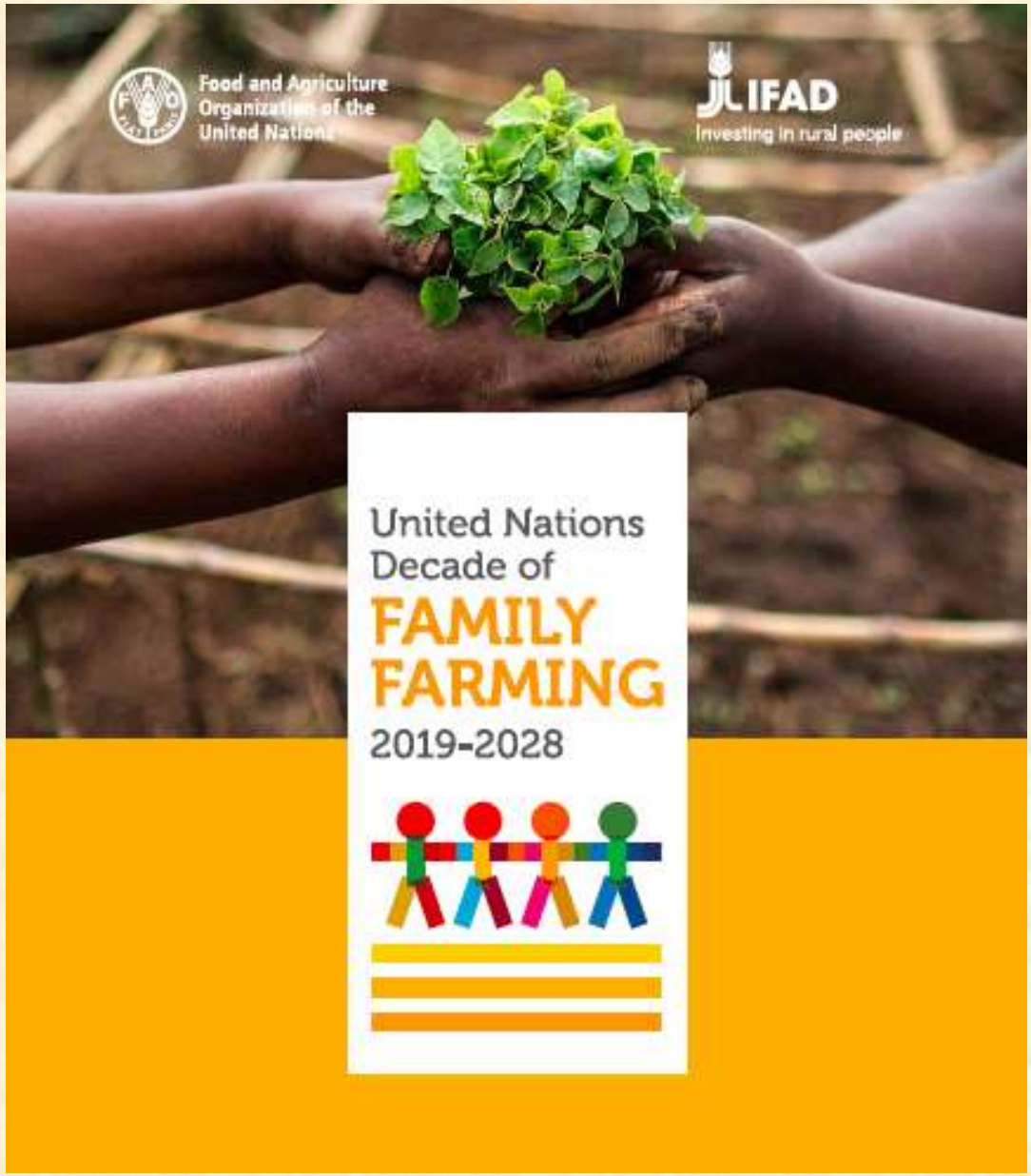
Generational crises in smallholder farming? Rural youth and agricultural futures

