

FAMILY FARMING IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The current challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic raise concern regarding security and sustainability of the global food system. As family farming plays a crucial role in the European agricultural sector, its support and development are vital to ensuring food sovereignty and security, including rural areas. It is the predominant farm model which accounts for more than 90% of the number of holdings and is considered as a main source of income and employment for rural population. In the context of global health crisis it is important to focus the attention on the issues and opportunities that family farms face. The aim of the study is based on an analysis of the observed trends in various aspects of family farming, to discuss the effects of Covid-19 and to highlight the strategies for the development of these agricultural production systems. The paper compares Bulgarian family farming with other EU member states. The survey indicates that although family farms dominate in the EU agricultural structure, they face number of challenges such as access to resources, financial aid, low competitiveness and investment activity.

Key words: food security, financial support, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Family farms play a significant role in the rural economy. They are key factor for food security and increase the vitality of rural areas.

Historically, the family farms are the first and most widespread representatives of the family and small business in the world.

The current challenges related to the Covid-19 pandemic raise concern regarding security and sustainability of the global food system.

Family farming plays crucial role in European agricultural sector, especially in the rural areas. It is the predominant farm model which accounts for more than 90% of the number of holdings Family farming is considered as a main source of income and employment for rural population [20].

In the context of global health crisis it is important to focus the attention on the issues and opportunities that family farms face.

The aim of the study is to observe the changes and trends in family farming, discuss the effects of the Covid-19 and highlight the strategies for development of the sector. The paper compares Bulgarian family farming with others Member-States of the EU.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Despite the common use of the term family farm, in the scientific literature the definitions vary widely and depend on context, country and aim of the survey [22].

One of the earliest definitions is proposed by Marx (1867). Family farms are defined as small farms engaged in production based on family labour, where science finds no application. Agricultural households use the major part of their production to meet the physiological needs of the family through exchange with nature. Therefore according to Marx they have poor opportunities for economic and social development [32].

Chayanov (1986) considers important to analyse of the economic activity of the rural family, which uses own land and has no interest in hiring external labour, but sometimes is also engaged in non-agricultural activities [9].

The most commonly cited definition of family farming is that of Gasson and Errington (1993). Their study is focused on six elements and outlined also family and territory ties in addition to labour and management [25].

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines family farms „as managed and

operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, both women's and men's. The family and the farm are linked, coevolve and combine economic, environmental, reproductive, social and cultural functions" [21, 22].

On that basis, Eurostat (2019) considers family farms as "farms in which at least 50% of the workforce is family-owned." [20].

According to the authors of CIRAD-Tera (1998), family farming represents the basic link between agricultural activity and the family organization, affecting assets, production methods, motivation and decision-making [10].

Berdegúe and Escobar (2002) propose a framework in order to characterise family farms and divided them into three groups, based on land, labour and/or capital assets, and market environment [6].

Depending on the context, different surveys outlined different definitions of a family farm. They are most often based on: (1) the employment of the family on the farm; (2) farm management; (3) the production structure; and (4) business risk.

In order to observe the trends and opportunities of family farms, conceptual models of their behaviour can be presented. Based on neoclassical economic theory, family farms can be considered as profit-optimizing economic agents. In this way, their behaviour is explained by the economic laws related to the marginal revenue and marginal costs. The assumption that producers are efficient suggests that the main driving force of households is maximum profit. Efficiency and profit maximization are seen as "two sides of the same coin" [12].

The other model is related to the rental opportunities - distribution of revenue and cost between the actors is a form of land lease in which the rent is a percentage of the total yield of the farm.

Risk minimization and diversification is another typical behaviour of some family farms. Lipton (1968) presented the so-called survival algorithm. According to his thesis, poorer and smaller farms are risk avoiding [31].

