

# **Sverige söker bonde – Unga lantbrukares framtida strategier i en föränderlig näring**

## **Looking for farmers – Young farmers future strategies in a transforming sector**

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### **Background**

The numbers of farmers that quit farming are high; this means fewer farmers will have to produce our food. At the same time globally the demand for more protein is growing and consumers are increasingly interested in quality food. These processes combined seem to foretell a gap between supply and demand; a gap in supply and demand for both cheap bulk production and high quality specialties. In Sweden each week 30 farmers quit (Yearbook of Agricultural Statistics, 2012). Prospects for the future are dark as well, as one out of four farmers is over 65 years of age. (Yearbook of Agricultural Statistics, 2012) Few of these farmers have successors, as many sons and daughters have sought employment elsewhere. Moreover, there are few newcomers to the industry because of the high capital input needed. These processes make clear the need to increase the knowledge on how farming is perceived in terms of social, economic and ecological sustainability.

*In this project we investigate how farmer students plan, reflect upon and negotiate their future as a farmer. We also study how young farmers explain their strategies to develop a resilient business and the way these strategies are gendered.*

A farmer is for many people personified by a man. Yet, farming in Sweden has always been a men's and women's business, or rather, a family business. Over the years the numbers of farmers decreased drastically as stated earlier. To illustrate, in 1951 there were over 500.000 males and around 360.000 females working in agriculture – in 2010 there were little over 100.000 males and around 75.000 females left. Remarkably, while the number of males in farming has declined steadily – with the steepest decline during the era of agricultural modernization in 1950-1960 – the number of females seems steady after 2006 and even increased a little (Yearbook of Agricultural Statistics, 2012). Thus, the gender balance in agriculture is changing<sup>1</sup>.

Though the importance of the agricultural sector - in terms of number of farms, and percentage of employment and share of BNP - has declined constantly over the last century (Yearbook of Agricultural Statistics, 2012), the closures that are awaiting us and the strategies

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<sup>1</sup> However, these statistics concern people working in agriculture, and not the farmers as the owner of the business. Such statistics may give a different insight in the gender balance in agriculture.

the new generation of male and female farmers employ to continue farming may prove crucial for the way the agricultural sector is shaped.

The development pointed at above, formed a point of departure for the project “looking for farmers”. Three dimensions of future farming are explored, with the focus set upon farmer students and young farmers’ intentions, practices and expectations. The three dimensions are succession and continuity; entrepreneurship and gender. By scrutinizing these dimensions the project develop knowledge about the challenges new farmers face, how these challenges are viewed and met and how the young farmers experience their room for maneuver.

## **Material and methods**

We have used three different methods: focus groups, dialog seminars and interviews.

*Focus groups with students:* We wanted to use a method that engaged participants and made them part of the knowledge production process. The participants were 17–18 years old, in their second year of the agriculture programme. We put together three groups, with six students in each group, and we used mixed groups because we considered that the interaction of different views among girls and boys could form an important part of the discussion. We compiled an interview guide with different themes, focusing on entrepreneurship, generational succession and gender. The transcribed focus group discussions have been coded and analysed in NVivo.

*Dialogue seminars with students and young farmers:* The focus group meetings were followed by a dialogue seminar where students were able to meet already established young farmers. The selection of farmers was based on gender and the focus of the farm. We wanted a variation of farm’s oriented towards milk, meat and grain production as well as conventional and ecological farmers. The questions that the students wanted to discuss with young farmers could be brought together in three themes. The first was about generational succession and the young farmer’s experiences from that. The second theme considered the farming business for example focus of the farm and the young farmers’ view on future farming. The third theme was about experiences and also touched upon the young farmer’s motivation and approach. Three groups consisting of 7-8 participants were formed. One group consisted of only women, one was mixed and one with only men. The discussion lasted about one hour and was later transcribed.

*Semi structured interviews with farmers and farm advisors:* Interviews were chosen as method motivated by the aim at reaching at explanations and reasoning and to uncover the way farming as a profession relates to an individual’s family and societal relations and intentions. In total we made 19 interviews in Uppsala and Södermanland counties. Our sampling strategy aimed to ensure that a broad range of young farmers were included in the study. We especially aimed to include a broad variety in gender, farm ownership forms and focus of the farm. The semi-structured interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and most often included a farm tour. The interviews were transcribed and analysed from “the inside” –

the transcribed text was a point of departure for development of new themes, and from “the outside” – the text was categorized in relation to the research questions and theoretical points of departure. Finally we made two interviews with farm advisors to get insights in what farmers want advice on and how advisers relate to our themes.