Rome, 29 May 2019

"putting family farming at the focus of interventions for a period of 10 years, the UN Decade aims to channel strong political commitment at national, regional and global levels .. Supporting the creation of an enabling environment for family farming to be empowered and supported"

See also:
UN Resolution on the Rights of Peasants (October 2018)



UN Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028

Global Action Plan

Pillar 2:

"support youth and ensure the generational stability of family farming"

The world's farmers are getting older – rapid changes in one generation

	AUSTRALIA		INDONESIA	
Year Age	1981	2011	1983	2013
Under 35	28 %	13 %	25 %	13 %
35-54	47 %	37 %	57 %	54 %
55 and above	25 %	50 %	18 %	33 %

Where are the world's family farms?

Region	% of all Family farms
Latin America/ Caribbean	4 %
Europe/C. Asia	7 %
Sub-Saharan Africa	9 %
Asia-Pacific	74 %

Smallholder destruction through dispossession: oil palm expansion in Kalimantan, Indonesia

Traditional Hibun Dayak mixed farming

Upland rice intercropped with maize, rubber

…. and a source of many other foods
(here, bamboo shoots and leafy vegetables)

One elder explained, “when the company came we thought our land was a big as the sea”. But more companies came.
Now his children and grandchildren are landless. They are marooned in a sea of oil palms in which they have no share (Li 2018: 59)

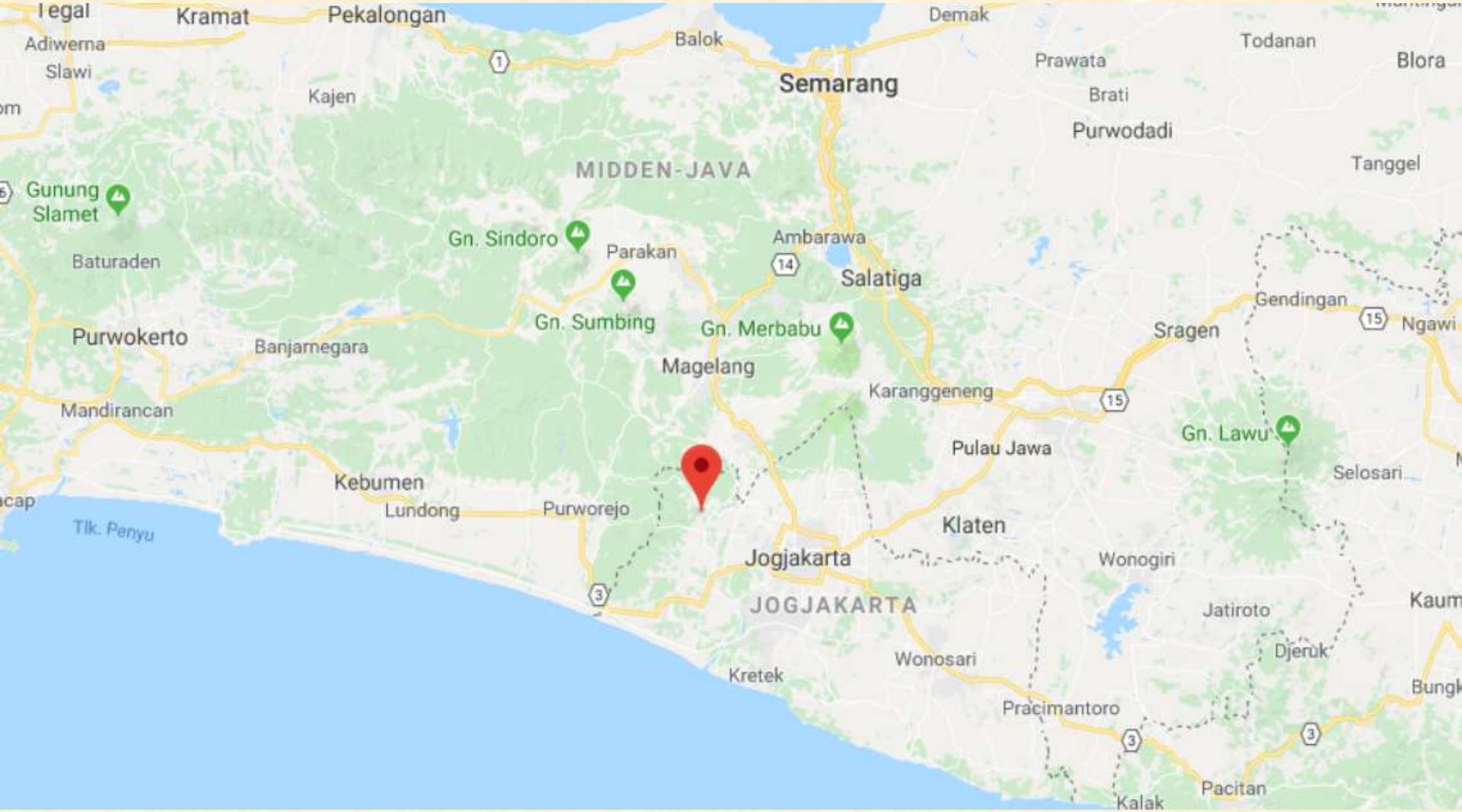
Migration and farming, Burundi
farming as part-time and part-lifetime activity

