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Summary: Generational Crises in Smallholder Farming



Young people are by definition land-less, even if their parents have land, argued Ben White.



There is not enough funding for research on young people in rural areas, warned Tatjana Fischer.

Farm Succession

Several factors are key for youth to envisage a career in farming. In Ben White's example from the Indonesian island Java, taking up farming as a livelihood strategy depends on:

- Land and inputs being available
- Farming being, at least partially, commercially oriented
- Farming being combined with other income sources.

Pluriactivity, or combination of farming with other livelihood options, seems central in many cases across the globe. Reluctance of youth to wait for hand-over of farm land is a common hindrance to succession. Reluctance to hand over farm and assets, especially in absence of social security or welfare, is also frequent.

Smallholders feed the world, but will they continue to do so in the future? Farming populations are ageing, and most rural youth aspire to careers outside of farming. Are young people unwilling to start or are their parents unwilling to stop? Access to land, possibility to farm for a market, or to complement farm with non-farm income contribute to the aspirations of rural youth. In future, generational renewal will depend on a reversal of current chronic governmental neglect of smallholder farming.

We invited **Ben White** (International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands), **Tatjana Fischer** (Institute of Spatial Planning, Environmental Planning and Land Rearrangement, BOKU Vienna), and **Margit Fischer** (Perspektive Landwirtschaft, Platform for Extra-Familial Farm Transfer) to discuss with us. **Friedbert Ottacher** (Horizont 3000 and Ottacher Consulting) led through the evening.

SMALLHOLDER FARMING: BENEFITS AND THREATS

There are many reasons to support smallholder farms: they produce more crops and food per ha, and provide more jobs per area than larger enterprises, said Ben White in his introductory statement. He went on to explain how this farming type is threatened by the penetration of corporate industrial agriculture, by the chronic neglect by governments and by lack of youth taking up smallholder farming.

ACCESS TO LAND AND A CHANCE TO TRY YOUR IDEAS

Ben White and Margit Fischer both stressed the importance of two factors for young people to take up or continue agriculture as a livelihood: first, access to (their own) land, and second, being able to try out their ideas, not necessarily having to stick with the *way things always were done* (and having to work closely supervised by their predecessors). In Indonesia, as well as in Austria, the younger generation has to wait long before being able to take over the parents' family farm. Margit Fischer explained that land is expensive, while revenues from agriculture are low, further rendering youth's access to land difficult. According to White, lacking interest is not the crucial point that keeps youth in Indonesia from taking over the family farm: "Often, they want to farm, but they don't want to do it together with their parents".

LACKING SOCIAL PRESTIGE

Farming is often not conceived of as a desirable economic activity and

has little social prestige compared to employment in private or government services. White warned against downgrading of rural life and of teaching children to aspire for careers outside of farming.

GETTING TO TRANSFER: MY FARM, YOUR FARM, OUR FARM?

Agreeing on a common strategy for a farm is not only tricky when the successor is a family member. While many aspiring farmers that would like to work organically contact the platform, Margit Fischer and her team struggle to find potential successors interested in conventional agriculture. "Many farmers want successors to continue farming in a conventional way, but there are only few such candidates", she said.

LEAVING RURAL AREAS – AND COMING BACK

Many rural areas across the globe suffer from outmigration to urban and peri-urban centres. However, migration does not seem to be a once-in-a-lifetime decision. In the case of Indonesia, Ben White distinguishes three types of farmers: the early continuers, who take up farming right after leaving school, the newcomer farmers, and the late continuers, who often migrated first and later returned to their villages. Austrian municipalities invest into bringing back former out-migrants as main residents, said Tatjana Fischer. Cities are not the only attractants of young rural residents: there is also internal migration - migration within the country-side – which is very complex and renders forecasting of trends and future requirements difficult.

RESEARCH: MORE FOCUS ON LOCAL NEEDS

What is becoming a research focus is not only determined by the interest of scientists – it is also governed by funding and that is a political decision, reminded Tatjana Fischer. In Austria, much of research in and recommendations to rural communities is devoted to the needs of migrants, who establish a secondary residence or who once migrated to the city and later return to their native country-side, but not enough to the needs of locals she underlined her demand for acknowledging that also rural communities are heterogeneous.

Links:

- * Plattform Perspektive Landwirtschaft (in German): <https://www.perspektive-landwirtschaft.at/>
- * The speakers' presentations are available online at <https://boku.ac.at/en/cdr/events>
- * The videostream (two parts) is available at <https://boku.ac.at/en/cdr/events> or at www.facebook.com/CentreforDevelopmentResearch/videos/

References and further reading:

- * Cassidy A, Srinivasan S, and B White (2019) Generational Transmission of Smallholder Farms in Late Capitalism. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement* 40:2, 220-237.
- * FAO (2012) Factsheet Smallholders and Family Farmers. Accessible from http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/sustainability_pathways/docs/Factsheet_SMALLHOLDERS.pdf
- * FAO (2013) International Year of Family Farming 2014. Master Plan. Accessible from http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/iyff/docs/Final_Master_Plan_IYFF_2014_30-05.pdf
- * Lowder S, Scoet J and S Singh (2014) What Do We Really Know about the Number and Distribution of Farms and Family Farms in the World? Background Paper for *The State of Food and Agriculture 2014*. ESA Working Paper No. 14-02. FAO: Rome.



Each year, around 200 Austrian farmers look for a successor, said Margit Fischer. Only a third of these are willing to accept a successor from outside the family.

SMALLHOLDER FARM VS. FAMILY FARM

The terms family farm and smallholder farm are often used interchangeably. This can prompt confusion as **not all family-run farms are small**, but small farm holdings are generally family enterprises.

Worldwide, family farms are by far the most common form of farming (Lowder et al. 2014); the FAO estimates family-run farms to account for at least 90 % of all farms (FAO 2013), and more than 80 % of farms to manage less than 1 ha of land (Lowder et al. 2014).

Smallholders are defined by the FAO as "small-scale farmers, pastoralists, forest keepers, fishers who manage areas varying from **less than one ha to 10 ha**" (FAO 2012).

University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences

Centre for Development Research

Peter Jordan Straße 76/I

1190 Vienna

www.cdr.boku.ac.at

cdr@boku.ac.at

www.facebook.com/CentreforDevelopmentResearch

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Text: Rosana Kral

Photos: Hanny Wijaya (teaser picture), Rosana Kral/CDR (1) and Florian Peloschek/CDR (2,3)

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