

Pluriactivity and succession in small family farms: The case of two less favoured areas in Greece

I. Gidarakou, L. Kazakopoulos and A. Koutsouris*

Abstract

The aim of this work is to examine the role of pluriactivity in the intergenerational continuity of family farms. By using questionnaire data it attempts to identify trends and differences among pluriactive and exclusive in farming households in relation to their production systems, farm structures and characteristics of their permanent household members. The work also focuses on the importance of pluriactivity for the reproduction family farm enterprise and the preservation of local social fabric and economy. Research findings show that part-time farming has a local specific character in these small scale agriculture areas. The majority of the farms in the next generation will be engaged in farming in a pluriactive way while a growing number of them will develop a commuting type of agriculture by choosing its permanent residency in the nearby urban centres. Household reproduction and stay within the community has more to do with farm diversification and the development of local labour market opportunities.

Introduction

The model of multifunctional agriculture is made obvious through the introduction of the pillar of rural development in the CAP. According to this model, development is conceived of as a process including a competitive, sustainable and quality oriented agriculture and farmers who would also have other income earning activities besides agriculture; such activities is expected to be able to support the reproduction of rural households and the social web of small and medium size population centres (Kinsella et al. 2000). In this context, pluriactivity and reproduction emerge as two all-important dimensions with reference to the development of Less Favoured Areas (LFAs).

The European policy turn, in the mid 80's, towards 'endogenous' development approaches and the diversification of the farm family activities was followed by the structural funds reform and marked, in Greece, through the implementation of a number of Regulations (797/85 through to 1257/99) and the LEADER Community Initiative. Their implementation as far as diversification is concerned targeted almost exclusively the semi-mountainous and the mountainous zone as well as the so-defined LFAs, which, since the 70s, manifested symptoms of a disrupted social structure.

Pluriactivity is considered as a permanent structural feature of agriculture as well as a spreading phenomenon in the rural space of the developed world. Since the 70s, a large number of research projects have been devoted, directly or indirectly, to the exploration of its multiple roles (Cavazzani and Fuller 1982, Zurek 1986, Shortall 2002, etc.).

* Ass. Professor, Professor and Lecturer respectively, Dept of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Agricultural University of Athens, Greece.

Nevertheless, the information available for such a complex issue is still inadequate. With reference to the debate on local development, a still open question is whether pluriactivity of the farming households is sustained due to its significance as a survival and continuity strategy or the fact that in the process of the gradual shrinking of the farming population there is always a category of farms who abandon farming through their engagement in pluriactivity (Gasson, 1986, Kinsella et al. 2000). Furthermore, even if pluriactivity supports the reproduction of farms, it is not known to what degree it also relates to the continuation of inhabitancy of the rural family in the LFAs or if a number of such families moves into larger centres in which both the conditions of living and the opportunities for off-farm employment are better and more attractive, especially for the younger family members. Since the likelihood of the conversion of a full time farming activity to a part-time one increases through succession (Gasson 1986, Gidarakou, 1990, Jervel 1999) a number of questions arise such as: what is the number of the successors' families who will continue to inhabit the small, local communities and, under what type of farming activities this might occur.

In Greece, census data indicate that the rural space continues suffering a population shrinkage; this is also made obvious through the shrinking of the category 'primary schooling children' and the closing down of schools¹. Nevertheless, in this context a positive indication is that migration is not directed any more to the big urban centres but to rural and semi-urban ones (NSSG 1981 & 1991, Goussios 2001).

Within such a problematique the current work intends to investigate, on the one hand, the phenomenon of pluriactivity, taking into account the local context and its spatial dimension and, on the other, its relation with the continuity of farming activities, in two areas where small-scale, multi-crop and fragile farming structures prevail². In this respect, the aim of this presentation is more to contribute to the problematisation on phenomena that relate to rural development and less to provide results that may be considered as being representative of the rural space since the sample upon which the present analysis is based upon is a rather small one.

The research context

The problem of the inter-generational continuity of family farming is common in the European space (Fennell 1981, Gasson and Errington 1993, Kazakopoulos 1996, Gidarakou et al. 2002). Research findings lead to diverse conclusions, even when such findings refer to the same country (Potter and Lobley 1996). The size of the farm holding has been found to relate with succession prospects (Symes 1990, etc.). Findings also point to the fact that structural characteristics of the farm, such as its size, are not the sole explanatory factors as far as exodus from farming is concerned; instead such structural characteristics function within a complex of push and pull factors stemming from in and out-of-the-family environment (Arkleton Trust 1992). The location and the production system of the farm have been shown to play a role in succession. Farmers in less favoured, mountainous areas with extensive livestock systems have a lower likelihood for succession as compared to farmers in plains with arable systems or in peri-urban areas (Gidarakou et al. 2002). However, it has also been ascertained that a lower likelihood for succession in poor agricultural areas should not be necessarily expected, relating thus succession to the lack of employment opportunities in an area (Fennell 1981, Potter and Lobley 1996).