The economic model of the leisure optimizer is developed in 1920 by Chayanov. His model is revised further by a number economists such as Melor (1963) and Sen (1966). The model outlines the exceptional vitality and ability of family farms to survive in difficult conditions. Farm household model is also part of Chayanov theory. The author suggests that his concept works more successfully in less urbanized rural areas, and especially in cases where farmers have the opportunity to rent additional land [34, 41].

According to the European Council (1997), family farms are a key element in the European model of agriculture. This model could lead to the diversification and sustainable development [2].

The importance and future of family farms are widely discussed in survey by IPC-IG (2016). Based on their study some main characteristics of the family farms can be outlined [28] (Figure 1).

A very important feature of family holding is that it has control over the main resources in the farm, which gives autonomy. Other feature is related to family farms as a source of income and employment. Family holdings are contributing to the rural economy and related to concepts as pluriactivity and multifunctionality [30].

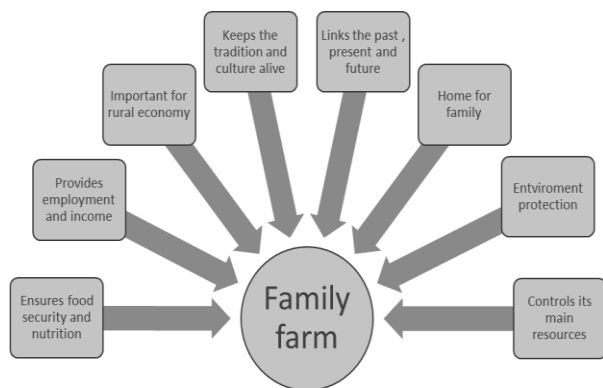


Fig. 1. Features of family farms
Source: Based on Van der Ploeg (2013); Chatel (2014) [44, 8].

However, there is far more than ownership, employment and decision-making [22]. Family farm is also home to the farming family and related to the connection and interaction between members and relatives of

the household. In addition family farms link past, present and future [1, 45].

The family farming is also part of a rural community and keeps culture and traditions alive. Family farms have a key role in maintaining biodiversity by using ecological processes and balances [38].

According to the FAO, 90% of the farms in the world can be defined as family farms and rely mainly on family labour [21]. Bruni and Santucci (2016) conclude that this type of farms are very successful in helping rural poverty reduction [7]. In number of regions of the EU, especially in Bulgaria family farms are key driver for this process [35]. In recent decades, however, family farming has changed significantly and these farmers face a number of challenges. Based on a study by the European Parliament, they are grouped into the three dimensions of sustainability: economic, environmental and social.

In this document the main economic challenges to family farms are systemised as: access to resources (land and capital), access to markets and their role in value chain [18].

On the other hand, European Commission (2012) indicates that social challenges are related to age structure and the role of women [14]. In addition, several challenges to family farming are linked to the geographical patterns – for example mountainous and underdeveloped regions which are distant from urban centres and have less alternatives for employment [18, 24].

The study analyses the trends and outlines the patterns in family farming development based on the data from Farm structure surveys in the European Union Member-States.

Eurostat definition and classification of family farms is used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In terms of their number, family farms are predominant structures in EU agriculture. (Figure 2).

According Eurostat (2019), 95 % of all 10.5 million farms in the EU are classified as family farms [20]. The share increases by almost 2 percent points compared to the Farm structure survey in 2013.

More than one third of family holdings in the EU are concentrated in Romania (3.4 million). Poland (1.4 million), Italy (1.1 million) and Spain (0.8 million) are the next three Member States with the largest number of family farms.

The share of family farms in total holdings is the highest in Luxemburg (100%), followed by Romania (99.21%), Slovenia (98.7%), Ireland (98.86%), and Poland (98.75%).