## **Results**

### *Balancing family traditions and business*

In the first part of the project we analyse the gendered strategies and plans of young agricultural students. Resilience theory is used to highlight the ability to cope with change, and change was discussed within the framework of generational succession. We have been able to add several aspects to the discussion on generational succession, gender and resilience processes.

The strategies involved in enhancing processes of resilience show that students try to create a balance between adaption and renewal, and that this balance seems to be motivated by social values that often emanate from emotional bonds. The students want renewal within certain family-related limits. Family can be a great source of support if they encourage interest in farming by showing trust in the young prospective farmer and allowing him or her to exert influence. However, the older generation and farmers in general may also hold back prospective young farmers by asserting their role as experts and not letting the younger generation take part in the decision making. This obstacle may be even more apparent for girls since the old tradition of male takeover and the gendered division of labour seems to place other expectations and demands on girls compared to boys. An open communication style causes the successor less stress. A succession plan that is openly discussed reduces the fear of conflicts with siblings.

Gender roles are partly expressed in the traditional manner but involve practices and reflections of a more “non-traditional” character, such as boys caring about relationships and girls about monetary interests. While young boys and girls still express traditional expectations about the opposite sex, the future plans of the girls do not fit within the traditional role of the farmer’s wife. Rather, they see themselves as business owners and capable of running small-scale or larger farms.

Networking is a prominent feature and the “solitary farmer” is replaced by the networking and cooperating farmer. Renewal and new thinking form an important strategy for the students facing generational succession, and this involves small-scale as well as large-scale farming. One strategy that enables farmers to maintain small-scale operations is to produce local food. Another strategy is to create activities that generate extra income. These activities depend on the geographical conditions but are also gendered as boys and girls often have different plans for diversification, for example machinery services or carpentry (boys) or food processing or tourism (girls). Good cooperation with neighbors is highlighted. The strategies of young farmers involve learning and acquiring knowledge from different sources. In order to be

competitive, a modern farm requires new skills, such as being able to acquire information, contacts and influences, both locally and internationally.

Results also suggest that a partner's interests, skills and willingness may affect the development of the business. One goal is a functioning 'work-love balance' with a partner with whom the farmer can discuss plans and decisions. However, partners should complement each other by developing their own interests. A partner may contribute to the future business but the view of this is still traditional, even if innovative gender roles are involved.

#### *Does occupational resilience and sustainable gender relations match?*

In this part of the project we investigate farmers' strategies through the concept of occupational resilience, which we define as the ability of farmers to meet challenges in their work and stay in business. An overall question we deal with is the relation between occupational resilience and sustainable gender relations; what kind of gender relations are involved in occupational resilience? Two recent processes that influence gender relations are the development of farm diversity and a growing interest for locally produced food and small-scale production. The results show that these processes are active in building occupational resilience and that they involve reproducing traditional gendered practices at the same time as they open up for new roles and transformed gender relations.

The results are organised in three themes: organization of farm work and household; farm orientation and diversity; and off-farm context and actors. The organisation of farm work is often performed by directing certain tasks to a certain individual. Often this is done in a "gender traditional" way, motivated by interest and efficiency. But alternative solutions and practices are present. For example men (fathers) are sharing the responsibility for children and women are active in decision making regarding the business.

Sectors intersecting with farming, such as banking, advising and veterinary services are also involved in the building of gendered identities and practices. The increase of women in these occupations is paralleled by a remaining strong relationship between men and machines. It seems that an increasing amount of women in formal education leads to a feminisation of some jobs (such as veterinaries, financial advisors, agronomists etc.) – and that this may lead to a continued masculinisation of other jobs (often machine-related), as a way to keep a gendered division of labour.

#### *Female farmers' values in Sweden – something new or something re-formulated?*

The study on female farmers values reflect three themes; quality of life, economic goals and socio-ecological intentions. These values reflect the way farming is perceived at three different levels: The individual level, the firm level and the societal level.

Female farmers value the economic gains that can be made from the farm business. These economic values are about maximizing the profit and about "house-keeping" or making the most out of it. These are challenges that are part of the job and are related to positive as well

as negative feelings. The positive feelings are connected to the everyday work on the farm and what you are able to control. The negative feelings are associated with policy and rules that need to be dealt with but are seen as top-down formulated.

