

PROMOTING GENERATIONAL RENEWAL IN SERBIAN AGRICULTURE

Vesna Popović¹, Branko Mihailović², Katica Radosavljević³

Abstract

Transition towards sustainable agriculture and food systems based on innovation, digital technologies, diversification and entrepreneurship needs young, motivated and skilled farmers capable to manage challenges and take risks. However, delayed farm succession and serious resource, infrastructure, economic, sociocultural, knowledge and administrative barriers discourage young people from engaging in the farm business. In 2018, only 3.3% of managers on Serbian farms were younger than 35, while 39.1% were 65 or older. Through a literature review and secondary data from the national and EU statistics, documents and reports, the paper deals with young farmers and their farm structures, and drivers and motivations of young people to engage in agriculture. The focus of study is, however, on business and entry models and support schemes for inspiring young people to takeover/start and develop their farm business and thus contribute to meeting society's demands for quality food, a healthy environment and vibrant local communities.

Key words: *young farmers, drivers and motivations, entry models, business models, support schemes*

Introduction

Recognizing the need for radical transformation of food systems toward 2030, the High Level Panel of Experts of the UN Committee on World Food Security stressed that “the future of agriculture and the sustainability of food systems depends on its youth” (HLPE, 2020, pp. 42). Starting from the role of family farm-

- 1 *Vesna Popović*, Ph.D., Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Agricultural Economics, Belgrade, Volgina Street no. 15, Phone: +381 11 697 28 54, e-mail: vesna_p@iep.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1018-2461> .
- 2 *Branko Mihailović*, Ph.D., Principal Research Fellow, Institute of Agricultural Economics, Belgrade, Volgina Street no. 15, Phone: + 381 11 697 28 42, e-mail: brankomih@neobee.net, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2398-6568> .
- 3 *Katica Radosavljević*, Ph.D., Research Associate, University of Belgrade Faculty of Economics, Belgrade, Kamenička Street no. 6, Phone: +381 63 81 27 014, e-mail: katica@ekof.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5609-8399> .

ing in world food and agriculture⁴, FAO and IFAD (2019) are even more precise, stressing in the Global Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028 that “the future of food and agriculture lies in the hands of the next generation of family farmers” (p. 30). Youth involvement may be particularly important for innovation and creative solutions necessary for sustainable food systems’ transition (HLPE, 2019).

Generational renewal crisis, also referred to as a “young farmer problem,” has gained in importance over the last few decades, primarily in developed parts of the world, such as the EU. The share of farm managers younger than 40 in the EU in 2016 was 10.6% (5.1% of those younger than 35) while 32.8% were 65 and older, so for every farmer younger than 35, there were more than six farmers of 65 and older (compared to more than five in 2013 and four in 2010) (Eurostat, 2021). However, data at the EU level hide significant differences by country – the share of farm managers under 40 ranges from 3.3% in Cyprus and 4.2% in Portugal to 20.3% in Poland and 22.2% in Austria. For every farmer younger than 35 years, there were almost 34 farmers of 65 and older in Cyprus and more than 27 in Portugal, 14 in Romania and 10 in Italy while the value of this indicator was only 0.6 in Austria, 1.1 in Germany and Poland, and 1.8 in France and Slovakia (Eurostat, 2021).

Matthews (2018) includes general demographic trends in Europe reflected in lower birth rates, extended education and delayed retirement as well as farm size, inheritance legislation, tax and pension policies, and social and cultural attitudes related to farm succession as factors influencing above-mentioned differences at the country level, emphasizing the importance of cross-country analysis. Moreover, studies on drivers and motivations for generational renewal in agriculture found that they are largely different and intertwined, and therefore require tailored, targeted, consistent and integrated system of support (Zagata & Sutherland, 2015; Eistrup et al., 2019; May et al., 2019; Coopmans et al., 2021; Dellapasqua et al., 2019; EC, 2021a). Generational renewal is one of the post-2020 CAP nine objectives (Dellapasqua et al., 2019; EC, 2021b). Also, the EU youth strategy 2019-2027 is, inter alia, aimed to create conditions for young people to work and live in rural areas. This is important particularly in the post-Covid-19 era that gives young people new business opportunities in agriculture and rural areas offered by innovation and digitalisation of agriculture and rural services (EC, 2021c).