"We want a future as farmers, but if we would have other activities to help, that would be better because farming is not enough"

"if there was an organization to help us learn a vocation, we could work and have money to buy land before the others do so and there is no more land"

Berckmoes & White (2016)

Kaliloro village, Indonesia



A never-ending research project ……

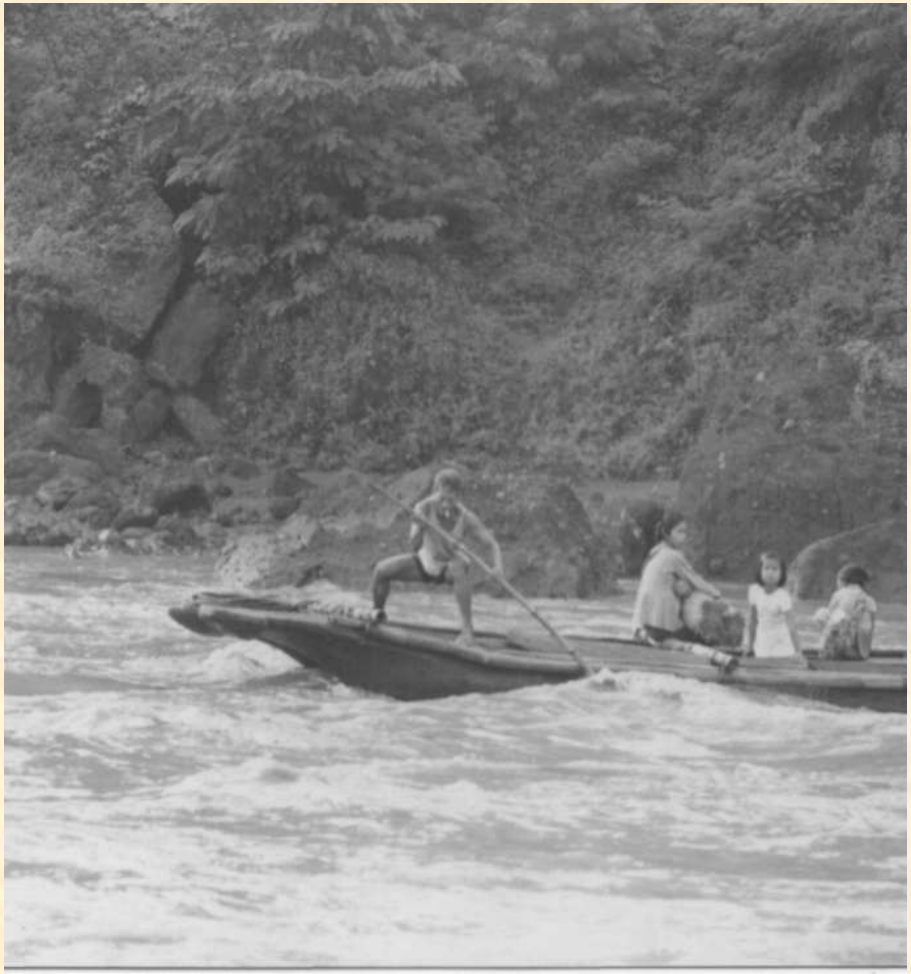
1972

2018

Green revolution
partial mechanization

Transport infrastructure

1972



2017


Bank Perkreditan Rakyat
INTA PUTRA
NGASIH
progo Yogyakarta
KANT

Indonesia's ageing farmers: - the young unwilling to start, or the old unwilling to stop ?

Age distribution of Indonesian farmers, 1983 - 2013		
Age group	**% of all farm heads**	
	1983	**2013**
< 25	3	1
25-34	22	12
35-44	31	26
45-54	25	28
≥ 55	18	33
Total	**100**	**100**

Youth employment by sector, 2017 (% of all employed)

Sector	All Indonesia			Rural Indonesia		
Age group	15-19	20-24	All	15-19	20-24	All
Agriculture	31.2	20.4	30.5	51.2	40.7	52.9
Industry	15.9	19.8	14.1	13.0	16.9	10.8
Trade	24.5	21.4	18.5	16.8	15.4	13.2
Construction	4.1	4.8	5.6	4.1	5.6	5.0

Rice-field ownership, 1972 and 2017
(% of households)

Area (m2)	1972	2017
0 (landless0	38.6	50.3
≤ 1000	23.3	28.6
1001-2000	21.1	12.7
2001-3000	4.9	3.4
3001-5000	5.8	1.4
5001-7500	1.9	1.0
7500-10000	1.9	2.4
> 10000	2.5	0.2
Total	100	100

Yanto (21)

No migration history

Innovative (chillies, vegetables)

Pluriactive (2 cows, delivers timber and manure)

"As farmers we're free to manage our own time"

