

Multifunctionality in agriculture :
from farmers' motivation to public recognition
The case of Walloon Region – Belgium

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Abstract

The global objective of this research study was to highlight how Walloon farmers project their roles in the coming years and how their projections can fit with the society's expectation. Based on the concept of multifunctionality, this study assumes that the reactivation of alternative functions to production in agriculture is an opportunity to restore the dialogue between agriculture and the society. Therefore, there was a need to understand how farmers perceive the multifunctionality concept and then to compare this comprehension scheme with the society's expectation. The research was based on original data which were collected in 2005 through a survey conducted in 12 communes of the Walloon Region (Belgium) and reaching 187 selected farmers. Results were then discussed with the surveyed farmers and other actors of rural areas during local workshops.

In the first part, an extensive diagnosis is given of advantages and constraints farmers identify in relation with alternative activities on farm as well on social and economic points of view. Motivation and blocking factors which lead their decision to start or not such activities are appraised. In a prospective approach, farmers' feelings are underlined concerning questions like the reinforcement of alternative functions, the evolution of production systems, the place of specific quality products, their interactions with consumers and local actors. In the second part, a cross-analysis between farmers motivation factors and their perception of recognition by the society allows to grasp challenges for a better reconnection of agriculture to society's expectation. These challenges are appraised notably by discussion sessions during the workshops. Specific findings are given for (1) the decisive weight of social component in some diversification activities, (2) the role partnerships can play in the implementation of multifunctionality and (3) the need of a positive public-oriented communication especially in relation with natural resources and landscape management by farmers. As a conclusion, this study gives a multidimensional definition of multifunctionality as it is seen by farmers in the Walloon Region conditions. This definition draws the frame to consider a new form of dialogue between agriculture and the society.

1. Introduction

Around 45% of the Walloon territory is devoted to agriculture. The Walloon Region is densely populated with an average of 203 hab./km². In 2006, 16 557 farms were registered in the Walloon Region. This number is rapidly declining (-50% over the last 20 years). The agricultural sector employs 27.365 persons. Among the labour force, 56% are full time workers and 44% are part time workers. Nowadays it represents less than 2% of the total labour force in the Region. In the agricultural sector, the average income per working unit calculated from a macro-economic point of view reached 23.153 euros in 2005. In real terms, the farm income declined during the last years.

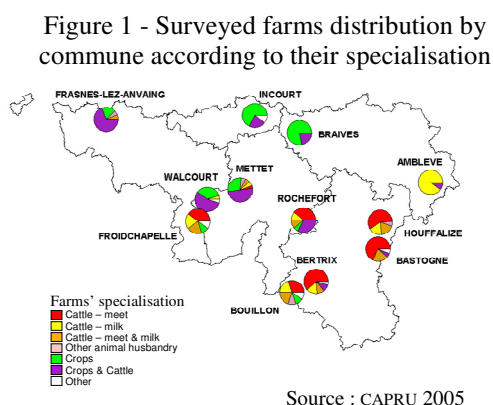
In the same time, environmental issues, food safety standards, administrative burden and land-use conflicts are heavily hanging over farmers. In the omnipresent commercial channels of agro-food industry, the link between producers and consumers becomes more and more tenuous. Over the last decades, the position of farms in food supply chains and relation of farming with wider society has notably evolved.

In the second half of the 90s, the concept of multifunctional agriculture (MFA) is seen as an opening to new perspectives for agriculture on economic, social and environmental concerns. After 10 years, it was time to appraise how Walloon farmers perceive their present and future activities in the frame of MFA concept.

2. Objective and method

The global objective of this research study was to highlight how Walloon farmers project their roles in the coming years and how their projections can fit with the society's expectation. Based on the concept of multifunctionality, this study assumes that the reactivation of alternative functions to production in agriculture is an opportunity to restore the dialogue between agriculture and the society. Therefore, there was a need to understand how farmers perceive the multifunctionality concept and then to compare this comprehension scheme with the society's expectation. This study is set in a rural development perspective as links to local or territorial concerns are framing the research method. The originality of the study lies on the implementation of a positive approach based on a field research, on a global process dealing with various facets of MFA (scope of the concept on economic, social and cultural viewpoints) and on a cross consultation of agricultural and non-agricultural actors.