The results also show that valuing economic goals is not unanimous with a positive attitude towards policies promoting a restructuring of the sector in terms of bigger units and higher profits. Economy is intertwined with other values and intentions regarding family, the love-work balance and the relation to society. Included might also be a wish to affect society and the food production industry. Agriculture needs to be reflected upon as a sector intertwined with the rural environment and rural development in general.

Earlier research has shown that the development within the agricultural sector means that farmers need to acquire and develop new competencies and qualities. Female farmers seem to have these qualities, for example female farmers seem to be more open for changes that are a capacity that goes well with today's demands. In relation to this, the present study shows that female farmers values to some degree corresponds to these qualities, but also that female farmers' values may be in line with what earlier has been understood as traditional male values. Female entrepreneurs also express values in line with traditionally "male" skills or intentions such as "making money" and this is possible to express due to the transformation of the industry as well as transforming gender relations in society. It is not clear whether this has been overlooked in earlier investigations or if it is part of a transformation. It might also be that female farmers (or farmer's wives) have always cared about the development of the business and about making money but the hegemonic social construction of "the (male) entrepreneur" has hidden this.

Both tradition and transformation are present in today's farming. Within the identified farming strategies it is possible to find independency and teamwork, economic as well as social goals – practices active in the construction of rural femininities and the restructuring of rural gender relations.

#### *Succession in Farming – Not Just 'Family Business'*

Scholars have argued that failures in family succession are important to make room for newcomers, bringing 'new attitudes, skills and dynamism'. Such reasoning is based on the assumption that family succession leads to continuity and non-family succession leads to change and innovation. In this study we found that family and non-family succession might have more in common than conventionally assumed.

First we suggest that family succession does not necessarily lead to continuity in farming styles. In most of the family successions in our study, the new farmers characterise their relation with the retiring farmer as a respectful relation, in which the retiring farmer still work on the farm. In these cases the new farmer takes on advice from the retiring farmer and takes the retiring farmer's ideas into account when formulating their farming styles. In some cases that we studied this was different. In these cases the new farmers said they were relieved to get ownership and finally be able to do their own thing.

Second we suggest that non-family succession not necessarily leads to discontinuity in farming styles. In our study several of the new farmers had a very good relation with the retiring farmer. Indeed, the respectful relation in which the retiring farmers helped and advised which we often think characteristic of family succession was also established in non-family succession. The new farmers stated they were respectful to the retiring farmers' ideas. There were also several farmers without relation to the retiring farmer. They discussed the farm in a very different manner. Of course they had to relate to the legacies of the farm, but they felt relatively free to do with the farm as they liked.

While we have argued that we should not equate family succession with continuity and non-family succession with change, it is also important not to equate a respectful relation between new and retiring farmer with continuity either. We are convinced that a respectful relation between new and retiring farmer influences the decision making process on farming styles. This does however not mean that new farmers with a good relation with retiring farmers do not change farming style. Indeed, large changes may take place with the blessing of the retiring farmer. Moreover, a major driver for change in both family and non-family farming styles may well be sought in changing political circumstances and changing market demands.

## **Discussion**

For young prospective farmers, balancing family traditions and business is a challenge as well as an opportunity. The challenge with family farming is according to our study that traditions and expectations from the older generation might hinder the young farmer's plans and strategies for a successful business. If the older generation don't let the young future farmer be a part of the business it is a risk that the young person loose interest, this might also happen if the generational succession is late. However it is evident that the students in our study have quite clear plans and expectations for the future. One reason why the students in our study may be so well prepared could be the practice of contributing to the farm through daily chores and work on the family business. Networks and traditions are transferred and help from the older generation enable support and favorable opportunities. The fact that students think the social values are of such importance is also a challenge and an opportunity for the future. New technological opportunities and the way the farmers in our study picture herself or himself as cooperating with others is promising for successful businesses. Networking farmers with both local and global networks and contacts are important for a resilient business. The way young future farmers look at diversification is important. To diversify means that young farmers can handle risks, be social and also create capital that enables them to concentrate on the most interesting and profitable activities. To be able to run a small and/or multifunctional farm is important alongside the focus on large farms in the future.