Jaya (24)

Former migrant

Farms 0.24 ha

A share tenant on her father-in-law's land

"I decide almost everything, and do almost all the work"

Three types of (potential) young farmers

- Early continuers
- Late continuers (ex-migrants)
- Newcomer farmers

Karang Taruna youth organization meeting

Thanks for your attention !

ROUGH NOTES TO ACCOMPANY THE SLIDE PRESENTATION
PLEASE DO NOT CITE OR QUOTE

Generational crises in smallholder farming?
Rural youth and farming futures

Ben White
Centre for Development Research, BOKU, 3 June 2019

1. Let us start with the first picture [slide 1]: The people you see are tranplanting rice in the Javanese village of Kaliloro which I first studied in 1972-73, and which I will come back to in the second part of this talk. Most are teenagers, the children of smallholder farmers, share croppers and landless workers, and most are in secondary school and will stay in school until they are 18 years old. They are the first generation of children in this village who have never helped their parents working in the fields. So what are they doing working in the fields?? I will come back to this later.

2. A few days ago in Rome (29 May) the FAO and IFAD launched the "United Nations Decade of Family Farming". [slide 2] The UN Decade aims to strengthen political commitment for the support and empowerment of family farmers. This is a fine goal, also echoing the UN Resolution on the Rights of Peasants and Others Working in Rural Areas, which was adopted by the UN just half a year earlier (UN 2018).