As an empirical research, results are based on original data which were collected in 2005 through a field survey conducted in 12 communes of the Walloon Region (Belgium) and reaching 187 selected farmers. Interviewed farmers count for 10 to 15% of total farms number in each commune. Communes were selected to be representative of the various conditions existing in the Walloon Region as well on farming specialisation (Figure 1) as on socio-economic points of view. In average, surveyed farm covers an area of 84 ha, employs 2.25 units of labour and is managed by a 46 years old farmer.



Results were then discussed with the surveyed farmers and other actors of rural areas during local workshops. During these workshops, farmers who took part to the survey were asked to validate the analysis and its interpretation. Then, several issues have been discussed with representatives of local governments, farmers union, cultural centres, tourist agencies, development agencies, environmental organisations, citizens, etc.

3. MFA through farmers' point of view

Interviewed farmers were asked about their perception of advantages and constraints related to different activities seen as inherent parts of MFA. A first set of activities concerns activities which deliver products and services that are marketable. Some of these activities are directly linked to agricultural produce (on-farm processing, specific quality products or short supply chains) while other activities are not deriving from agricultural produce (tourism and leisure or education activities at farm). A second set of activities is focussed on public services delivered by farming activities through nature and landscape management. Motivation and blocking factors which lead their decision to start or not such activities were appraised. In a prospective approach, farmers' feelings concerning their future activities and functions were recorded.

3.1 Diversification of on-farm activities: from income generation to social recognition

3.1.1 Diversification of on-farm activities as an opportunity of development

The evolution of agricultural sector has inevitably dictated a development model for farms giving little chance of survival to the too exiguous farms structures. Activities of diversification in the broad sense are perceived as a mean of ensuring the maintenance of farms which choose today an alternative way in the development of their activities. Concerning the economic importance of these activities, 40% of interviewed farmers affirm they need diversification on an economic point of view while 39% says they are economically not dependent on it.

According to interviewed farmers, the main advantage belongs to economic opportunities to generate more value added on farm and/or to get higher prices for specific quality and regional products or services. This advantage is nevertheless balanced with the requested investments to develop such activities in a sector where the intensity of capital use is very high. Particularly the recent introduction of more strict mandatory standards has had a huge impact on investment. In a context of restricting norms and controls, requirements though they are recognized as necessary and respected may be not easily reconcilable with small units. As a consequence, the profitability is sometimes reduced to such a point that it discourages the maintenance of some activities or incipient initiatives. Diversification of on-farm activities is often labour costing and the return on labour is not guaranteed.

Interviewed farmers say that diversification of on-farm activities is a sector that would be developed for the survival of small farms and that it is a way to share out the risks. To preserve the diversity of models in agriculture is an important challenge that some farmers are trying to take up. Thirty percent of interviewed farmers say they plan to develop new activities in their farm. Most of them are thinking about on-farm tourism or alternative production and processing.

3.1.2 Diversification of on-farm activities as a human and financial investment to fit with society's expectation

Beyond the opportunity of additional income generation, the diversification of on-farm activities is seen as a whole project. The commitment in additional activities to traditional agricultural produce represents a real project combining advantages and constraints. As for any entrepreneurship activity, it means a risky activity engaging financial investment, sometimes very huge, without any guarantee of success. It's also an important human investment that request availability and often the presence of husband and wife on the farm. It also means to adopt a new job and to accept its consequences as well in terms of satisfaction as of constraints. Farmers say that the diversification of on-farm activities is not necessarily their original objective and that it supposes specific technical skills and broad-mindedness.

Real vocation, choice of life or motivation to undertake, these activities allow nevertheless to reconnect to the society's expectations and to the market in a different way than raw material production.