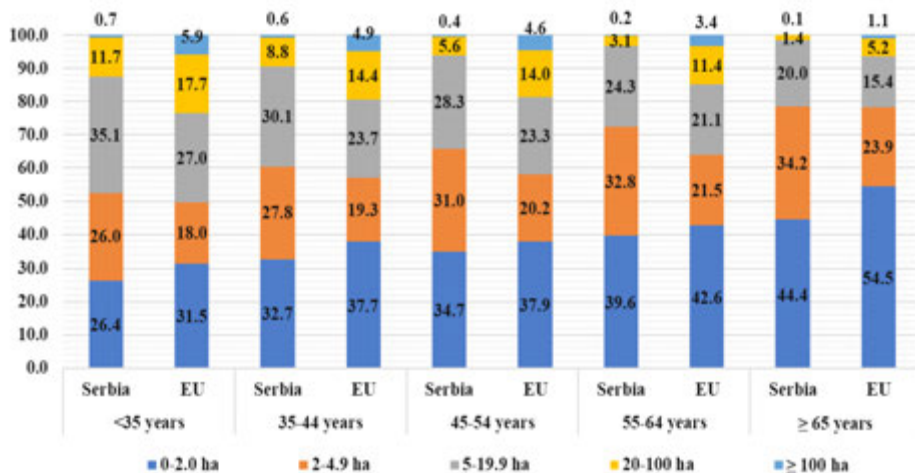
4 Producing more than 80% of the world’s food in value terms, family farms are the most prevalent form of world agriculture (FAO, 2014).

With only 3.3% of farm managers younger than 35 and 39.1% of them aged 65 or older in 2018, compared to 4.7% and 32.8% in 2012, respectively, i.e. with index of ageing (65/35 ratio) of nearly 12 in 2018 compared to 7 in 2012 (SORS, 2013, 2018), Serbia is among European countries with “young farmer problem.” What policy actions could contribute to the farm, and wider, rural generational renewal in Serbia will be discussed at the end of the paper after the analysis of young farmers farm performances, drivers and motivations, business and entry models, and the supports to young people’s engagement in farming in the EU and Serbia as the EU membership candidate country.

Young farmers in Serbia – statistical overview

Statistics indicate young farmers as farm managers aged under 35 using Farm Structure Survey age intervals⁵. Young farmers in Serbia tended to manage larger farms in terms of area, which is in line with EU trends (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Farm managers by age class and farms area in Serbia, 2018 and EU-28, 2016.

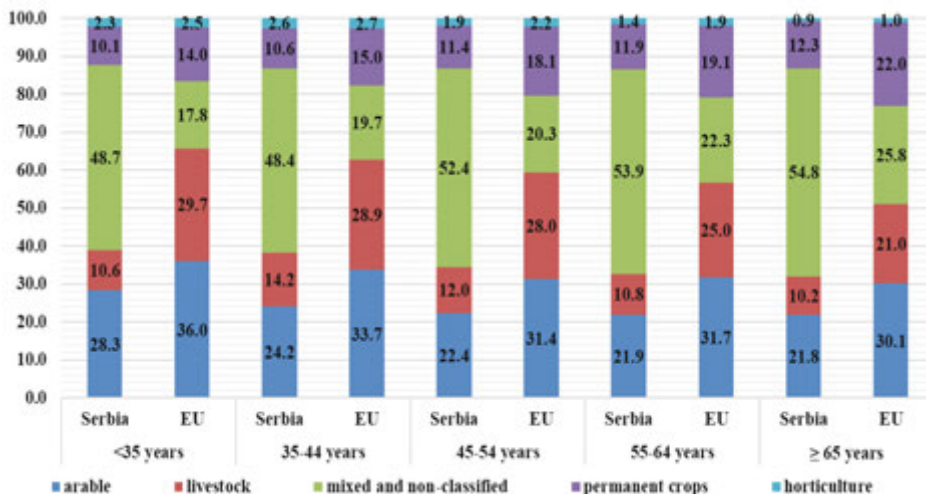


Source: SORS, 2018; Eurostat, 2021.

Regarding farm specialisation, Serbian farmers are much less specialized than EU farmers, but, as in the EU, they are more engaged in specialized production than oldest farmers (Figure 2).

⁵ FSS age statistics limit the analysis of YF supports that consider young farmers to be holders of registered farms aged 18-40 (NPRD, 2018) / under 40 (IPARD, 2021) conflating successors as individuals taking over existing farms from a previous generation and newcomers who start farms (Zagata & Sutherland, 2015; EIP-AGRI, 2016; Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016).

Figure 2. Farm managers by age class and types of farming in Serbia, 2018 and EU-28, 2016.



Source: SORS, 2018; Eurostat, 2021.

Generally larger and more specialised, young farmers' farms appear to be more economically efficient, with standard output per farm of 17,583 EUR in 2018, compared to national average of 9,455 EUR. However, behind these values are significant regional differences and there is also a large lag in relation to the relevant EU numbers (Table 1).

Table 1. Farm managers by age class and standard output per farm (EUR) in Serbia, 2018 and EU-28, 2016.