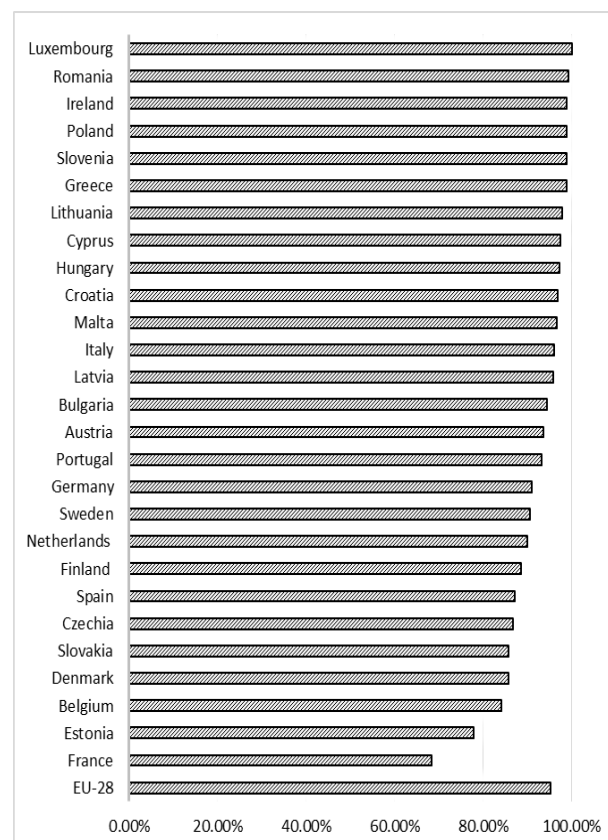


Fig. 2. Share of family farms in total farms in the EU, 2016 (%)

Source: Eurostat statistic explained, Farm structure survey, 2016.

On the other hand, the lowest share is registered in France (68.34%), Estonia (77.84%) and Belgium (84.03%). Bulgarian share is close to the EU-28 average (94.4%) and decreases slightly in comparison to the results in 2013 (95.5%). Based on the data it can be concluded that family farming are important part of in European agriculture and play significant socio-economic role. In the rural area there are ensuring food security, help in poverty reduction and mitigation of global pandemic crisis.

Another important indicator is the average size (Figure 3). In the scientific literature, the term “family farming” is often related to “smallholder farms” [11]. On the other hand, FAO (2014) suggests that farm size can be of a secondary importance in determining family farms [21]. Farm size depends on agro-ecological and socio-economic conditions. The latter is confirmed by the Eurostat data. The average size of family farms in Member States varies significantly.

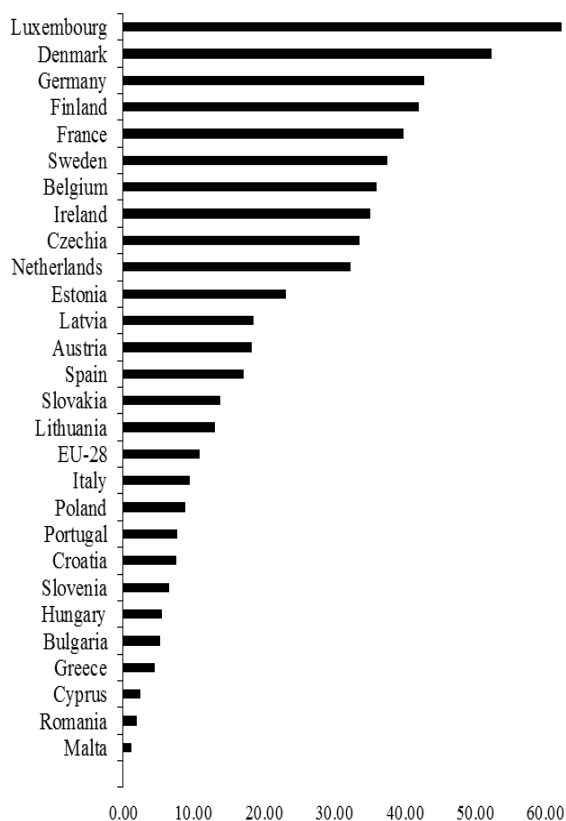


Fig. 3. Average size of family farms, 2016 (hectares per farm)

Source: Farm structure survey, 2016.

