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NEWCOMERS IN AGRICULTURE: NEW IDEAS, NEW DYNAMICS?

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In recent years, rural areas have been viewed as attractive places that combine the best living conditions with interesting employment opportunities, especially in the services sector compared to the urban areas (rural ideal). Indeed, in Western societies a counter-urbanization movement has been recorded for decades, first observed in the USA and later in Western European countries (Woods, 2011). This trend involved either movements of people from urban areas installing in rural areas for the first time, or returnees who once “took a pass” from the city and then decided to return to their place of origin. Consequently, although in the first phase of the counter-urbanization phenomenon people were motivated by the pursuit of a better life and work framework (oriented to the tertiary sector), recently these phenomena seem to be more intense under the pressure of the crisis, as returnees expect to achieve livelihood through more traditional or entrepreneurial agricultural forms. The agricultural sector, previously underestimated (from a sociocultural and an economical point of view), is actually rediscovered for multiple beneficial roles and acquires a foothold in public discourse (Halfacree, 2006, 2008).

In Greece, population movements to and from rural areas were induced largely by rural family strategies aiming at the survival of the family farm. The family farm in Greece is a creation of the agrarian reform of the 1920s, one of the most radical reforms in Europe. After the Second World War the modernization of farms was initiated, resulting in the migration of younger family members to urban centers for studies and / or employment, while the farm

was maintained as a means to finance their studies or employment opportunities. The migration of youth to urban centers was a strategy for small family farm survival in order to avoid fragmentation and disappearance. Essentially, it was a strategic management decision concerning the surplus family labour force, taken simultaneously with the ongoing pursuit of social climbing of the family in the local rural community.

At country level, this option resulted in the maintenance of a large number of farms which inhibited the concentration of agricultural land ownership. Indeed, from 1961 to 2011 the average size of farms in the country increased by only 1.3 hectares (3.6 to 4.9), the number of farms decreased by 15%, while about 60% of them cultivated less than 5 hectares. During this period, the farmland of the family was not sold, which led to expansion of multi-employment but also to new forms of farm management such as “distance management” in those cases where there was no family member in the rural community (Goussios and Duquenne, 2003). From a sociological perspective, these strategies enabled the scattered family members to maintain their "roots" in the rural community (Koutsou et al. 2011).

The crisis in Greece is manifested profoundly in recent years, but it began to appear by the early 2000s and was initiated in the 1960 as a result of the aforementioned rural family strategies, i.e. the exodus of younger members without giving up the family farm. Today, faced with the difficulty of finding employment in urban centres, since youth unemployment reaches 50%, the agricultural sector appears attractive and provides interesting opportunities to young people, even within the family farm. The recent economic crisis strengthens the “rural ideal” and feeds the debate about the “resilience” of rural areas in times of crisis. Indeed, in recent years a small reverse trend is witnessed concerning movements of young people towards rural areas, in particular towards their place of origin, where they have an ancestral agricultural property. These young people, with increased skills (knowledge of new technologies, foreign languages, social networks, operation of the state services, etc.), seem to turn towards production sectors with high added value, or even towards processing and marketing activities, as the continuation of the existing cropping pattern is not actually profitable because of the small size of family farms. The Greek rural sector offers opportunities to increase value added, particularly in the area of quality products and Products of Geographic Indication (PGI).

The "Young Farmers" Program, co-funded by the European Union, providing bonuses for the first installation and increased subsidies for investments, gives the opportunity to young

people under 40 years old to establish in the agricultural sector. The latest call of the Program was launched in 2014.

This paper presents the first results of a research carried out in selected areas of northern Greece, aiming to study the results of the last call of the “Young Farmers” Program. The paper utilizes both secondary and primary data. Initially, we analysed the application file of the beneficiaries of the Program, in order to identify their key demographic data and their farm planning. In the second phase, personal interviews were conducted with a sample of new beneficiaries of the Program in order to explore their personal journeys, family strategies and their integration in local communities.

The research also aims to investigate the rate of response of young people to the above program, their profile and their objectives on the farm that they created for the first time or were the successors of under the light of family strategies for the continuation of the family farm. The main question posed by this paper is whether young farmers are bearers of novel ideas and the extent to which they represent a new dynamic for rural areas.

References

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