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De-mystifying family farming: Features, diversity and trends across the globe



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ABSTRACT

Family farms are defined by two criteria: the importance of family labour and the transfer of ownership, land tenure or management to the next generation. Most farms across the globe are family farms, and they vary in size from < 1 ha to > 10,000 ha. Trends in farm size (small farms getting smaller and large farms getting larger) are not directly related to farm ownership and do not necessarily impact global food security. Rather, both the causes and effects of farm size trends depend on the availability of farm resources and off-farm employment opportunities. Similarly, environmental sustainability, though impacted by agriculture, cannot be linked directly to family ownership or farm size. To address issues related to environment, social conditions and food security, focus should not be on the preservation of family farms but on transformations to strive for environmental, social and economic sustainability of farming in all its shapes and forms.

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1. Introduction

The 'International Year of Family Farming' was declared in 2014 by the United Nations General Assembly. The [FAO \(2014\)](#) stressed the importance of family farming for "its significant role in eradicating hunger and poverty, providing food security and nutrition, improving livelihoods, managing natural resources, protecting the environment, and achieving sustainable development"; a view widely endorsed (e.g. [European Commission, 2014](#); [Foodtank, 2014](#); [IFAD, 2014](#)). Family farms are perceived to be essential to sustain these many functions, yet the very existence of family farms is reputedly under threat (e.g. [Snyder, 2012](#); [van der Ploeg, 2013](#)). The goal of the International Year of Family Farming was, therefore, to "reposition family farming at the centre of agricultural, environmental and social policies in the national agendas" ([FAO, 2014](#)).

The focus on family farms is a reaction to several trends. Economic pressure results in some farms increasing in economic size, while others decrease in economic size or disappear. Small farms can move towards a part-time or "hobby" mode ([Tan et al., 2013](#)), but if off-farm income is lacking the farm family is under threat of impoverishment. This results in a 'disappearing middle', a phenomenon which has been identified in many countries in Europe ([Mandryk et al., 2012](#); [EUROSTAT, 2014](#)), in the USA

([USDA, 2014](#)), see [Fig. 1](#), and also in regions of China ([Tan et al., 2013](#)) and sub-Saharan Africa ([Deininger and Byerlee, 2012](#)). In many developed regions, the total number of farms is decreasing while the age of the farm population increases ([EUROSTAT, 2014](#); [USDA, 2014](#)). Finding successors has become difficult ([Fennell, 1981](#); [Mishra et al., 2004](#); [Wheeler et al., 2012](#); [White, 2012](#)). Farms have become more specialised ([Bernard de Raymond, 2013](#)), mechanised ([Woodhouse, 2010](#)), and intensive ([Rossi and Garner, 2014](#)), while the food supply chain has become more globalised ([McMichael, 2009](#)). Some authors associate these trends with environmental damage ([Rossi and Garner, 2014](#)), lack of cohesion between nature and society ([Slobbe et al., 2011](#)), disappearing rural communities ([van der Ploeg, 2008](#)), landlessness among rural populations ([Woodhouse, 2010](#); [Deininger and Byerlee, 2012](#)) and loss of food sovereignty ([Patel, 2009](#)). Some even link problems of obesity to large, intensive animal farms ([Rossi and Garner, 2014](#)).

Family farms are equated to small farms by various authors (as also found by [Collier and Dercon, 2014](#); see [FAO, 2014](#)). Small farms are perceived to be diversified and to contribute more to environmental sustainability, preservation of traditional values, and economic resilience than large farms ([van der Ploeg, 2013](#); [FAO, 2014](#); [Swaminathan, 2014](#)). Negative perceptions of the loss of control over globalised food supply chains and threats to rural livelihoods in developed countries are directly associated with larger, more specialised and industrialized farms and the proclaimed disappearance of the family farm ([Snyder, 2012](#); [GRACE, 2014](#); [Rossi and Garner, 2014](#)). In developing countries, food security and poverty alleviation are said to depend on productivity

