

HOW CHANGES IN FARMERS' VIEWS OF QUALITY OF LIFE BRING ABOUT STRUCTURAL CHANGES: THE CASE OF FARMING IN THREE MARGINAL AREAS OF SWEDEN

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Abstract

Why do farms shut down in marginal areas of Sweden even though the financial situation seems reasonable? One hypothesis is that traditional farming does not offer good enough quality of life for today's farmer or his/her family. Recent Swedish literature shows the problems arising when social service and facilities abandon the countryside and how it becomes difficult being a farmer and a modern citizen at the same time. Today, the norm is more vacation and higher financial position, for farmers, as well as all citizens.

The qualities of farm life, such as autonomy, closeness to nature and tradition, in relation to society's norms of life quality, including all kinds of facilities, cultural life, leisure, vacation and financial position will bring about structural changes in agriculture. To increase private consumption, obtain more leisure and vacation time or even find a new job/life situation near cities, farmers intensify production, shift from dairy production to livestock, buy a new milking robot or shut down the farm.

This is part of a story of 30 farmers in marginal areas of Sweden, two in Västerbotten in the north of Sweden and one in the forests of Småland in the south. Interviews were conducted during autumn of 2001.

1. Structural changes do not just happen

Previous research has shown that structural changes in agriculture influence farmers' quality of life. For instance, Goldschmidt (1978) describes how industrialization of farms creates class differences, inequality and dependence. Depopulation also brings loss of educational facilities and social organization to farm villages. In Goldschmidt's case, the structural change is described as enforced from outside, or possibly introduced by the farmer, to increase economic profitability in the farm business.

Economic factors are important in the framework, in which the farm develops, but decisions made by farm managers are not made on financial issues alone. There are many external and internal determinants in combination, which motivates decisions for changes on farm level. Farmers', and other rural residents', search for a good life is a complex process and derives from both the business and the private sphere.

Normally, the relation between quality of life and structural changes, implicitly refers to the idea that structural changes have implications for quality of life. Such as when the farming becomes more intensive and large scale, or if the farmer has to shut down, the family's quality of life changes. But it is also possible to see it the other way round; changes in perception of quality of life are bound to have impacts on the structure of the agricultural businesses. Of course, it is a two-way connection between the two phenomena, but the latter relationship is often forgotten.

2. The aim of the study

This study builds on the hypothesis that *changes in farmers' views of quality of life bring about structural changes*. The questions this paper will examine are:

- Do farmers believe that farming supplies satisfactory quality of life for today's farmers and their family?
- What is the relation between the structure of agriculture and farmers' perception of quality of life?
- What happens to the farm structure when new views on quality of life emerge, resulting in new demands and behavioural patterns?

3. The relation between quality of life and structural changes

3.1. What creates the view of quality of life?

3.1.1. Qualities of farm life

Farming is described as a form of life; it is not just an occupation. This means that life on the farm together with work is an integrated whole for most farmers. The values, the qualities, that farm life provides are, among other things, continuity/tradition, autonomy and closeness to nature. The presence of these values separates farming from other occupations (Nitsch 1990). The farming form of life contributes to make a farming identity, but this social identity is threatened by a decreasing number of farmers. It is difficult to sustain a certain way of life when being strongly influenced by non-farmers, and societal trends.

Continuity is a way of describing the importance of inheritance and keeping the farm in the family. Today many farmers cannot look forward to passing the business on to a son. When a succession is planned the problems with insufficient quality of life becomes more obvious. Younger generations have more 'urban' demands and they are not always willing to sacrifice that for farm life (Gasson & Errington 1993).

Farming is autonomy under certain conditions. You have the freedom to plan your work and you are your own boss. It is a conditional autonomy, which is challenged by weather conditions and agricultural policy among other things (Djurfeldt, 1994). The farmer is also tied down by taking care of the animals. Farmers have stated that they perceive being tied to the work and feeling lonely as two problems of being a farmer (Gunnarsdotter 1999, Salomonsson 1999).

There are many examples where farming are referred to as managing 'nature': 'To work with what is living and growing in a place that have been cultivated for a long time gives a feeling of being part of a greater whole which most people will not experience' (Gunnarsdotter, 1999). Lowe et. al. (1997) argues that farmers often protest against environmental regulations simply because they feel that farmers, more than anyone, live in harmony with nature and that policymakers from the city do not. Their policies are not perceived as legitimate.