3.1.3 Diversification of on-farm activities as an invitation to dialogue

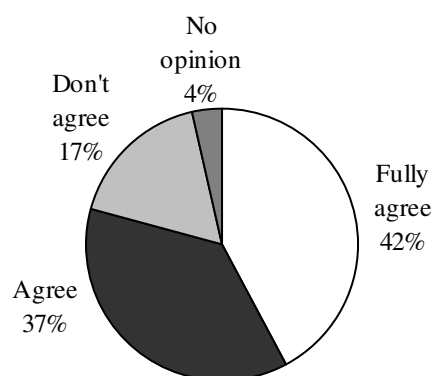
If economic considerations are undeniable for most interviewed farmers, varied sources of social and personal satisfactions are associated to on-farm activities of diversification. Contacts with clients or visitors and the opportunity to give them any explanation about the farm products and the profession are appreciated by farmers. The pride to deliver a good final product, directly to consumers, is also a motivating factor. Interviewed farmers acknowledge that the diversification of on-farm activities may come out on an interesting activity on human and social points of view. As a source of human enriching and social recognition, the commitment goes beyond the solely economic dimension. It's clearly perceived as a new entry to restore the dialogue and to re-position agricultural sector in the society.

3.1.4 Highlight on tourist activities at farm: a study case

For 79% of interviewed farmers, tourism is an interesting opportunity for the diversification of on-farm activities (Figure 2).

Amongst the interviewed farmers, 33 of them are involved in on-farm tourist activities. The main determining factors for starting an activity of tourism at farm belongs to 4 categories: the possibility to valorise existing real estate patrimony is the factor that is the most frequently cited (24 instances). Financial income and expected profitability are also listed amongst the first motivations of these farmers (13 instances). Opportunities to start a new activity (8 instances) and to give rise to contacts with tourists (7 instances) ranks amongst elements motivating the start of a tourist activity on farm.

Figure 2 – Frequency distribution of the 187 interviewed farmers for the following affirmation « On-farm tourism is an opportunity to diversify farmers's activities »



Source : CAPRU 2005

Most of farmers who are involved in on-farm tourism say they get satisfaction (29 instances) from this activity. After they have experienced it, farmers say their satisfaction comes from contacts with tourists (13 instances), good profitability (8 instances) and possibility to restore and maintain farm buildings that were out of order (8 instances). Even two thirds of the 33 farmers involved in on-farm tourist activities have received financial incentives to start their project, incentives don't seem to be a determining factor in decision making. Indeed, one third of farmers have operated their project without any financial support and 75% of farmers who have received a financial support would have run their project even without this support.

For farmers who are not involved in tourism but who say they are interested in (53 instances), motivating factors come from additional income generation (15 instances), contacts with visitors (9 instances) with, especially, the possibility to explain their profession (6 instances) or to contribute to children education (3 instances), the opportunity to make old farm buildings profitable (7 instances), to create a job on the farm for the wife or a child (4 instances) or to prepare the re-conversion before retirement.

For farmers who are not interested in such an activity, limiting factors are recognized as the lack of time or labour (60%), the investment and the necessary adaptation of infrastructure (55%), the aptitude (10%) or the fear to be disturbed (10%). Moreover, they pay attention to the attractive potential of their farm and region.

While most of farmers are confident with the potential of on-farm tourism (Figure 2), they are more mitigated when this activity is seen in a medium or long run perspective. 32% of interviewed farmers think that on-farm tourism won't be more widespread in the future (see table 1 below). They explain

that the development of this sector depends on the tourist attractiveness of the region and that there is a risk of saturation. They also have the feeling that this sector will evolve towards stabilisation rather than development.

3.2 Nature and landscape management: from incitement to public recognition

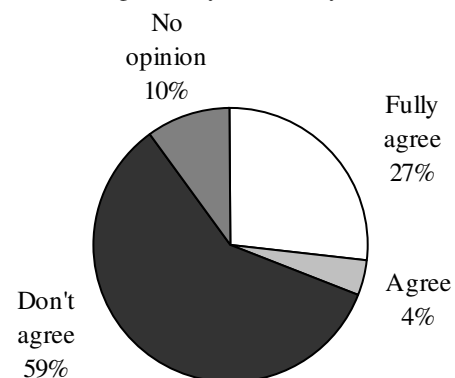
3.2.1 Farmers as key actors in landscape and natural resources management

Most interviewed farmers say they are playing an active role in landscape (96%) and natural resources (92%) management. They explain that mandatory standards enjoin them to work with regard to landscape and natural resources but that their daily works on the field have a positive contribution to the quality of rural heritage.