Within the United Nations however, we see many of the same contradictory policies towards family farmers that we see at national level in many countries:

- on one hand, laws and regulations supporting and protecting smallholders (but not implemented)
- and on the other hand policies that tolerate or even support large-scale land grabs, the dispossession of smallholders, and corporate penetration of agriculture and agrifood chains

3. One of the seven "pillars" of the UN Action Plan for the next 10 years is to "support youth and ensure the generational sustainability of family farming" [Slide 3]

This reflects an awareness of a possible generational problem in the world's agriculture, which is seen as having two inter-related dimensions:
First, all over the world, smallholder farming populations are getting older

[Slide 4 ageing farmers Indonesia, Australia]

As you can see, in both countries in a 30-year period (roughly, one generation) the proportion of farmers under 35 years old has halved and the proportion aged 55 and over has doubled.

[Austria is a possible exception ? – "the third-highest number of young farmers in the EU" – but still only 10.7% are under age 35 (2014)]

And second, it seems that rural young men and women today are not interested in farming futures and "are turning away from farming".

So this raises the question: will there be a next generation of smallholder farmers ? Or will smallholder farming be abandoned by the new generations, leaving big capital and multinationals to take over ?

4. Who are the world's remaining family farmers, and where are they ?
Depending on how you define family farms and how you count them, and remembering the poor quality of statistics in many regions, it is estimated that there are more than 500 million family farms in the world. They comprise more than 90 % of all farming units, and produce 80 % of the world's food on slightly more than half of the world's farm land (the remainder being the 2% of large, corporate, industrial farming enterprises that occupy the other half of the world's farm land). (Lowder et al. 2016)

Where are these family farms? [Slide 5] Only 9 percent of them are in Africa, 7 percent in Europe and only 4 percent in Latin America. The great majority, almost three quarters (about 364 million) are in the Asia-Pacific region: China, India, other South Asian countries, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. These farms are overwhelmingly small (less than 2.0 hectares) and in Indonesia as we will see later, much smaller than that.

I should explain why I prefer to call them "smallholder" farms rather than "family farms" or "peasant farms". Most small farms are "family farms", but some are not, and for me this should not be an essential part of the definition. There are many farm households in which only one member is engaged in farming while others have other jobs; there are farms run by a couple of friends, and so on. I therefore prefer the term "smallholder" , which is defined not only by the size of the farm unit, but to the manner, style and scale of its operation, where owner or tenant farmers themselves manage and work on the farm, often mainly with the help of family members but not ruling out the use of hired workers. It can thus include a half- or quarter-hectare farm in an Asian country, and a 50- or 100-hectare farm in Canada, Austria or The Netherlands, depending on the manner in which they are owned, managed and worked.

These smallholder farms can be highly productive, and efficient. They produce more food and other crops per hectare than larger farms, and in terms of "social efficiency"

they provide far more jobs and livelihoods per unit of area, and are on the whole less earth-warming, than large industrial farms.
There are therefore good, practical reasons to work for the support and preservation of smallholder farming.

5. In many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America the future of smallholder farming is subject to three kinds of threats:[1]

- the penetration of corporate industrial agriculture and agribusiness domination of agrifood chains
- the chronic neglect of smallholder farming by governments[2]
- within the surviving smallholder sector, generational sustainability may be at risk through the apparent unwillingness of young rural men and women to become farmers.

And it's not clear how FAO or other agencies think these threats can be countered during the coming decade.

While I will focus mainly on the last of these threats today, it is important not to forget the other two. None of the UN Decade documents mention, even once, the threat to family farming caused by the march of large-scale capital (both national and multinational) acquiring huge areas of land, replacing smallholder farmers with industrial agriculture, and also increasingly dominating the upstream and downstream points in agrifood chains (the supply of inputs and the processing and maketing of outputs). This threat is like the elephant in the room, which everyone knows is there but nobody wants to talk about.