3.1.2 Influence from society

It is possible to explain farming as enabling a certain quality of life, but there is also the quality of life that most citizens in industrialised countries want. Farmers, and their family, value as does the rest of the population, a good financial situation, cultural experiences, vacation, and family life, etc. If these requirements are not met by farming, the farmer may consider changing his way of life.

Some farmers have long working hours to attain the profitability he needs. A normal Swedish male farmer works approximately 55,6 hours a week (Jordbruksstatistisk årsbok 2000). This may be unacceptable for some young people who want to live like normal citizen and watch television, go to movies and have normal vacations. An interviewee from Salomonsson

(1999) declares; 'Economic viability has changed, but also farmers way of life. Farmers want to go abroad on vacation or go skiing with their families like normal people'.

Interviews with farmers, in 1992, show that half of the farmers have less than one week's vacation per year. However vacation has increased since the 1980s. Women and young farmers have more vacation than others. These recent changes lead us to believe that farmers get more and more leisure time (Gunnarsdotter 1999).

Especially women may find farm life unsatisfactory. In a study made by Gunnarsdotter (1998), the problem of young women leaving the farms is discussed. Some people argue that farming is a too 'male dominated' place, that the social network on the countryside is insufficient to modern women. At the same time, the nuclear family is a very well defined norm. Bachelors are often seen as strange characters leading abnormal lives. In some areas you have to have a wife and kids to be a 'man' (Nilsson 1999).

In Sweden family farms are rare nowadays. Less than 15% of the farms have both husband and wife working full time on the farm (Djurfelt 1996). A normal farm cannot supply work and income for more than one person, and, especially women, often have an employment outside the farm. In those cases, the farm have to rely on companies providing employment, and, when companies and other services abandon the less favoured areas, the farm family has difficulties to sustain. In figure 1 main determinants for farmers' views of their quality of life are summarised.

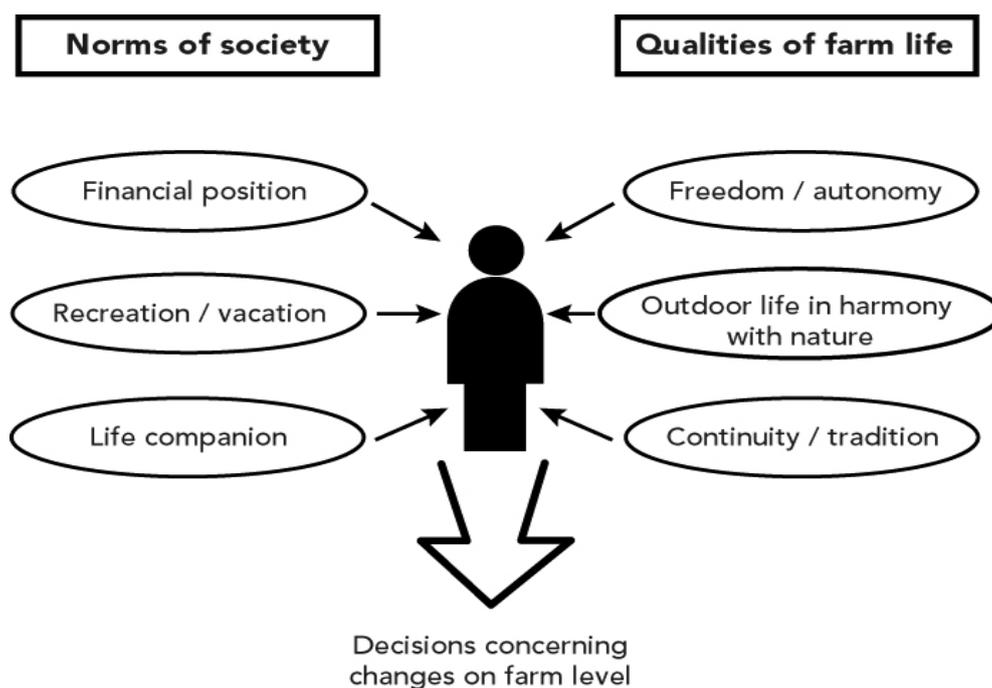


Figure 1: How norms of society and qualities of farm life contribute to changes on farm level.