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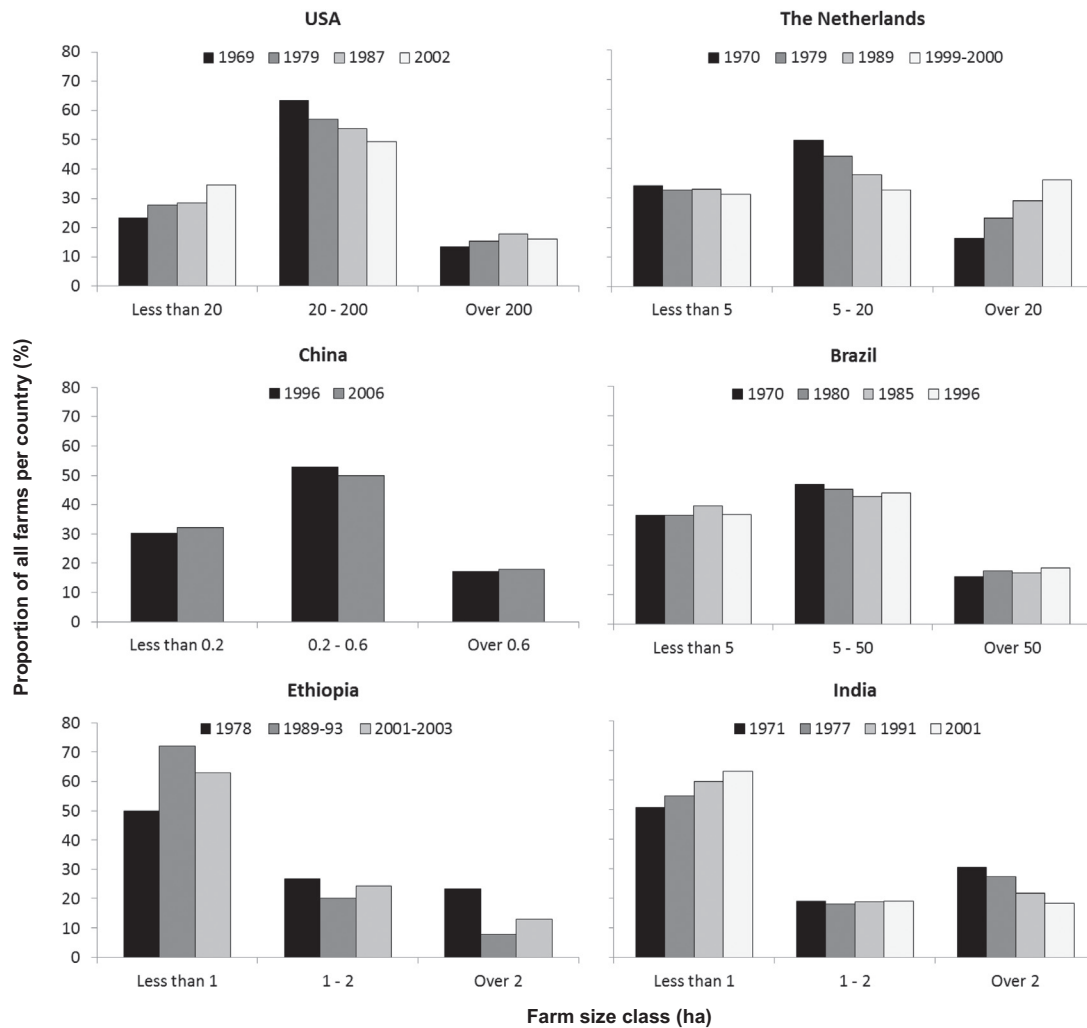


Fig. 1. Changes in farm size distribution in terms of acreage in the USA, The Netherlands, China, Brazil, Ethiopia and India. All farms per country have been grouped into three size classes representing small, medium and large farms, specific to the country represented. The relative distribution of the total number of farms of the country over the three size classes is given as percentages. Years represented differ per country depending on available data. Data for China are from [Tan et al. \(2013\)](#), data for all other countries are from [FAO \(2015a\)](#).

of the diverse crops produced on family farms where the majority of the population resides ([FAO, 2014](#); [Swaminathan, 2014](#)).

Hence, the protection of family farming is proposed as the best response to the perceived threats of trends in agriculture in both developed and developing countries. Yet it is unclear what role family farms play in contributing to these trends and on what the attribution of the various positive characteristics to family farms is based. To unravel the above, we identify the criteria used to distinguish family farms, explore the diversity among family farms across the globe and analyse trends in farm size and intensity. Impact on environmental and social conditions and food security are considered and we conclude by reflecting on implications for policies.

2. What is a family farm?

Whilst the term 'family farm' is commonly used both in the scientific and popular literature, there is no common definition to characterise family farms across the globe ([Hill, 1993](#); [Eastwood et al., 2010](#)). Definitions often include two criteria: (1) family ownership of the land, or land tenure rights over generations, and (2) the use of family labour ([Errington and Gasson, 1994](#);

[Kritzinger and Vorster, 1997](#)). Ownership refers to both decision-making power and physical ownership of the farm assets (e.g. land, housing, machines, livestock) which allow succession: inheritance of the farm by the next generation. Secure land tenure may be regarded as ownership in many Asian and African countries where land remains within the family through traditional governance or long-term tenancy contracts ([Lin, 1988](#); [Toulmin and Quan, 2000](#)). Most definitions suggest 'a substantial part' or 'the majority' of farm labour should be provided by the family. [Djurfeldt \(1996\)](#) argues that the use of family labour is a critical advantage of family farms which cannot be neglected in defining them. By contrast, [Errington and Gasson \(1994\)](#) argue that dependence on hired labour on a farm should not be used as a criterion to distinguish family farms as both the demand for labour (seasonality) and the supply of family labour (changes in the family cycle) fluctuate. Both agree on the centrality of family relations and the direct involvement of the farm owner in the daily work, contrary to non-family units where there is a separation between ownership, management and labour ([Reinhardt and Barlett, 1989](#)).

Some countries distinguish family farms for legal purposes, such as eligibility for subsidies. The criteria used usually include the characteristics mentioned above. In some cases, a size limit is

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