¹ For example, in two of the communities included in the research presented here the numbers of school-age children were 19 and 7 in 2000 as compared to 59 and 32 respectively in 1980.

² The current presentation utilises data made available within a larger-scale research programme; the latter extends to more areas than the ones presented here, where research is still going on.

The existence or not of a successor has been shown to influence the options pursued by the farming family as far as its farming practices are concerned (intensive vs. extensive production systems). Also, farms where a successor is not secured tend to be more static and less dynamic (Symes 1973, Crow 1986).

As far as pluriactivity is concerned, it has been perceived as a long-term strategy of adapting the family resources and skills to the changes occurring in both the rural and the wider economic spaces. Such an understanding, led to the re-design of policies in order to support an ‘integrated development’ approach (Jervel 1999, Kinsella et al. 2000). It is maintained that the level of pluriactivity of the farming households depends on the type and extent of the farming activities, the farm size, the personal characteristics of the household members, gender, as well as on off-farm factors. However, there are findings also indicating that the organisation and functioning of pluriactive households and the characteristics of pluriactive farmers do not differ substantially from those of the full-time³ ones (Fuller 1988, Gidarakou 1990). Moreover, pluriactive farmers have frequently been seen as a category who are more prone to abandon agriculture (Bryden et al. 1993). Nevertheless, others argue that there is not sufficient evidence that part-time farming accelerates or supports such an exodus (Mage 1976, Bollman and Steeves 1980).

As far as the relation between pluriactivity and succession is concerned, research findings indicate that the percentage of reproduction is lower in areas with well developed off-farm labour markets as compared to areas with poorer conditions (Arkleton Trust 1992). However, contradictory findings exist as well. It has also been shown that the off-farm employment of the successor indicates the transformation from full-time to part-time farming when farms are inherited (Gasson 1984, Djurfeldt and Waldenstrom 1999). Especially in peri-urban communities, where access to off-farm employment and social services is better, the conditions for succession on a part-time basis are better than in the rest of the rural areas (Gidarakou et al. 2002).

Despite the fact that, after a peak in the 80s, the engagement of the research community with the issue of pluricativity has declined, it seems that there is a need for research into pluriactivity to understand the, so far, non-clarified dimensions of such a complex phenomenon, which is, furthermore, heavily dependent on local conditions. Many questions, such as its role in inter-generational survival of the farm, are still open despite the fact that the policy has based many expectations concerning the renewal of the rural society through an effort to create/secure the conditions that will allow for the members of the farming households to become pluriactive. If the ‘common sense’ that, on the one hand, pluriactivity paves the way to the abandonment of farming and, on the other, moving towards part-time agriculture relates to an increased move of households from small rural to semi-urban and urban centres, will be supported through research, then the principles on which rural development is based will need to be critically reconsidered. Then, it will be possible to create policy measures that will address, in an integrated way, issues of local employment generation, infrastructure and environmental improvement. Within such a context, topics such as the diversification of activities and its relationship with farm succession should attract an increased attention on the part of the research community.

³ In the present paper the term “full-time farmers” is used to define the farmers and households with no additional income from an off-farm job.

Methodology

Research was conducted in two Prefectures of the country: Evritania in Central Greece and Messinia in the South. The two Prefectures differ in a number of socio-economic indicators owed to their divergent agro-ecology and, consequently, production systems (CEPR, 1986). Furthermore, the two Prefectures differ in terms of development interventions in the last 15 years. In the first one, the presence of a development agency since the late 80s, whose role was gradually enhanced through an integrated development plan expanded the supply of off-farm employment, especially in the Prefecture capital Karpenisi, the only urban centre of the area. In the second one, the development process followed a much more 'autonomous' and fragmented trajectory, i.e. without any kind of 'integrated' interventions.

In each area, two proximate communities comprised the research field. The first area, in Evritania, is a mountainous, peri-urban one in which forestry predominates while the second one, in Messinia, is a semi-mountainous area where agriculture dominates. The choice of peri-urban communities in Evritania was dictated by the insignificant levels of pluriactivity in the more remote communities of the Prefecture as well as by the focus of the research on the role of peri-urbanity on pluriactivity and the relation of the latter with the sustainability of family farming. In the second Prefecture the communities are somewhat at a distance from the capital and thus show a clearer rural character as well as a lesser degree of dependence as far as employment is concerned from the capital. The second area is a rather typical example of the semi-mountainous Greek rural areas, with one of the villages having developed an endogenous off-farm labour market.

