



Agri-environmental policies and ‘good farming’ in cultivation practices at Finnish farms



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ABSTRACT

Twenty years has passed since Finland joined the European Union in 1995. Agriculture was one of the key areas in which significant changes were both anticipated and realised. Besides the European-wide structural change towards larger production units and the steeply decreasing number of farms, the EU's agricultural policy has brought about significant changes in farming as a livelihood and the ways in which it is practiced in Finland. These changes involve environmental considerations related to fertilisation or tillage practices, for example, but they are also reflected in wider meaning-making related to what farming fundamentally is about. Using the concept of good farming as the key, we explore how the introduced agri-environmental policies have changed farming practices and how this is reflected in the ways that good farming ideals are understood and constituted among different farmers. The analysis is based on interviews in which farmers describe their farming practices, purposes and the influence of policies. Our results suggest that the ideals related to good farming are diversifying and changing as the ways of gaining a livelihood through farming changes. This change occurs as the ideals are renegotiated when performing new voluntary or forced practices. Good farming ideals do not only function as a cultural barrier to the adoption of new practices, but they can actively contribute to the accommodation and development of the practices.

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1. Introduction

The concept of ‘good farming’ has recently regained attention in rural sociology (Riley, 2016). It is a notion used for analysing the cultural norms related to agricultural production and their influence on farming practices, particularly to the change towards more environmentally friendly agriculture (Silvasti, 2003; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Sutherland, 2013). What are often identified as good farming ideals center on high productivity and manifest via symbols such as high yield, farming skills and managed landscape (Burton, 2004). These ideals have been formed in times when farming primarily meant food production for the farming household and secondarily a sellable produce for the surrounding community. Thus farming as a means for a livelihood meant food production, and the more food that could be produced the better the livelihood. The symbols are related to ensuring efficient food production and have acted to reinforce the intensive production system. Eventually, over-production and environmental and health

concerns related to intensive farming have caused the ways in which food is produced to be questioned, which resulted in new policy goals related to multifunctional agriculture. However, farming ideals do not seem to change at the same pace as the policy changes, which causes difficulties for the success of the policies.

As changes in good farming are slow to appear, the ideals are suggested to form a central barrier to the adoption of agri-environmental measures (Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011); the policies do not fit farming culture. Aiming for high productivity has been identified as an especially central problem related to the functioning of agri-environmental schemes (AES) that traditionally offer compensation for costs and/or reduced yields caused by the measures. For example, a reduced level of fertilisation violates good farming ideals of doing one's best and being rewarded for the results. A solution proposed for the mismatch between productivist good farming ideals and agri-environmental schemes is to make the latter more appealing to production-inclined farmers (Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011). This means compensation by environmental goods produced, in other words payment by ecosystem services. This way new, appreciated symbols related to good farming could be created without the need to alter the ideal of

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productivity itself. However, with the exception of [Sutherland and Darnhofer \(2012\)](#), relatively little attention has been paid to the change processes related to good farming ideals: how current policies have managed to change the ideals and how the changes could be promoted. Focussing on the case of Finland, our study explores how the existing pay by action policies have affected good farming ideals. Our particular research questions are: 1) What is the influence of the EU agri-environmental policies on farming practices from the farmers' perspective? and, 2) How do the induced changes in farming practices relate to the ways good farming is understood and constituted among different farmers?

Finland is a particular case to study agri-environmental subsidies and practice change. Environmental measures were scarcely in use in Finland prior to EU membership in 1995 ([Peltomaa, 2015](#)) and the membership considerably increased the importance of environmental issues and policies related to agriculture ([Jokinen, 2000](#)). The agri-environmental subsidies have focused on water protection, resulting in changes in farming practices such as decreased utilisation of mineral fertilisers and increased utilisation of zero and reduced tillage methods, especially in Southern Finland ([Palva et al., 2001](#); [Salminen et al., 2014](#)). In Finland, the share of agricultural area committed to agri-environmental schemes is among the highest in the EU ([Eurostat, 2012](#)). The agri-environmental programme was introduced in Finland as a part of the income subsidy system, and about 85–92% of farms, as well as 88–96% of the agricultural area, have been committed to it throughout the different programme periods ([MAF, 2004](#); [Aakkula and Leppänen, 2014](#)). This makes the programme particularly influential in affecting the way that farming is practiced. Finnish farmers are also very dependent on agricultural subsidies (including the environmental ones); on average the subsidies are 1.4 times the created farm net value added in the programme period 2014–2020 (the EU average is 0.4) ([Niemi and Ahlsted, 2015](#)).