Nonetheless, they consider that these environmental services and farmers' commitment are not recognised by the society (Figure 3).

According to farmers, this lack of recognition is due to a lack of information or a misinformation. They consider that the mass media are partly responsible of this misinformation. Even though farmers admit that mentalities are nowadays evolving positively, they suffer more criticism than they enjoy public esteem. There is a need to improve public awareness.

Figure 3 – Frequency distribution of the 187 interviewed farmers for the following affirmation « Farmers' roles in landscape management are recognised by the society »



Source : CAPRU 2005

3.2.2 Motivating and blocking factors for farmers' adhesion to agri-environmental measures

74% of interviewed farmers are involved in agri-environmental measures (AEM). By this way, they voluntarily adopt production methods which are more compatible with the protection and improvement of environment and landscape. These methods go beyond the relevant mandatory standards. Farmers say they agree to adopt these methods as long as it is compatible with their activity of production that they consider as their main activity.

Here, the role of incentives is evident. More than 60% of interviewed farmers think that they should be more paid for environmental amenities. When they are asked in an open question which motivations and constraints they associate with AEM, farmers give more explanation about constraints than motivations. When they are given, motivation factors belong to the conviction of validity of these measures (12 instances) or to the financial compensation (6 instances). Concerning blocking factors they list administrative and control burden (24 instances), delayed or inadequate payments (16 instances) or technical constraints (19 instances).

3.3 MFA through partnerships

Most of interviewed farmers (82%) declare they are involved in partnerships with other rural actors. Intra-sector partnership is the most common (96 instances) while the second form of partnership is a proximity and un-formal partnership with primary schools (36 instances) or neighbours (37 instances). Institutional partnership with the local government (commune) is the third form (34 instances). Multi-actors partnerships within the frame of local initiatives of development (22 instances) or environment oriented partnerships (14 instances) are also recorded.

When farmers are asked about their position in local communities and partnerships they would develop in the future with other actors of rural areas, a half of them think that there will be fewer interactions (see table 1 below). They add that they are wishing to reinforce interactions between

farmers and other actors but it becomes more and more difficult because the number of farmers is decreasing and because population misunderstanding leads to negatives interactions and discourage their participation to such partnerships. Nonetheless they appreciate the setting up of local development strategies as multi-actors and participating process encourage efforts for reciprocal comprehension.

3.4 MFA as a prospective model for the Walloon agriculture?

Perspectives and functions of the Walloon agriculture within 10 years were appraised through several statements figuring strong features of possible evolution. Farmers were asked to give their position. Results are given in frequency tables below (Table 1).

75% of interviewed farmers guess that farming systems will evolve towards more specialisation. In their commentary they say they deplore this direction but they feel to be driven by the present orientations of CAP towards more concentration and consequently towards more specialisation. This view is somewhat balanced by the figure of a potential trend to more diversification, shared by 54% of surveyed farmers. They actually perceive an incitement to the diversification of activities and share the view of a positive contribution of MFA to local and regional economy and culture (less dependence on agro-food industry, more contacts with consumers, preservation of traditions, patrimony and culture, etc.) but they consider that multifunctional farms are a development model for small farms which will adopt an alternative strategy. Farmers' position to the statement concerning contacts with consumers reinforce this contrasted opinion as 50% guess there won't be more contacts... except for farmers who take up the diversification challenge of on-farm activities. Besides, 68% of interviewed farmers think that an off-farm activity will be necessary in the future or even consider that farming will become a secondary activity. In both views, interviewed farmers forecast the development of agriculture as a dual model bringing to the fore the contradictions they perceive in CAP incentives.

Most of farmers recognise that regional products are good products and contribute to rural identities as a patrimony to be preserved.

Their mitigated position regarding the growth of these specific products is explained by a too narrow market for products which are more expensive than standard products. 71% of them state that the success of organic products won't increase because the local market is now saturated and more and more seized by the agro-food industry and distribution.