	Serbia – NUTS 2				Serbia	EU-28
	Belgrade region	Vojvodina region	Region of Šumadija and West Serbia	Region South and East Serbia		
<35 years	14,118	30,735	11,989	8,895	17,583	55,328
35-44 years	11,500	28,727	11,225	9,193	16,017	49,120
45-54 years	13,367	21,923	9,557	7,383	12,337	49,616
55-64 years	9,683	18,101	6,987	5,868	9,391	35,451
65 and over	5,762	8,883	5,491	4,672	5,838	12,501
Total	8,976	18,067	7,367	5,978	9,455	34,088

Source: SORS, 2018; Eurostat, 2021.

Zagata and Sutherland (2015) highlight findings from the literature, which suggests that succession, as the major form of generational renewal in agriculture, is more likely to occur on profitable farms and that young farmer problem is mainly related to small-scale farming in less productive and remote regions, with high youth outmigration. Such regularity can be noticed in Serbia as well. The share of young farmers (under 35 years of age) among managers of, on average more specialized and productive, farms in the fertile Vojvodina plain was 4.9% in 2018 and they generated 8.3% of standard output of farms in the region, with an average of 30,735 euros per farm. The value of these indicators is far lower in the hilly and mountainous regions of Central Serbia,⁶ with small-scale and mixed agricultural production and rural youth exodus.

Drivers and motivations

Drivers can be defined as factors and processes, from the global to the local scale, that provide conditions or barriers for being engaged in an activity while motivations include intrinsic targets of individuals that inspire their actions in this direction (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Ruiz-Mallén et al., 2015).

Young farmers in most cases take over an existing farm through family and non-family farm succession. Coopmans et al. (2021) define four spheres of factors with mutual influence on farm generational renewal during phases of successor identity formation, farm succession, and farm development. Personal sphere includes personality, early involvement in farming, career and perception of farming; the farm and family sphere encompasses farm resources and performances, and interpersonal and farm-family dynamics; the external agro-entrepreneurial sphere includes labor market, access to land and capital, and policy framework while societal sphere covers appreciation for farming, lifestyle aspirations and farm location. Fischer and Burton (2014), emphasized the role of the successor identity in drivers' effects on succession process in the sense that the impact of these factors is less significant when the successor identity is strong and vice versa. Plana-Farran and Gallizo (2021) confirmed the influence of farm families' socio-emotional ties on individuals' intentions to succeed the family farm. Non-family farm succession allows prospective young farmers (raised on another farm or without farming roots) to engage in farming without sizeable start-up capital and local farming knowledge, and elderly farmers without heirs to provide successor

6 The share of young farmers among farm managers in the Region Šumadije i Zapadne Srbije and the Region Južne i Istočne Srbije was 2.8%, they realized 4.6% and 4.1% of the total SO, with an average SO per farm of 11,989 EUR and 8,895 EUR, respectively (SORS, 2018).

while retaining a home, social interaction and involvement in farming (Duesberg et al., 2017; Grubbström & Eriksson, 2018; Korzenszky, 2019).

Newcomers (with and without family farm background) usually start from scratch or take over a derelict farm (Helms et al., 2020; Simões et al., 2021). The number of complete newcomers (individuals outside farming families) is increasing, as is their role in farm entrepreneurship, innovation and rural renewal. They are more likely to have higher education, off-farm incomes and specific work, lifestyle, environmental and social aspirations. Access to land, housing, infrastructure, capital, skilled labor, markets, knowledge and information, off-farm employment, social services and networks is regionally differentiated and particularly important for them (EIP-AGRI, 2016; Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Hopkins et al., 2020).

Surveyed young farmers in Serbia explained their decision to become a farmer by their passion for agriculture, healthy food and nature, desire to be their own boss and to continue family tradition (Šimleša, 2019; Ratković, 2020). They marked subsidies, stronger position in food supply chain and better access to land, machinery, training and advisory services, infrastructure and social services as preconditions for sustainable farm development (Šimleša, 2019).

Business and entry models

According to Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) “a business model describes the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value” (p. 14) and it is described through nine building blocks, including key resources. Addressing the legal aspects of access to key resources, the entry models into farming make a decisive part of a business model (Lorleberg et al., 2015). As stated earlier, the main entry model into farming throughout Europe, including Serbia, is family succession, which is mostly performed by inheritance. Junior-senior partnership is commonly used form for non-family farm succession (Korzenszky, 2019; Helms et al., 2020). Newcomers use tenancies and, less often, land purchases to start new farm business, or enter into different cooperation / collaborative farming arrangements with existing farmers such as cooperatives, contract farming, share farming and partnerships. They also take over derelict farms and use crowd funding, crowd sourcing or the incubator farm support services (Lorleberg et al., 2015; Helms et al., 2020).