Primary data were collected through a survey based on a questionnaire addressing farm heads theoretically being in the process of handing the farm over to a successor or close to it. Each family had at least one child over 18 years old (i.e. an already established successor or a child that might – or not – constitute a potential successor). These households in each village were listed and categorised as pluriactive or not. Households were included in the pluriactive category if at least one of their permanent members (father, mother and/or children) had incomes earned outside the family farm irrespectively of the amount of money earned. The questionnaire was administered to all such households; thus, 60 questionnaires were taken from the first area and 78 from the second one.

Pluriactivity and production systems

Pluriactivity characterises both research areas but its scale and dimensions differ markedly as shown in Table 1. It is an almost generalised phenomenon in Evritania and a much lesser one in Messinia⁴. In both cases a non-negligible number of households are engaged in farming while permanently living in the urban centre. Such households are more common in Evritania (25%) where as mentioned the development interventions have widened employment opportunities (Efstratoglou and Psaltopoulos 1999). In Messinia, their number is lower (13%); furthermore, such households are only found among the pluriactive ones thus reducing the percentage of pluriactive households living in the research area to 30% of the pluriactive households. Pluriactivity in Messinia owes to a substantial degree to the closeness of one of the settlements to the seaside; (tourism activities at local level and fishing). On the contrary, in

⁴ It should be stressed that the level of pluriactivity provided by the research does not illustrate the average levels in each area since the interviewed households are the ones at or near the succession process.

Evritania pluriactivity is favoured due to the proximity of the communities and thus easy access to the Prefecture capital.

The production system differs substantially between the two areas but not between the two household categories (i.e. between pluriactive and full-time farming ones) in each of them. In Evritania extensive livestock (sheep and goat farming) dominates with all households raising small ruminants. In Messinia, the production system is dominated by olive orchards (90.6% of the area). In the first case, the total cultivated area per farm is small (2.9 ha) devoted to mixed arboriculture and, to a marginal degree, arable farming predominantly fodder crops; in the second one, the average size of farms is bigger (5.3 ha) and small ruminants are of marginal importance. Contrary to previous research findings (Kassimis 1986, Efstratoglou-Todoulou 1988), the size of the cultivated land (owned or total) is not related to household pluriactivity in both areas, despite the trend that averages are slightly higher for the full-time farming households, thus verifying previous findings referring to mountainous areas of the country (Gidakou, 1990). However, the size and economic importance of livestock differs substantially between full-time farming and pluriactive households in the mountainous area (60 vs. 25 heads respectively) where small ruminants make up the predominant production system.

It has also to be mentioned that pluriactivity in Evritania mainly refers to children's (permanent members of the household) pluriactivity; only 25% of the farm heads and 18% of spouses are pluriactive vis-à-vis 83% of the households. In Messinia, despite the lower level of pluriactivity, farm heads' pluriactivity is as high as 32% (Table 1). The weaker farming structure of the mountainous agriculture and the proximity of the communities to the urban centre favour pluriactivity, especially of the younger household members.

Pluriactivity predominantly refers to off-farm activities and tends to provide more than half of the total household incomes, a general phenomenon in the mountainous area. Taking into account the inter-generational evolution of pluriactivity an intensified trend of disengagement from full-time farming of rural households in both areas is ascertained, which is accompanied by a transfer of the residence of the next generation households in space in order to be more convenient for off-farm employment. For households who already have a successor living in an urban centre the prospect of his/her return to the communities is negligible. All current farm heads believe that their successors will be involved in farming by commuting to the villages.

The general educational level and the age of both farm heads and their spouses do not differ significantly between the two types of households in both areas with the exception of farm heads in Messinia where farm heads of pluriactive households are younger and better educated. Contradicting findings referring to the relationship between education and pluriactivity are not rare (Fuller 1988, Efstratoglou-Todoulou 1988, Gidakou 1990, etc.). As far as successors (actual and potential) are concerned, a trend indicating that successors have higher educational attainments in pluriactive households was found, esp. in Evritania. The low requirement, as far as education is concerned, of the off-farm jobs⁵ may explain such a weak relationship.