6. A brief example from Indonesia: the rapid expansion of oil palm plantations, replacing mixed upland farming, especially in Kalimantan [Slide 6][3]

[Slides 7-8-9-10 show Hibun Dayak swidden farmers practising sustainable mixed-farm agriculture, growing both subsistence and commercial crops , contrasted in Slide 10 with the huge expanses of monocrop oil palm which replace it]

Plantation expansion often leaves the original landholders in place, but confined in enclaves on which they may be able to continue some kind of farming on a reduced scale; the real squeeze begins a generation later, when the remaining land in the enclave proves insufficient for the needs of young (would-be) farmers.

> As one elder explained, "when the company came we thought our land was a big as the sea". But more companies came. Now his children and

[1] For today's talk I have to leave aside the issue of climate change / climate breakdown – not because it isn't important, but there simply is no time.
[2] Some European countries are exceptions to this.
[3] Oil palm now covers close to 15 million hectares in Indonesia (mainly in Kalimantan and Sumatra) with plans for further expansion.

> grandchildren are landless. They are marooned in a sea of oil palms in which they have no share, (Li 2018: 59)

These large-scale land deals have closed off the smallholder option, not only for today's farmers but also for members of the next generation, who face permanent alienation from land on which they, or their children, might want to farm, and in the absence of livelihood opportunities elsewhere.

7. Now let's return to the issue of generational replacement in the areas where smallholder farming survives. What lies behind the apparent unwillingness of young people to take up farming?,

Do we really know what young rural men and women want, and how they envisage their futures? Recently I reviewed five multi-country surveys of rural young men and women's "aspirations", covering 34 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, plus 8 more transitional European countries. They all point to the same general conclusion: when asked some version of the question 'what would you like to do when you grow up?', young rural people overwhelmingly answer that they hope for a secure salaried white- or blue-collar job, and equally overwhelmingly put agricultural/farming futures far down on the list, if mentioned at all.

But what does this actually mean ? When young people are asked these questions by adults, in formal interview contexts, or in the presence of their peers in focus-group discussions, their answers are often subject to social acceptability filters, and reflect not so much their considered individual visions and hopes, as dominant norms about universally acceptable, "worthy" futures.

In fact, I think we could probably say that "wanting not to be a farmer" has been a constant in the lives of the children of smallholders (and an aspiration of parents for their children) since access to formal education made each succeeding generation of children more educated than their parents. Rural schools are one place – but not the only place – where rural life is downgraded, and children are taught to aspire to urban lives and office jobs. If being in school allows or requires children to stop helping their parents in farm and other work, the new generation becomes "de-skilled" with regard to farming, as we saw in the first photo from Java.

When the same surveys have asked "what would make farming an attractive option for you?", the responses are equally clear: farming is seen as a possible option by some young people, but only if:

- land and inputs are available,
- farming is at least partly commercially-oriented,
- and combined with other income sources ("pluriactivity")

Here is an example from a village in Burundi [Slide 11]
-- “we want a future as farmers, but only if….”

This helps to remind us that young rural people, by definition, are “landless”, even if their parents own some land.

8. This leads is to ask some critical questions about the dominant perspective on generational crisis: which we will look at more closely using the example of Indonesia. and particularly the Javanese village of Kaliloro, where I have been involved in research for more than 45 years, since 1972. [Slide 12 (map), slide 13 (BW 1972 and 2018)]

There have been many changes in the past 45 years. In rice farming, the ‘green revolution’ and partial mechanization [Slide 14 – buffalo and tractors]. Transport infrastructure has made everyone more mobile [Slide 15 – river and bridge], [Slide 16 – horse and busy traffic]

First, returning to the ageing farmer question: (and the Indonesia table, Slide 17): you can see that even in 1981 the proportion of farmers under 25 years of age was very small (only 3 per cent). At that time, most boys in rural areas were leaving school at age 15, and girls often at age 12. So in the past, too, there was a long gap beteeen the age of leaving school and the time at which young people could take over management of a farm.