Farming is not a gender neutral practice, during our field studies it was a recurrent theme and both men and women are aware of a gendered division of labour paralleled with a transformation including an increased feminization of the branch. When we investigate farmers' strategies through the concept of occupational resilience, we find that gender

relations are active in the formulation of these strategies. What kind of challenges a farmer face and how he or she meets these challenges depend upon social, economic and political but also cultural contexts. For example sellers of agricultural equipment may ask for “the real [male] farmer”, while a visit by the veterinary does not create such situations of feeling “invisible”. Two recent processes that influence gender relations are the development of farm diversity and a growing interest for locally produced food and small-scale production. In-depth interviews with young female and male farmers indicate that these processes are active in building occupational resilience and that it involves reproducing traditional gendered practices at the same time as it opens up for new roles and transforming gender relations. A multifunctional farm needs a variety of competencies, thus making more space for women but also for men with the matching skills and interests.

Conventionally it is thought that when a family farm is passed on to outside of the family this will lead to change in and innovation in farming styles and agrarian development. Likewise when a family farm is passed on within the family it is believed to lead to more stability in farming style. Our research suggests that the relationship between family versus non-family succession and continuity in farming styles is not so clear-cut. We argue that instead family succession can lead to change and non-family change to continuity. These insights are important for policies directed at supporting family succession, for policies trying to attract newcomers to agriculture, and contribute to the academic debate which is largely based on the above assumption that family succession equals continuity and non-family succession change and innovation.

## **Conclusion**

**Education:** Knowledge of what promotes and limits the strategies of young agricultural students and how they intend to deal with opportunities and obstacles is important for the improvement of agricultural education. Prospective young farmers would benefit from an establishment of arenas or meeting points for discussing strategies for their future farming business, generational succession and the gender issues involved. A prospective farmer who will be networking needs communication skills. It is also evident that the education system needs to recognize the social values and goals present in farming.

**Continuity in learning:** Both students and farmers stress the importance of learning from other farms, both within Sweden and abroad. This kind of experiences is valuable for evaluating pros and cons with the existing business, what works well and what needs to be developed. International visits and contacts may also lead to cooperation and create networks. It seems that, in the way farmers view themselves and their professional role in relation to other farmers, the emphasis has changed from the solitary farmer/farming family to a role of a networking and cooperating farmer.

**Family business or not:** Our study shows that relations to family and partners are important to handle difficulties and challenges. Farm advisers have an important role to promote an open communication style and to be aware of the gendered patterns. The young generation

need support but also a sense of freedom for own decisions and choices. Advisors could also play a significant role for a successful transfer of the farm when attempting to minimise the stress that often emerges within the family during generational succession.

**Farm variety:** The way a farm develops is dependent on several aspects, such as possibilities for succession, land lease, work-love balance, interest, economy, social and geographical context and farm history. For those involved in the industry, including related sectors (financial etc.) it is important to acknowledge diversity in size and turnover. The fact that many young farmers' expresses that they want to start a smaller business and then enlarge or run the company with side businesses is important when policymakers design support for farmers in rural Sweden and the EU.

If the industry should continue to play a role in not only food producing but also the production of landscapes and part taking in building rural resilience in a broader meaning, structures affecting the farmers should encourage diversity in size and content.

**Succession involves (at least) two generations.** While the young successor needs support and a solid social network, the same is true for the farmer who is retiring. The industry could gain from identifying and illuminating alternative career tracks for the older farmer, in order to facilitate the disposal.

## **Transfer of results to purchasers**

### *Meeting with reference group 2015-10-02*

The reference group consists of representatives from the farming sector, LRF as well as researchers from different universities and other public institutions. The aim of the meeting was to present our results and get comments and reflections. We presented our studies and thereafter the participants discussed in small groups what they thought was interesting and relevant results for agribusiness in Sweden. We also asked them to give examples of the impact that the results might have for Swedish agriculture. The discussions were very fruitful and gave inspiration to finish the writing of the articles, and to the writing of this final report. Another aim with the meeting was to discuss ideas about future research. One example was that it would be interesting to do a follow up study of the young farmers that we have interviewed to be able to discuss what happened with their business and to learn from their experiences. Another example was to discuss young farmers view on development opportunities. It is hard to change job during the life course, in what way can a young farmer make a career? This was also linked to new meeting places and innovations as a way to renew working conditions. A third direction for further research that was suggested was gender and economy. More knowledge is needed on who is doing what kind of job and who is salaried and to what extent. The way gender relations and economy intersect also need further investigation regarding symbolic values, ideas and future resilience. Lastly we discussed that succession involves (at least) two generations. Both the young successor and the farmer who



is withdrawing need support and a solid social network. We need to know more about alternative career opportunities for farmers in a later stage in life.