Finnish EU membership accelerated the changes in farming as a livelihood. Along with the general EU-wide development, the previous price subsidies were gradually removed and new subsidies were tied to agricultural land area, not the amount of products produced. This increasing decoupling of production and subsidies reduced the economic importance and incentive of actually producing agricultural products as subsidies could be obtained with minimal production activity. Partially as a result of this the average field area of Finnish farms has almost doubled since 1995, while the number of farms has nearly halved ([Tike, 2005, 2014](#)). Behind this general development, the ways that livelihood is gained from farming are diversifying ([Peltomaa, 2015](#)). Farm diversification and part-time farming increase while the share of large farms also increases. Currently, it is estimated that about 50% of Finnish farms produce 95% of agricultural products ([Niemi and Ahlsted, 2015](#)). The agri-environmental subsidies relate closely to these livelihood changes by enabling further extensification.

The policy changes that have occurred and affect farmers' livelihood are bound to influence good farming ideals and related norms. We approach good farming ideals as being constructed in relation to farming as a livelihood and understand the construction to occur in farming practices ([Singleton and Law, 2013](#)). For example, the ideal of the good farmer as one who obtains good yields is reinforced in producing the good yield and being appreciated by the farming community. A change in practice can eventually result in new ideals of good farming (e.g. [Haggerty et al., 2009](#)). However, the ideals attached to existing practices also resist practice change ([Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011](#)). It is this interconnection between practice and change of ideals that we focus on.

2. Practicing good farming

2.1. Changing practices, changing ideals

Good farming has been analysed using Bourdieu's intertwining concepts of habitus, field and social and cultural capital (e.g. [Burton et al., 2008](#); [Hunt, 2010](#); [Sutherland, 2013](#)) as well as identity theory ([Burton, 2004](#); [McGuire et al., 2013](#)). Additionally it has been connected to social and cultural scripting, which shapes the formation of norms and values towards farming (e.g. [Silvasti, 2003](#); [Vanclay and Enticott, 2011](#)). These approaches share an idea that the understanding of good farming is something that plays an important role in determining farming practices, but good farming can also be regarded as being constituted in practices. The focus on practices shifts the attention from the farmers, their socio-cultural context and discourses towards their actual doings. Practices entail bodily and mental activities as well as materials or things involved in performing these practices ([Reckwitz, 2002](#)). Thus the focus on practices enables accounting for the interplay between understandings (such as good farming) and material entities as well as bodily activities. From the practice perspective, good farming is a normative meaning simultaneously enacted in and constituting practices. Scripts and symbols gain their meanings and identities are enacted in practices.

The prevalent approaches to good farming widely agree that good farming is a dynamic concept which is constantly under change: the meaning of good farming is negotiated locally ([Haggerty et al., 2009](#)), it varies between different farming styles and farmer groups ([Hunt, 2010](#); [Sutherland, 2013](#); [Riley, 2016](#)) and is influenced by policies and markets ([Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012](#); [Fleury et al., 2015](#)). Despite these openings related to change in good farming ideals, the processes of change and in particular the role of policies in inducing change have gained relatively little attention. Looking into good farming via practices can help find ways to better understand the formation of farming ideals, and as a consequence also facilitate their change. In the following we exemplify our position in looking at livelihood and practices as the core of change in farming ideals and propose a framework for the analysis of change in good farming ([Fig. 1](#)).

In our analysis, we focus on practices as mediators in the formation and change of good farming ideals (e.g. [Singleton, 2012](#); [Mol, 2013](#); see also [Huttunen and Oosterveer, 2016](#)). The core idea behind our framework is that the good farming ideals have been formed in relation to the need to gain a livelihood for the farm household, and this formation occurs in practices. While the context of gaining a livelihood changes and varies among different farms and their varying farming styles, farming practices are modified. The modified practices do not necessarily sustain the good farming ideals formed together with the previous practices and eventually the change in farming practices can change the ideals: as farming practices change, new practices slowly erode the norms related to good farming and create new norms. The change may include different layers that have different potential for change as the good farming ideals connected to the original practices may resist the change as well. Stabilisation of new ideals takes time and it may take one generation to change the ideals, especially if they are 'forced' via new practices introduced by external events such as changes in policy or market environment ([Haggerty et al., 2009](#)).

The change and differentiation of good farming implies a constant struggle over the definition of the goodness of different farming practices and pursuits ([Phillips and Gray, 1995](#)). Norms and values are embedded in practices, which means that enacting the practices evokes a set of understandings or meanings related to the practice making some issues appear as good and others as bad ([Singleton, 2012](#); [Mol, 2013](#)). For example, applying fertiliser can be

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