Looking at these statistics and the growing numbers of farmers over 55 and shrinking numbers below 35, we can ask:

- are farmers being forced to continue farming into their old age because of the lack of successors – this is the most commonly assumed explanation -- or are they living and/or staying healthier longer and therefore not ready to hand over farms to their successors? Is the problem that the young are unwilling to start, or that they are unable to start because the old are unwilling (or unable) to stop ?

In Indonesia and many other countries of Asia and Africa, despite urbanisation and economic diversification, agriculture is still the single biggest employer and provider of livelihoods. It is also, still, despite the aspirations of rural youth to non-farming futures, the biggest employer of youth. [Slide 18]

for how many young men and women, sons and daughters of smallholder farmers, is it possible to establish an independent farm livelihood while they are still young? How does one "become a young farmer" in today's world?[4]

[SLIDE 19 Table landholdings from Kaliloro]

As you can see from these statistics on landholdings, half of all households don't own any rice-land at all – so their children have no prospect of inheriting land -- and another 42 percent own less than 0.2 ha. There are only about 5 % of households (those with more than 0.3 ha) where we could imagine parents being able to hand over part of the land to one or more children as they grow up.

How many young people, in today's world, are content with a life-course in which after leaving school (around 18) they help their parents on the family farm, waiting until they are maybe 40 years old and their parents die or become to weak to farm, and they can take over the land? It's not surprising then, that so many young people migrate out of the village after leaving school. But what is important, is that many of them, later, come back: migration is not a life-time decision.

In this village as part of the "becoming a young farmer" project we recently interviewed 30 young farmers, male and female. Only a small handful of them had no experience of out-migration, prior to making a start in farming and most had not made a start as independent farmers until their late 20s or early 30s.. The typical "young farmer", then, is an ex-migrant.

This points to the importance of seeing the generational problem in agriculture in a *life-course* perspective.

Here are two two quick examples of yung farmers in Kaliloro:

(1) [Slide 20]
Yanto, a young bachelor aged 21, is the youngest farmer we interviewed and an exception to the general pattern, as he has no history of out-migration. He lives with his father, grandfather and two younger sisters who are still in school. His mother who owned only 500m2 of rice land died when he was still in lower secondary school, and left all her land to Yanto; she saw that Yanto was already helping his parents in farm work,

[4] (This is the main question of our four-country research project "Becoming a young farmer: young people's pathways into farming in four countries" – Canada, China, India, Indonesia. In this project I have been helping the Indonesian research team, and the village of Kaliloro is one of the five villages we have been studying in this project)

and more likely to become a farmer than his sisters.[5]
Besides farming on his small plot of land, he helps his father on the 1200 m2 of rice land which he share crops from a relative. Besides the usual rice and soya crops he plants chillies and vegetables, which bring in some cash; the rice harvest is consumed by the family. For cash, he also relies on non-farm work; he looks after two cows, and earns wages carrying timber, and delivering manure to an organic fertiliser business. One reason why he is happy to farm and care for animals is that he owns his own small plot of land, another is that he feels more free and relaxed than he would as a factory worker. "....as farmers we're free to manage our own time, if we feel sick or tired we can just stop working for a while".

(2) [Slide 21] Yaya (24 years old, married with a 4-year old son). Orphaned when she was 5 years old, she already went to work at age 12, but her employer supported her education until she completed (vocational) secondary school with a qualification in secretarial work. After leaving school she left the village to work as a shop assistant, and then in a foodstall. When she was 20 she married Jarwo, and returned to the village.

She is completely dependent on Jarwo's father for access to land. He owns only 700 m2 of rice-land but as the neighbourhood head he gets 0.6 hectares of village-owned irrigated rice-fields in place of salary. He does not farm this land himself but parcels it out to seven farmers with rental or share-tenancy agreements. After two years working for other farmers and helping her father-in-law, Jaya took over management of some of the land and now farms 2400 m2 (somewhat more than the avrage farm size in the village) as her father-in-law's share tenant, giving him one-half of the crop.