3.2. What structural changes?

The structural changes in agriculture happen fast. Farms shut down, production changes from milk production to meat or crop, farmers make investments to reduce required labour and some try to make a more rational production to be able to hire workforce. In Sweden the past decades have shown a decline in number of farms, but the farms that remain are becoming larger and more specialized. In five years farms have gone from 90 000 to 80 000 and dairy

farms decline in larger numbers than other lines of production (Jordbruksstatistisk årsbok 2000).

In forest dominated areas milk production is diminishing to a larger extent. It is common to change production from milk to livestock, and later on stop farming all together. Younger farmers often have large debts and farmers of all categories are worried that no one will be able to take over the business (Kumm 1996).

In Sweden 60 % of the farms have no one to take over the business when the farmer retires (Djurfeldt 1998). This has repercussions on farmers' belief in the future. When there is no heir, farmers tend to phase out to prepare for old age instead of re-invest in the business (Lowe et al, 1997).

3.3. How changes in views of quality of life effect decisions made

Farming is a way of life, not just a business. The farmer's work and his way of life are difficult to separate. The farmer's needs and intentions make the motives that keep him on the farm. This could be done in a number of ways. The same needs, for example to have a family, can make a person stay farming, change his/her occupation or even leave the farm.

When investing in a milking robot, the main purpose can be to working hours in the barn and more spare time to spend with the family and on leisure like normal people (Lovang 2001). Other farmers can testify that the new robot will never be profitable but that it is other values that count.

4. Interviewing farmers

This study was conducted during the autumn of 2001 and consists of a brief literature review, primarily Swedish case studies, and in-depth interviews with 30 farmers in three marginal areas of Sweden. One is in Småland in the south of Sweden and two is in Västerbotten in the north. Ten farmers were chosen in each of the three areas. Strategic sample was applied with purpose to get different perspectives on being a farmer in that particular area. With the help of local farmers' federation members, farmers from different age, sex and production aims were selected.

To this date, nine interviews have been carried out in the parish of Nottebäck in the north east corner of Kronobergs län (Kronobergs län is an administrative province and 'län' is a unit comparable to a county) in the south of Sweden. In 1971 and 1999 two short films (The film 'Uppvidinge – bygd utan jordbruk' from 1971 describes the citizens perspective of the future of farming when the regional administration concluded that no agricultural land would exist in this area in 1980. The film 'I Sveriges hage' from 1999 farmers on the same farms were interviewed and all farms from the earlier film were still productive) on the future of agriculture in this particular region were produced. I have watched these films and two of my interview persons were starring in one of these films.

I have spoken to one couple in their mid seventies who recently left their farm to be inherited by their youngest son. I also spoke to the son and his fiancé, both in their late twenties. They have a small live stock production and the young people both have other jobs. The property also has forested land.

One of the farms, I visited, was owned by a divorced farmer in his forties with four children between seven and seventeen years of age. He had a small dairy milk production with 20 cows and some horses. I also visited a couple in their late forties with two sons of nine and eleven years of age. This farm had livestock and horse breeding and cultivated land on 15 farms in two villages.

Furthermore I visited an old couple in their mid seventies with 10 dairy cows and no heir to take over the farm. I interviewed a former leaseholder in the parish in his mid thirties, now working at the county administrative board (länsstyrelsen) and a fifty year old farmer with a

wife, two teenaged children and approximately 20 dairy cows. This farmer was the most pessimistic of the people I have talked to. He claimed that he had wanted to quit for the past ten years.

The last two interviews were done with a young couple in their mid thirties with two small children. They had the largest dairy production in the parish, with more than 30 cows. The wife was born in Austria. I also spoke to a couple in their late fifties, with two grown up sons, growing organic livestock and managing more than 500 hectares of forest land.

5. According to the farmers

5.1. Farmers in marginalized areas

In the case study areas the population is diminishing and because of that, shops, schools and other services shut down. With loss of services it becomes even more difficult for small villages to sustain. In most cases these farms only provide work for one person and it becomes more difficult for members of farm families to find a job outside the farm. In extreme cases a male farmer can be forced to chose between having a family and stay on the farm.

5.2 Qualities of farm life

Most interviewees stressed autonomy, tradition and closeness to nature as the most important features that make you become a farmer. In some interviews the interviewees mention one or two of the features and in some all three are mentioned. Every farmer I have interviewed talks about nature and working outdoors. The pessimistic farmer adds that ‘farming is something you take on, a responsibility’.