The examination of land transactions reveals an almost identical behaviour of farm heads of both types of household in both areas. An average of 65-70% of farms did not buy land while more than 70% did not sell either, the latter indicating that there is no intention for the intensification of farming activities

⁵ An analysis of the off-farm jobs of farm heads and, to a lesser degree, of their successors in both research areas reveals that such jobs refer to traditional activities in villages such as: cafes, bakeries, groceries, handicrafts, restaurants etc. Furthermore, there are very few farmers who rent rooms in both areas.

but rather an attitude towards land as an economic security item than as a business asset. The low probability of securing succession, which it will be shown in the next session, explains to a large degree such a kind of attitude towards farming.

Succession aspects

According to the findings, succession prospects are adverse. Around 40% of the farm heads in each area do not expect to have a successor. In the mountainous area, only 16.7% claim that they have secured a successor with another 43% being rather sure. In the semi-mountainous area, succession is secured in 36% of the farms. Therefore, in the mountainous area, despite the fact that pluriactivity is generalised a phenomenon, succession is more problematic. The fact that the problem of succession is more acute in mountainous areas as compared to other areas in Greece is supported by recent research data, too⁶.

Comparing the prospects for succession of the two types of households in the mountainous area, reveals that a significant part of the pluriactive households (42%) are in an exodus process while only 8% have secured succession; for the rest (50%) succession is uncertain. A more detailed analysis of the relationship between pluriactivity and succession in the two communities of the semi-mountainous area reveals that the place where a second (i.e. besides farming) job is located differentiates the role and significance of pluriactivity as it relates to farm succession. In one of the two communities, where pluriactivity is higher and takes place within its boundaries (rural tourism and fishing) the succession prospects are more favourable for pluriactive households as compared with the second one. Such findings underlie the complexity of factors entering into the relationship between pluriactivity and farm succession.

The succession prospects do not differ significantly (in statistical terms) between the two categories of households in both areas; full-time farming household heads tend to claim a successor a bit more often. This is explained by the fact that among full-time farms a larger number of successors is occupied in farming and lives permanently in the village (see below). For Greece, Gidarakou et al. (2002) have also found better succession prospects among households in which farming is the main income source.

In a number of farms succession has already taken place; in both areas the percentage of such farms is both low and identical (18%). The picture is differentiated when the two types of households are taken into account (Table 1); a higher percentage of established successors is found in the full-time farming households.

Finally, the attitude of parents towards succession differs in the two areas. The majority of farm heads holds a negative attitude in the mountainous area⁷ that is inverted in the semi-mountainous one (Table 1). A more negative attitude is expressed on the part of spouses (wives) in both areas thus verifying previous findings (Gasson and Errington, 1993). Whether the successor stays in the farm is found to be more a personal choice of the children than dependent on the parents' wishes which, in turn, do not translate in an active prompting of children. Indeed, many less farm heads than those holding a favourable attitude towards succession prompt their children towards succession.

⁶ The fact that mountainous areas in Greece face a much more serious problem as far as their reproduction is concerned, has also been recently shown in the case of Karditsa Prefecture, Central Greece (Gidarakou et al., 1999).

⁷ I.e. farmers would not like one of their children to stay in agriculture.

Successors: characteristics and future plans

The educational level of successors (actual and potential) is undoubtedly higher than that of the current farm heads. While there is a trend that successors with lower education are concentrated in full-time farming households, no statistical significant differentiation was found in both areas.

Most of the successors hold an off-farm job and this is more often in Evritania (71% vs. 60% in Messinia). Moreover, the main occupation of the already established or expected successors differs between the two types of households; in the full-time farming households the rate of successors occupied in agriculture is double as compared to the pluriactive ones⁸. Agriculture dominates among those pluriactive successors who also hold a second job.

Engagement in agriculture, as either the main or the secondary job, on the part of the successors is not related to the farm size (owned or total cultivated land) in both areas⁹. In addition, in the case of Evritania no connection between education and main occupation was found, while in Messinia pluriactive successors were found to have higher education in comparison to the exclusively farming ones. In Evritania, the fact that 71% of the successors hold a non-farm job probably obscures such a relationship.

In the case of Messinia, all successors who are primarily engaged in agriculture stay in the villages as compared to 50% of those who hold an off-farm job as their main occupation; moreover, residence relates significantly (in statistical terms) to the place where the primary occupation is located (Table 1). Such findings do not hold for Evritania, probably due to the peri-urbanity of the villages. However, in both areas the percentage of successors living away from the villages is as high as 30%; farm heads are unanimous in their prediction that these successors will stay in the urban centre and will commute in order to continue farming.