Participants at the meeting:

Susanne Stenbacka, Sofie Joosse, Ann Grubbström,

Elisabeth Gauffin (farmer, Stabby gård Uppsala, previous vice chair The Federation of Swedish Farmers, LRF)

Marit S Haugen (Professor, Centre for Rural Research, Trondheim)

Irène Flygare (Head of Research department, Upplandsmuseet)

Urban Laurin (Consultant, writer and inspirator)

Thomas Norrby (Agronomist and advisor, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) (Ulrika Auno, The Federation of Swedish Farmers, was invited but did not attend the meeting.)

*Invited speaker*

Stenbacka, S. Sverige söker bonde – unga lantbrukares framtida strategier. Presentation på konferensen Framtidens lantbruk i Dalarna. Framtidens lantbruk, SLU I samarbete med Länsstyrelsen Dalarna. Tällberg 18 juni 2013.

## **Publications**

Grubbström, A., Stenbacka, S., Joosse, S. (2014) Balancing family traditions and business: Gendered strategies for achieving future resilience among agricultural students. *Journal of Rural Studies* 35, 152-161.

Stenbacka, S. (submitted July 9<sup>th</sup> 2015) Female farmers' values in Sweden – something new or something re-formulated? Book chapter in: Shortall, S. & Bock, B. *Gender and rural globalisation: International perspectives on gender and rural development*. CABI International.

*In progress:*

Grubbström, A. The former farmer and the new land user – Relations to land and people. (will be submitted to *Agriculture and Human Values* in November 2015.)

Joosse, S., Grubbström, A., & Stenbacka, S. Succession in Farming – Not Just 'Family Business'. (will be submitted October 2015 to *Sociologia Ruralis*.)

Stenbacka, S., Joosse, S. & Grubbström, A. Does occupational resilience and sustainable gender relations match? About gendered strategies among young farmers in Sweden. (will be submitted to *Sociologia Ruralis* in November 2015)

## **Presentations at conferences**

Grubbström, A., Stenbacka, S. & Joosse, S. Either you have to be very big, or small and carve out a niche". Young future farmers view on how to achieve a successful business. The XXVI European Society for Rural Sociology Congress, Places of Possibility? Rural Societies in a Neoliberal World. 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> August 2015, Aberdeen, Scotland.

Stenbacka, S. (2015) Female farmers' values in Sweden – something new or something re-formulated? The XXVI European Society for Rural Sociology Congress, Places of Possibility? Rural Societies in a Neoliberal World. 18<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> August 2015, Aberdeen, Scotland.

Stenbacka, S., Grubbström, A., Joosse, S. 2014. Gendered strategies among young farmers – about the relation between occupational resilience and sustainable gender relations. Nordic Ruralities. Thriving and Declining Communities. 3rd Nordic Conference for Rural Research. 8-10 September, Trondheim. Norway.

Stenbacka, S., Grubbström, A., Joosse, S. 2013. Gendered strategies among young farmers – about the relation between occupational resilience and sustainable gender relations. XXV ESRS (European Society for Rural Sociology) Congress: Rural resilience and vulnerability – the rural as locus of solidarity and conflict in times of crisis. Florence 29th July – 1st August 2013.

Stenbacka, S., Grubbström, A. & Joosse, S. 2012. Young farmers' strategies in a transforming sector. Rural at the edge. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Nordic conference for rural research. 21-23 May, Joensuu, Finland.

## **Dissemination**

Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. 10<sup>th</sup> February 2010. Seminar and exchange of information regarding research projects. Sixteen researchers from the two universities met and discussed on-going and future research.

Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University 13th January 2013. We arranged a workshop together with Katarina Pettersson and Susanna Heldt Cassel (also financed by SLF). The aim was to learn from each other's' research projects and to discuss a joint publication.

Grubbström, A. Sverige söker bonde – unga lantbrukares framtida strategier. Presentation at the Department of Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University for the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). Kulturgeografiska institutionen, Uppsala University, June 2013.