

# Methodological challenges in analysing farmers' business strategies for more sustainability in farming

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What happens to wheat production when....?

When will pig numbers increase?

How many dairy farms will die?

Questions like these, politicians and stakeholders always ask when policies or market conditions are expected to change.

Researchers help out with projections and forecasting. They use model calculations and interview experts.

As soon as they do more than extrapolating trends, they have to work with basic assumptions. These assumptions focus on potential adjustments in the producing sector.

But what or who is the sector? It is indeed a heterogeneous group of women and men. These farmers make decisions every day. Their actions fuel continuity, cause changes or even make transition happen.

For that reason, it is obvious that all, researchers, policy analysts, politicians, lobbyists and processors and traders are desperate to get to know the strategies of the unknown species called farmers earlier and more precisely than the others.

Some of these are so unhappy with their former projections that they even claim farmers to act irrational. Indeed, superficially regarded, farmers' reactions sometimes seem to be erratic and non-rational.

# Our approach

We visited farmers and rural processors and interviewed them. We wanted to learn more about their business strategies. Moreover, we wanted to know what they know in theory about management and if and how they reflect on their strategic decision making.

These investigations focused on case studies of farm and small food businesses. It was not about statistical representativity in our case. We wanted to know how they (and then we) can improve our analyses of farmers' business strategies.

# What we've learned

It is not helpful to ask farmers directly about their business strategies. They even answer they would not have any. The theoretical knowledge is missing but not the often well- thought-through strategies. The interviewees were just not used to putting their strategies in words and systematically reflecting on their strategy development process.

However, the strategies existed, had emerged from good reflections based on both experiences and new information.

We learned that the problem is not with the farmers but with us, the scientists.

We need better strategies for the thorough identification, collection and analysis of farmers' strategies!

Our paper aims to show that we, the ag-economists, and the farm management experts can – maybe supported by the rural sociologists – conduct better strategy-based investigations of farmers' business strategies.

However, it is not easy and we should not underestimate the need to properly develop a suitable approach depending on our particular research questions.

Thank you for your attention.

# Role of management strategies