According to the data, it seems that in the next generation part-time farming will predominate; in Evritania, according to current farm heads' opinions, successors are expected to be pluriactive at an 88% level vs. 25% of the current heads while in Messinia at an 83% level vs. 13%.¹⁰ Especially in Evritania, where the prospects for succession are poorer and the communities are peri-urban, farm heads believe that the next generation will marginally hold agriculture as their main occupation (12.2% exclusive; 7.3% main; and, 80.5% secondary). In Messinia a more positive estimation is made (16.7%; 6.4%, and, 76.9% respectively).

Conclusion

Pluriactivity is a basic feature of farming. It has a spatial dimension, depending on the supply of off-farm employment and its location vis-à-vis the communities. Relevant findings confirm the spatial dimension of the phenomenon (Arkleton Trust 1992, Damianos et al. 1994). Pluriactivity is encountered more often in the peri-urban communities of Evritania.

⁸ The fact that there are pluriactive successors in households characterized as exclusively engaged in agriculture is not a contradiction since there are successors who are not permanent members of the household.

⁹ Other research data suggest that, for Greece, the relationship between farm size and succession is not significant (Gidarakou 2002).

¹⁰ The same holds true for other Greek areas as well (Gidarakou, 1990).

Production systems differ spatially (i.e. between the two Prefectures) but not between the two types of households (full-time farming vs. pluriactive) in each area; full-time farming households own only marginally more land than the pluriactive ones. However, an orientation to livestock production, due to its labour intensive nature, restricts the potential for engaging in an off-farm job (Kazakopoulos, 2000).

A large number of farm holdings (around 40%) will not be reproduced. Pluriactivity while not supporting succession in the framework of the fragile agricultural structures under consideration it does not prove to be a step towards exodus either. There is nevertheless a slight advantage of the full-time farming households in terms of succession. The relationship between pluriactivity and succession depends on the location of the off-farm labour market.

The running of a farm holding (by the farm owner) in a community does not always coincide with residence in the community. The loss of farming households from the communities through the inter-generational change will be higher than the loss of farms. An important number of households are occupied with farming while being established in an urban centre and such a phenomenon is expected to grow in the next generation. A number of successors are already residents of an urban centre and, according to current farm heads, do not intend to return to the villages. The proximity to the urban centre plays an important role in selecting such an option with the closest to the urban centre communities having a greater potential to retain their households in place.

Significant changes occur in the succession process. Agriculture will become a non-exclusive or secondary job for the big majority of the next generation households. The disengagement of rural households from full-time farming will be intensified in both areas. The renewal of farming will go hand in hand with an increasing shift to part-time farming (Gasson 1986, Gidarakou 1990).

The jobs held by both farm heads and their successors are low-profile in terms of social status/profile and do not depend on either age or education; therefore, no relationship was found in terms of education since almost everyone can hold such a job.

The development interventions in the mountainous area widened the employment opportunities in the prefecture capital and attracted the younger members of the rural households. Pluriactivity on the part of the farm head is rather low.

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Table 1: Basic characteristics of households and successors in the research areas

	Evritania		Messinia	
	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part-time</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part-time</i>
Pluriactivity of farm households	83%		40%	
Residence outside the village	25%		13%	
Pluriactive farm heads	25%		32%	
Pluriactive spouses	18%		17.9%	
Pluriactive grandfathers	5%		6.4%	
Estimated (by the farm head) pluriactivity in the next generation	88%		83%	
Income from pluriactivity = or > farming income (for pluriactive households)	92%		81.1%	
	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part-time</i>	<i>Full time</i>	<i>Part-time</i>
Average farm size (ha.)	2,9		5,3	
	3.6	2.8	5.5	5.0
No of animals (sheep & goats)	60	25	26	20
Farm head's education < or = primary	80%	88%	57.7%	76.2%
Successor's (actual and potential) education > primary	16.7%	55.2%	57.7%	76.2%
Positive succession prospects	16.7%		35.9%	
Rather positive succession prospects	41.7%		24.4%	
Negative succession prospects	41.7%		39.7%	
Farm heads' negative desire for succession	55%		15.4%	
Spouse's negative desire for succession	61.1%		54.7%	
Encouragement/prompting for succession (by the farm head)	25%		52.6%	
	40%	22%	56.1%	48.6%
Successor's main job location at village (according to main occupation)	<i>farmer</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>farmer</i>	<i>other</i>
	66.7%	36%	100%	39.3%*
Successor's education > primary (according to main occupation)	<i>farmer</i>	<i>other</i>	<i>farmer</i>	<i>Other</i>
	40%	52%	42.1%	82.1%

(*) statistically significant (at 5% level)