Table 1 – Frequency tables giving the position of the 187 surveyed farmers regarding the following statements

	Fully agree	Agree	Don't agree	No opinion
Specialisation versus diversification				
Farmers will be hyper-specialised	49%	26%	19%	6%
Farmers activities will be more diversified	27%	27%	36%	10%
There won't be any farmers but large agricultural firms	42%	28%	26%	4%
More and more farmers will have a non-agricultural secondary job	41%	27%	23%	9%
Specific quality products versus standard products				
The production of regional products will increase	12%	28%	46%	14%
The production of organic products will increase	6%	12%	71%	11%
Partnerships between agriculture and wider society				
Farmers will have more contacts with consumers	17%	22%	50%	11%
There will be more farmers - non farmers partnerships	9%	26%	49%	16%
Reinforcement of alternative functions of agriculture				
Farmers' roles for landscape management will be reinforced	46%	32%	13%	9%
On-farm tourism will be more widespread	18%	37%	32%	13%
All alternative functions of agriculture will be reinforced	38%	25%	20%	17%

Source : CAPRU 2005

As said above, interviewed farmers are mitigated about the development of on-farm tourism. Almost 80% of them agree to say that farmers' role in landscape management will be reinforced in the future. They explain that incentives enjoin them to do so. They are conscious that their involvement would correspond to the rising demand of the society for green services even they don't feel the relevant gratitude. They expect to stand more constraints in their production activity but, in the same time, they expect to be more paid therefore.

4. As conclusion: new anchorage bonds between agriculture and society through MFA?

From cross consultation during multi-actors workshops, a recurring request is arising about the necessary improvement of the communication between agriculture and wider society. Another concern is the general consensus on the maintenance of rural patrimony including farms' cultural and social capital.

Based on the findings related to on-farm activities a transversal element makes a possible connection between farmers' motivation and the receptivity of the non-agricultural society. Among farmers' motivations related to the first set of diversification activities (on-farm processing, short supply chains, on-farm tourism and leisure), the opportunity of having contacts with customers or visitors and the social enrichment resulting from these contacts prefigure well an opening to the wider society emanating of a voluntary involvement of farmers. On the other side, these activities answer obviously a request of the society and farmers have the feeling to be recognized for these functions. Even income generation and personal interest are leading farmers' decision, this social component is part of the sustainability of these kinds of activities as it is positively perceived on both sides.

Concerning their involvement in landscape and natural resources management, farmers recognize that they are key actors. Financial incentives are determinants for their commitment. If these incentives are supposed to translate the society's interest with respect to the environment and, therefore, to remunerate farmers for the answer whom they bring to this request, farmers expressed their feeling of lack of recognition regarding this function. For this category of activities, the challenge is posed in term of identification of a strategy of positive communication to be addressed to the wider society.

In the section devoted to the prospective, the contrasted view farmers have when they consider a dual model of development for the Walloon agriculture may be translated on the basis of two extreme models considering farming systems, roles farms will have to play, partnerships they will develop in these roles and communication media which will convey their relations with consumers. According to the first model, large and hyper-specialised agricultural firms would be seen in the role of mass production of agricultural raw materials with standardized quality. In this role agriculture would have agro-food industry and distribution as lonely partners. Contacts with consumers would be seized by these partners using the mass media as mean of communication. Whereas the rupture between food producers and consumers is already deep, it's consequently advisable to wonder about the possibility of taking into account the multi-faceted nature of agriculture in strategies of communication where considerations are presently of another nature. In the second model, diversified small-scale farms would be involved in another form of production generating more value added on the farm. These farms would be involved in marketing networks like short supply chains corresponding better to their production nature and volume and they would undertake activities of tourism and leisure. By their intrinsic structure, they would positively contribute to the maintenance of the social and territorial tissue in rural areas. These farms would have multiple partners and could preserve direct contacts with consumers. The question here is to see which are possible synergies with these various partners, how to build these partnerships and how make them last.

Such a dual model is still inherently present in actual agricultural policy. After years of a progressive disconnection from markets and consumers, the return to market driven activities combined with direct or indirect links to the wider society's expectation, it is not easy to appraise as a promising opportunity for sustainable agriculture rather than a risky U turn.