regain control over intermediaries (dairies), or develop a new activity (biogas plant), among other objectives. They may lead to the distancing, whether intentional or forced, of some farmers from agricultural tasks (relying on robots, dedicating time to union activities, and delegating production).

### **Practical Implications**

These transformations impact every dimension of agricultural work, including changes in the profile of workers (increasing socio-demographic diversity of the farmers' origin and experiences, and a rise in wage labor), the structure of enterprises (corporate farming, delegation), in the tasks performed or which have been left out (agroecological practices, no-till farming, digital monitoring, communication, on-farm sales), the allocation of tasks (enlarging workgroups) and a redefined sense of work (entrepreneurial spirit, focus on environmental stewardship, relation to animals and nature).

All of these new forms of work entail acquiring skills, underscoring the importance of dialogue with training institutions and among farmers. Most of these new skills are not directly related to agricultural practices. Instead, they are similar to those utilized in other professional sectors (management, industry,

sales, law, digital, etc.). As a result, the daily work of some farmers is becoming increasingly similar to that of a small business owner.

New agricultural practices such as alternative farming, biogas production or milking robots are prevalent in specific categories of farms, depending on their size, production sector, or geographical location. On the other hand, changes related to management, communication, short food supply chains, and diversification are occurring on a wide range of types of farms.

The diversity of these new forms of work requires a reconsideration of extension systems to meet the new needs of farmers. Additionally, they raise inquiries regarding the regulation and legal structure of agricultural work, such as self-employment status, legal responsibility, and compliance with labor laws, notably safety standards.

It is surprising that new forms of work in agriculture do not seem to be addressing the challenge of decarbonizing the agricultural sector, despite its significant greenhouse gas emissions. The topic of climate change is frequently portrayed as a circumstance that farmers must adjust to, rather than a phenomenon that they can address by decreasing their greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, AET is rarely associated with work issues, especially with regard to farm types and workers. Considering its impact on work in agriculture is crucial for the success of AET, as it may increase its attractiveness for some (neo-rural) workers, while potentially discouraging others, but also because it leads to significant consequences for agricultural practices and activities.

In addition, it is important to note that agricultural enterprises involved in these new forms of work may be transitioning towards other systems, such as entrepreneurship, digitization or biodynamics. These changes reflect diverse visions of a desirable agriculture for the future. Therefore, it is essential to consider all of these transitions together, taking into account their interactions and feedback.

## **Theoretical Implications**

Examining demographic, agroecological, digital, and other transitions in agriculture through the lens of work provides insights into their tangible impacts on the agricultural sector. The experts often approached new forms of work from either a structural or individual perspective. The structural perspective focused on legal entities, regulations, and external determinants, while the individual perspective considered working conditions, hours, projects, the meaning of work, and internal determinants. This study highlights the significance of examining both perspectives simultaneously.

Reviewing our work through the concept of transition has allowed us to realize that there are transitions of different natures in agriculture in France. Firstly, the agroecological transition, a project that is openly supported by institutions, but struggles to have a concrete and impactful translation in the daily lives of farmers. Then, a demographic transition as the reconfiguration of farmers' career paths. This includes a decrease in the number of farm owners, an increase in professional mobility, and the emergence of new partnerships in large farms. The demographic transition is presented as an inevitability and a problem that must be addressed by strengthening the attractiveness of agricultural professions. Furthermore, we have observed a digital transition. It may be



presented as an opportunity to address current agricultural challenges (working conditions, AET) or as a risk to the independence of farmers. The risks include permanent connectivity, data security, indebtedness, and disappearance of certain skills.

These transformations have impacted the agricultural sector, but they may also go beyond and extend to non-farm professional sectors. All professional sectors are marked by the increasing demographic diversity, the rise of digitalization, the importance of ancillary tasks, efforts to reduce the environmental impact, the trend towards liberalization, and the coexistence of seemingly opposing worldviews. Those common changes suggest a possible convergence between the agricultural sector and other professional domains. These similarities call for further research, conducted in collaboration with specialists in non-agricultural work to identify similarities and differences between these new forms of work in agriculture and new forms of work in other professional sectors.

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