



HAL
open science

Public policy for family farming. Definition for better support

Jean-Michel Sourisseau, Jean-François Bélières, Philippe Bonnal, Pierre-Marie Bosc, Bruno Losch, Jacques Marzin

► To cite this version:

Jean-Michel Sourisseau, Jean-François Bélières, Philippe Bonnal, Pierre-Marie Bosc, Bruno Losch, et al.. Public policy for family farming. Definition for better support. Perspective (English edition), 2014, 29, pp.1-4. <10.19182/agritrop/00030>. <hal-05582861>

HAL Id: hal-05582861

<https://hal.science/hal-05582861v1>

Submitted on 7 Apr 2026

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 - Attribution - Non-commercial use - No Derivative Works - International License

> PUBLIC POLICY FOR FAMILY FARMING

Definition for better support

Jean-Michel SOURISSEAU, Jean-François BÉLIÈRES, Philippe BONNAL,
Pierre-Marie BOSCH, Bruno LOSCH, Jacques MARZIN

The International Year of Family Farming has focused world attention on the economic and social role played by this type of agriculture, as well as on its potential for meeting global challenges. It has also identified weaknesses and the need for decisive, far-reaching public action to overcome these. However, policy making and implementation require a clear-cut statistical definition of family farming at the global level, as well as a detailed picture of the various forms this agriculture may take at the national level. Hence the proposal to characterise family farming by the conjunction between the domestic unit and the production unit, and to determine criteria for fine-tuning this definition in each country.

In 2014, family farming took centre stage when the United Nations (UN) devoted an international year to it, in view of its economic and social importance, as well as its potential. Indeed, family farming is the predominant form of agriculture in the world, with FAO putting the figure at 88% of all farms. These farms provide work for the vast majority of agricultural workers, who still represent 40% of the global labour force, although situations vary considerably (less than 2% in Western Europe; almost 80% in West Africa), and they are the main suppliers of most of the world's agricultural markets. In addition to this predominance, their virtues have been brought to light: knowledge of ecosystems; sustainable management of natural resources; contribution to food security and regional development; and capacity to provide future employment. Family farming is therefore a key component of the response to global challenges such as climate change, food security, the depletion of fossil fuels, emerging diseases, and employment. However, it may also result in the development of agricultural practices that com-

promise the future, especially if farmers are in a vulnerable situation and have no option but the reckless use of the non-renewable natural resources available to them.

Family farming is still a highly controversial category. Some say it is outdated and incapable of providing rural people with a decent living and of producing enough food for the world, whose population is expected to grow from 7 billion in 2011 to 10 billion in 2050. To meet these objectives, they propose modernising and extending production structures, and increasing labour productivity everywhere to bring it in line with that of the richest countries. This model would lead to a significant reduction in family farming and, ultimately, to its virtual disappearance. However, others see this as a somewhat unrealistic and risky prospect given the importance of this type of agriculture and the functions it provides.

It is because of its potential, but also its weaknesses and the threats it faces, that family farming requires decisive, far-reaching public action.

perspective

Through *Perspective*, CIRAD provides the opportunity to explore new avenues for discussion and action based on research, without presenting an institutional position.

> Family farming requires public action

To ensure the policies implemented are effective, it is first important to obtain recognition of “family farming” as a category of its own within these policies and in international discussions. This implies developing a strict, operational definition that is compatible with the statistical possibilities of the international institutions, in order to evaluate the numbers of family farms and their contribution to development. In addition, each country must adapt this generic definition to its own context, in order to develop actions that are coherent with its history and its national challenges.

CIRAD’s research (see box p. 4) has resulted in proposals on these two levels, both global and national: producing a generic definition of family farming by the conjunction between the domestic unit and the production unit; and clarifying this conjunction in each country using specific criteria.

> Obtaining recognition of “family farming” as a category of its own

Counting family farms throughout the world

Despite its potential and the international year devoted to it by the UN, it is clear that family farming remains an unstable, even vague concept. There are several reasons for this.

The first of these are tactical reasons. Since this category has been explicitly promoted in international debates during the international year, producers’ organisations, which cover a very wide range of forms of production, need to be able to refer to it. Claiming to belong to this category may prove interesting in the future. A vague definition that makes little distinction will therefore be widely acceptable and accepted.

> A shared definition at the global level is needed

Another reason is that family farming is built upon different national contexts and political pathways, in which the use of this category is aimed at exploiting specific differentiations and characteristics. Representations of farming categories may thus vary and be satisfied with a vague definition that encompasses this diversity.

Finally, the concept is vague because it is used within different frameworks: an ideological framework for the protection of lifestyles; a normative framework for promotion policies; and an academic framework for knowledge production about the way agriculture works.

This lack of clarity means that family farming is often associated with, or even confused with: small-scale farming, defined by the cultivated area; subsistence farming, defined by its purpose; or peasant agriculture, defined by its community and regional roots and by its autonomy with

regard to industrial inputs and agricultural services. This confusion makes it difficult to determine what family farming actually is.