Business strategies depends largely on resources and markets, farm performances, and new entrant’s investment capacities, values and ambitions. As already

mentioned earlier, a large number of family farm successors in the EU and Serbia take over profitable, mainstream farms and further expand and modernize the family farm business based on specialization and economies of scale. They can also diversify their farm business relatively easily using available (inherited) farm resources. Small-scale successors and newcomers opt for innovative and consumer-oriented business models, based on value-added products and short food supply chains, on-farm diversification and share and experience economies, often combined with additional off-farm activities, depending on local agro-ecological, infrastructure, economic and social conditions (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Helms et al., 2020). Milone and Ventura (2019) pointed out to a “new peasant’s generation” (van der Ploeg, 2018) of innovative young farmers in Italy and their business success based on creativity, innovation, ability to collaborate with different agents and responsiveness to societal demands regarding food. In Serbia, newcomers are often returnees from cities and abroad and prefer to invest in high-quality niche products and on-farm diversification (Jurašović, 2016). The pandemic can further push remote workers and their families into farming and rural businesses (Djordjević, 2021). Their contributions to rural revival go far beyond farming and need more tailored and integrated support.

Policies to support young farmers

The evaluation of the impact of CAP income and investment support and start-up aid to young farmers on generational renewal in EU agriculture finds it mostly positive, particularly if these measures are accompanied by other EU policies aimed at increasing attractiveness of farming and rural areas for prospective young successors and newcomers (EC, 2021a, 2021c). Also, many issues that affect generational renewal are in the scope of national inheritance, fiscal, social, environmental and land policies, and their regulation need to be consistent with EU interventions. The new CAP, which will be implemented from 2023, envisages support for young farmers (up to 40 years old) at the new mandatory minimum level of 3% of Member States’ envelope of CAP income support (EC, 2021b). Member States will also be able to support junior-senior partnerships, land mobility services and innovation and knowledge transfer to young farmers while various form of financial instruments will help them overcome credit barriers (Dellapasqua et al., 2019).

As the EU membership candidate country and a country with an obvious need for generational renewal in agriculture and rural areas, Serbia strives to follow developments in EU policies in this field. Generational renewal of agricultural holdings will be one of the 12 special goals of the new National Rural Devel-

opment Program 2021-2024 and implies coordination of policies leading to socio-economic transformation of rural areas (MAFWM, 2021). In this regard, young farmers can benefit from investment support for livestock, fruit and vegetable production and have a preferential treatment in realization of agri-environmental subsidies and support for the development of rural tourism and old and artistic crafts under the National Rural Development Program 2018-2020 (OG RS, 60/18), credit support under the National Program for Agriculture 2018-2020 (OG RS, 120/17), investment support in physical assets of agricultural holdings and rural tourism under the IPARD Program 2014-2020 (OG RS, 38/21), and grants under the Competitive Agriculture Project 2021-2024 (OG RS, 30/21). Vojvodina province supports young farmers' investments in physical assets of agricultural holdings and on-farm food processing in rural areas (OG APV,66/20) and the farm holder's age is one of the selection criteria for RD support at the provincial and city levels.

All these measures are aimed at already established young farmers' businesses, but it is equally important to promote farming as an occupation and a lifestyle among preschool and school age children and youth, and facilitate access to resources, infrastructure and social services to prospective young farmers, especially in rural areas. In that regard, National RD program supports rural infrastructure, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications is in the process of building rural broadband communication infrastructure (Delegation of the EU to Serbia, 2021) while the Ministry of Village Care starts with the project of buying abandoned houses in rural areas and giving them to young married and unmarried couples, single parents and young farmers up to 45 years of age (OG RS, 64/21)⁷. The latter project is included in the National Village Revival Program, along with other proposed actions on generational renewal in rural areas such as the transfer of up to 50 ha of state-owned land for free use to young married couples (Mitrović, 2020). Support to farm succession advisory services, junior-senior partnerships, innovative farmers networking and knowledge transfer, land mobility platforms and incubator farms for newcomers, backed by inheritance, social and tax policies' adjustments, are some of measures that could be a part of new, tailored and place-based support schemes targeting young farmers in Serbia.

7 Financial support at the provincial level to married couples for the purchase of rural houses with a kitchen garden (providing that one of the spouses / extramarital partners is not older than 40 years) has been implemented since 2015 in AP Vojvodina within the Program of Economic Empowerment of the Institute for Gender Equality (Institute for Gender Equality, 2021).

Conclusion

Young farmers in Serbia need a broad and timely support, but it must be consistent, integrated, regionally differentiated and tailored to the different needs of successors and newcomers, according to their entrance motives and barriers, business models they develop and contributions they provide to local economy and society.

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