In the early film from 1971, a sheep herding farmer explains that he did not take up dairy farming (like his parents did) partly because the buildings were too old, but he also said that he wanted more ‘comfort’. He also describes living in the countryside as a ‘comfort’.

5.3. Financial position

‘One get stuck in expensive investments for the farm or in things for private consumption. You have to get economic profitability to cover this’ says the 29 year old farmer in one of the interviews. He talks about how you feel obliged to buy certain things to attain a better quality of life and that this makes you invest even more or alter you production to get the profitability to cover these expenses. When you make your business more effective that is often in order to make more money and financial space for private consumption or more investments in nice machines.

The pessimistic farmer tells me, when we talk about the best things about his farm; ‘It is surely very beautiful, but that won’t make you rich!’. The old farming couple explain that, when they started, people had less income but also less costs. Modern people have higher expenses for private consumption and it gives you higher status as a farmer to have new equipment.

5.4. Recreation and vacation

This young man continues to talk about how you want leisure time to do what ordinary people do when they are off work. He mentions having to work when other have vacation, in the summer for example. This has changed in the past decades: when his parents were young almost every person living in the countryside was a farmer and no one you knew had vacation when you had to work. Today the situation is different: in this particular parish there is one farmer in every two villages, a small fraction of the population in the countryside are farmers.

The statement from the interview person shows that farmers compare themselves to other people and feel different to some extent.

'When becoming a farmer you chose not to have leisure and vacation' testifies the divorced farmer in the interview. The former leaseholder I met at the county administrative board told me that he does not regret leaving farming, in terms of leisure time and vacation. He also said that it, of course, was easier for him to leave than for someone that has inherited a farm from an ancestor. He himself started at a new place, which he did not own, when he was 24.

5.5. A life companion

The middle aged man with two grown sons expressed his worries that his children would have difficulties to meet a life companion. He complained about loss of meeting places for young people. This is a greater problem for people in the countryside because all things of young people's interests goes on in the city, where the countryside youngsters often have no social network to meet with. In the countryside there are too few young men and women to create a meeting place.

In Nottebäck there are some work places for countryside people, in Väjö (30-40 km away) and in some smaller towns nearby. This makes it easier for spouses to live on the farm. One of the farms I visited provides enough work and profitability for two adults. In the north of Sweden this is often not the case.

6. Some tentative conclusions

Nine interviews have been carried out so far, and another 21 will be conducted during the autumn of 2001 mostly in the two areas in the north of Sweden. In my findings after these first nine interviews there are indications to support my hypothesis and I expect to get a more complete picture when all the interviews have been analysed.

Some of the farmers believe that farming does not supply enough quality today and almost every one of them believe that future generations will ask for better working conditions and more urban values. They think that people will still live in the countryside, but there will be no dairy production. With the testimonies above one can argue that farmers today experience a lack of quality of life that they feel is a matter of course for other people. It is also evident that they continuously compare themselves to other people with other jobs. The interviewees talk about lack of vacation and leisure time compared to 'normal people' and you have to keep in mind that the average person in the countryside today is not a farmer. In many cases, the goal of more leisure time contradicts the goal of better financial situation. To get profitability farmers have to work longer hours.

There is a relation between perceived quality of life and structural changes. My interviews reveal changes being done on farm level to meet the farming family's needs and demands on quality of life. Two farmers have quit (old age was a contributing factor in one of the cases) and one wants to quit. Two farmers have gone from dairy production to livestock. Three farmers have expanded their production in order to get more profitability and less tight economic frames for private consumption. You can, of course, also look at it the other way round. Structural changes have, of course, also an impact on the quality of life. For example, when a farmer expands his/her business he/she sometimes obtain another working situation and this gives him/her different possibilities to be with family and have spare time. Farm structure and quality of life are highly interdependent.

It is obvious that farmers constantly compare themselves with other people. They sometimes have high expectations on themselves to give their children the same possibilities to horseback riding classes and ice hockey practice as other children. Moreover they often do not think highly of the special environment they provide for their children to grow up in. They

want to live like ordinary people. New views of quality of life and the results in demands, and new behavioural patterns in society, influences farmers like all other groups in society. To meet new demands or change behavioural patterns farmers might have to stop farming under certain circumstances. The influence that 'society' has on farm life, in terms of increasing demands for urban values, is impossible to avoid and this is not even desirable. The challenge is instead to try to manage this new situation in policymaking and practice to keep farmers farming, and in good health.

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