A shared definition at the global level is therefore needed. This would enable a more accurate estimation of family farming numbers, as well as those of other forms of agriculture (entrepreneurial and family business farms), and a better long-term assessment of the contribution each type of agriculture makes to sustainable development. It will then be possible to quantify the respective weight of each type in food production, employment and rural income, as well as in the (good or bad) management of natural resources, and to subsequently develop appropriate policies. All of this knowledge will help to respond to arguments for the concentration of agriculture and against family farming to meet global challenges.

Labour as a criterion for the definition

Research by CIRAD confirms the existence of intrinsic linkages between the domestic unit and the production unit. The family-based nature of the permanent labour used on farms, without excluding casual workers, is a key criterion for defining this type of organisation.

Family farming thus differs from entrepreneurial agriculture, which exclusively uses wage labour, and family business agriculture, which uses permanent wage labour to supplement the family workforce. In family farming, family and production unit are embedded; productive capital is included in the family’s property; domestic and productive approaches, and market and non-market approaches, are all combined. In entrepreneurial agriculture on the other hand, productive capital is held by private or public stakeholders guided by capitalist or financial principles.

The labour criterion makes it possible to differentiate family farming and to include it in agricultural censuses, irrespective of national contexts, productive systems, legal statuses and operating systems.

It also enables a more generic and operational definition than denominations based on other criteria. Indeed, the size of the production unit (small producer, small-scale farmer) cannot be used to compare national situations, as it depends on productive systems and contexts. The objectives pursued (subsistence farming, commercial farming) are not exclusive and change according to incentives. The economic logic and rationale (peasant or capitalist) only refer to the economic and financial

dimension and are subjective criteria. In terms of economic independence and community roots, which are often used as arguments against agribusiness, these depend on the socio-economic and cultural context and are therefore insufficiently generic.

> Labour to define an objective statistical category

In particular, labour can be used to define a statistical category whose criterion is objectively verifiable, reflecting the organisation of family farming and the implications of this type of production in terms of its resilience and its contribution to global development challenges. If labour is systematically and better integrated into national and international agricultural censuses, global statistics will be improved and it will be possible to measure the importance of family farming in agriculture worldwide. This will help to inform international debates and discussions on changes in agriculture and its production structures, with the aim of comparing the potential of the model based on concentration, which is advocated in most cases, with that of family farming.

> Eight criteria pertaining to farm structures and operating methods to clarify the diversity

Taking diversity into account

Although the type of labour used on farms makes it possible to define family farming at the global level and to identify its specificities without distorting them, it fails to capture the great diversity of this form of agriculture. For example, it groups together family farms with varying levels of capitalisation and labour productivity, and which therefore have different needs and expectations in terms of public policy. In order to go beyond statistical surveys and to translate these into suitable public action, a more accurate analysis of the diversity of family farms and their requirements is needed, based on the realities of each national context. For example meeting the challenges in India of a family farming system that is fragmenting, where access to land is becoming increasingly difficult, does not call for the same instruments as increasing the stability of production and prices in a farm in the Sahel, where access to land is secure, or winning markets for family farms in Brazil's Nordeste region that have to cohabit or even compete with latifundia.

> Involving organisations and institutions from the agricultural and rural world

Eight criteria pertaining to farm structures and operating methods can clarify this diversity. They refer to conditions of access to resources and capital, which determine the possibilities for transforming production and activity systems. They can be broken down and ranked according to past national trajectories, political power struggles between agricultural stakeholders and within local civil society organisations, and agri-

cultural issues as they are perceived at the local level. These criteria are as follows:

- security of access to natural resources, especially land, and the quality of these resources. This criterion concerns a number of situations ranging from landless families to family farms with so much land and natural capital that its transmission is problematic;
- investment capacity, whether family farmers are restricted by their lack of capital, over-indebted, or producing surpluses that enable them to increase their technical and strategic options;
- the role and importance of self-consumption in the family strategy. The primary concern of vulnerable multi-activity farmers is to feed their families, whereas others may only consume a small proportion of their production;
- the type of integration into upstream and downstream markets and independence in relation to these markets. This criterion ranges from family farmers who decide to limit their external dependency through the technical models or marketing systems, to family farmers who are integrated upstream and downstream into concentrated, industrialised and finance-dependent food systems;
- the degree of diversification of farm production. Some family farms are involved in complex agroforestry, with multi-storied cropping systems; others specialise in grain and fruit markets;
- multi-activity and the role of agriculture in activity systems, which ranges from a strictly food production or even social function, to exclusive specialisation in agriculture, or predominantly off-farm wage employment;
- the degree of substitution of family labour with physical capital. Some families maintain manual systems, with high labour intensity, using paid workers during peak periods. Others opt for mechanised systems with high labour productivity, using only family workers;
- the objectives of the activity and the strategies for mobilising farm output, which range from increasing returns to family workers to productive accumulation, diversification or even increasing farm financial capital.

These criteria can be taken into account by public policies, and also by agricultural and rural organisations or institutions. These may or may not foster and create favourable conditions for the expression of household strategies. They influence and determine the options available to family farms, as they are their intermediaries for the organisation of production and marketing,

A few words about...