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Yaya has been the "main" farmer from the beginning. Jarwo does other work that brings in money more regularly than farming. He works in a small-scale coconut-oil enterprise in the neighbouring hamlet, where he earns 60,000 rupiah (about 4.00 Euros) per day; and twice a year, in the rice planting season, he works as hand-tractor operator every day. "in one season he can earn up to Rp. 2.0 million (about US $130)".
"I decide almost everything", says Jaya, "and do almost all the work, choosing the seed variety, making the seed bed, germinating the seeds, leveling the field, making the lines for the planting, recruiting and paying the planters, weeding, fertilizing, spraying and checking the crop every day". Despite being the main farm manager, Yaya does not attend the meetings of the local farmer's group since it is assumed that farmers are men. This

[5] 500 m2 -- one-twentieth of a hectare – may seem absurdly small for a rice farm. But with two harvests a year and yields of about 5 tons per hectare, this land can provide 500 kg of harvested rice (= about 300 kg of milled rice) per year, enough to feed a small family for up to a year.

highlights a further problem faced by young women (would-be) farmers: the lack of recognition as farmers, both by state agents and in society.

Recently Yaya's farming future has come under threat, as her father-in-law passed away and she therefore will have no access to his salary land.

9. Coming now to some conclusions: all the three threats to smallholder farming that I have mentioned earlier feed into, and feed on, each other. If there is to be a future for farming styles and rural economies driven not by corporate profits but more by the interests of smallholder livelihoods and ecological benefits, there has to be a new generation of (would-be) smallholder farmers willing to take up the challenge. But new generations of rural youth will turn away from agriculture if governments continue to neglect the smallholder sector and they do not see a prospect of sustainable smallholder-based livelihoods and welfare.
Given what we know about rural youth today, and the future challenges they will face, what would it mean to mainstream youth/generational issues in rural development policy discourse and practice?

We need to pay attention to the different interests and needs of three kinds of potential young farmers [Slide 22]

- the "early continuers" (like Yanto)
- the "late continuers" (the ex-migrants, like Jaya)
- and "newcomer" farmers (those who do not come from farming families)[6]

Policies aiming to support young would-be farmers should include both "continuers" and "newcomers", both male and female, and should take into account their multidirectional mobility between places and sectors, and their interest in pluriactive livelihoods combining farm and non-farm incomes. A youth-inclusive agricultural and rural development agenda means approaching young people not as instruments of development and growth, but as subjects, actors and citizens; providing land and other resources to young men and women would-be farmers; more effective support for small-scale agriculture generally; and investment in infrastructures making rural areas more attractive places for young men and women to live and work. Young people themselves hopefully can become a powerful political force campaigning for an end to government neglect of smallholder farming.

10. Finally, I promised to come back to the photo which I showed at the beginning: In all Indonesian villages there are youth groups called "Karang Taruna'. These groups are expected to be active in organizing sports, preparing for the national Independence Day festivities, etc. But two years ago, in one corner of Kaliloro

[6] "Newcomer farmers" are not a significant group in Indonesia, but they are growing in numbers in many European countries, North America and Japan.

village, the local Karang Taruna [Slide 23] decided to rent some land from the village government, and to plant rice as a source of income.
These teenagers – who as I said, in most cases had never helped their parents in the fields, came in large groups to plant the rice [Slide 24] , to weed it, and [as you see, Slide 25] to harvest it. They were proud that despite their lack of experience, they achieved a harvest no smaller than that of the neighbouring farmers. They are now into the 4th planting season and looking for other opportunities to earn some income together.

This gives me some reason for optimism that it is not farming as such that young people are allergic to. They do not want to spend their young adulthood helping their parents in a position of dependency, and maybe in future they do not want to farm in the same ways that their parents farm. But they – or at least some of them -- are willing to consider other styles of farming for the future.

Thanks for your attention ! [Slide 26]