Jean-Michel SOURISSEAU, a socio-economist, has been coordinating CIRAD's research on family farming for the International Year since 2012, jean-michel.sourisseau@cirad.fr

Jean-François BÉLIÈRES, an agro-economist, jean-francois.belieres@cirad.fr

Philippe BONNAL, an agro-economist, philippe.bonnal@cirad.fr

Pierre-Marie BOSCH, an agro-economist, pierre-marie.bosc@cirad.fr

Bruno LOSCH, a researcher in political economy, bruno.losch@cirad.fr

Jacques MARZIN, an agro-economist, jacques.marzin@cirad.fr

are all researchers at CIRAD. They are members of the ART-Dev joint research unit (Actors, Resources and Territories in Development, <http://recherche.univ-montp3.fr/artdev/>), except P.-M. Bosc, who is a member of the MOISA joint research unit (Markets, Organisations, Institutions and Stakeholders Strategies, <http://umr-moisa.cirad.fr/>).

The whole team has been focusing on family farming since the late 1990s.

as well as for policy issues. They also explain their diversity and are stakeholders in the policy preferences that may support them.

Family farming has the potential to meet future challenges, provided it is recognised and accompanied for what it represents and for all the functions it performs. There is however little doubt that the industrialisation or agricultural concentration processes underway will continue. The future of family farming therefore depends on its relationships with other forms of agriculture, and on its capacity to evolve towards configurations that are better able to compete with these systems. It has the necessary assets to

respond – in local, national and international markets – to the expectations societies may have of their agriculture.

In the effort to define family farming and its diversity, it is therefore also necessary to explore hybrid forms, especially family business farms, which take organisational characteristics from both enterprises and families, but are guided by family principles. Moreover, new forms of agriculture will no doubt appear. It will then be of strategic importance to characterise these emerging forms and to monitor their performances and their contribution to sustainable development. <

This *Perspective* is the result of research conducted by CIRAD since the late 1990s by the Family Agriculture and Globalisation programme, from 1998 to 2005 and, more recently, by the ART-Dev and MOISA joint research units. It is inspired by the books and special issues of journals published during the International Year of Family Farming, and also by the scientific events organised on this occasion.

CIRAD publications on family farming include:

Sourisseau J.-M. (Ed.), 2014. *Family Farming and the Worlds to Come*. Springer, jointly published with Éditions Quæ, Versailles, France, 361 p.

Bélières J.-F., Bonnal P., Bosc P.-M. (coord.), Losch B., Marzin J., Sourisseau J.-M., 2014. *Les agricultures familiales du monde. Définitions, contributions et politiques publiques*. Paris: Agence française de développement ("À savoir" collection).

Collectif, 2014. *Les agricultures familiales de par le monde. Exister, se transformer, devenir*. Versailles: Ed. Quæ ("Nature et Société" collection).

Sabourin E., Samper M., Sotomayor O. (eds), 2014. *Políticas públicas y agriculturas familiares en América Latina y el Caribe. Balance, desafíos y*

perspectivas. CEPAL – Colección Documentos de Proyecto. 298 p

HLPE, 2013. *Investing in smallholder agriculture for food security*. A report by the high level panel of experts on food security and nutrition. Rome: CFS-HLPE, 112 p. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i2953e.pdf>

Sourisseau J.-M., Bosc P.-M., Fréguin-Gresh S., Bélières J.-F., Bonnal P., Le Coq J.-F., Anseeuw W., Dury S., 2012. *Les modèles familiaux de production agricole en question. Comprendre leur diversité et leur fonctionnement*. Autrepart (62): 159-181.

Losch B., Fréguin-Gresh S., White E.T., 2012. *Structural Transformation and Rural Change Revisited: Challenges for Late Developing Countries in a Globalizing World*. African Development Forum series. Washington DC: World Bank. DOI: 10.1596/978-0-8213-9512-7

Losch B., Bosc P.-M. et Devautour H., 2005. Programme « *Agricultures familiales et mondialisation* » (AFM), 1998-2004. *Filiation et perspectives d'une recherche collective. Esquisse d'une trajectoire de recherche*. In: Bosc P.-M., Devautour H., Losch B. (eds). *Agricultures familiales et mondialisation*, cédérom, Cirad, Département Tera.



perspective

Editor: Patrick Caron, Director General in charge of Research and Strategy

Coordination: Corinne Cohen, Department for Scientific and Technical Information

Translation: Anna Kiff

Graphic design: Patricia Doucet, Communication Service

Distribution: Christiane Jacquet, Communication Service

Email: perspective@cirad.fr

www.cirad.fr/publications-ressources/edition/perspective-policy-brief

FIND OUT MORE

Friedmann H., *Farming Households in 1973 and Today: One path for agriculture or many paths for farming?* Forthcoming.

Lamarque H., 1991. *L'agriculture familiale. Comparaisons internationales I. Une réalité polymorphe*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 303 p.

Tchayanov A.V., 1990. *L'organisation de l'économie paysanne*. 1^{ère} édition 1923, Paris: Librairie du Regard, 344 p.

For a different perspective

Collier P., Dercon S., 2014. *African Agriculture in 50 years: smallholders in a rapidly changing world*. World Development (63): 92-101.