Family farms are the largest in Luxembourg (62 hectares per holding) and Denmark (52 hectares per holding). On the other hand the smallest family farms are registered in Malta (2.51 hectares per holding), Cyprus (2.02 hectares per holding) and Romania (1.17 hectares per holding).

Bulgarian family farms have average size of 5.25 hectares per holding which is smaller than EU-27 average (10.84 hectares per holding).

Based on the data, it can be concluded that family farms are predominantly small in most of the EU Member-States (Figure 4).

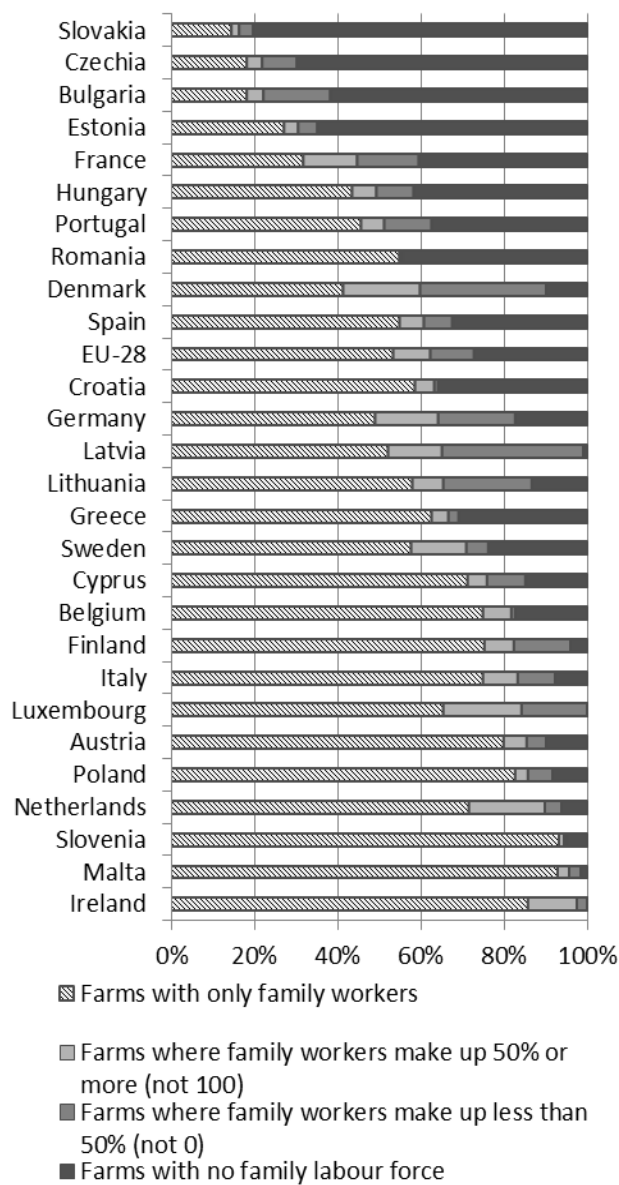


Fig. 4. Distribution of the utilised agricultural area by type of farm labour, 2016

Source: Farm structure survey, 2016.

However, the countries can be divided into groups - the first group, with an average size higher than the EU-28, the second group with an average size around the EU-28 and the third group - lower than the EU average.

The majority of Eastern-European countries and new Member-States are in the third group. After the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, the number of farms in the EU has doubled. Majority of family farms in these countries

were very small holdings based on self- or semi-sufficiency [17].

By contrast, the first group of the farms includes Western European countries which have different agricultural structure and production patterns.

Family farms concentrate more than 62% of all UAA in the EU-28 (Figure 3). In 2016 the lowest shares is recorded in Slovakia (16.3 %), Czech (21.9 %) and Bulgaria (22.2 %) [4].

By contrast, the highest shares of UAA are registered in Ireland (97.4%), Malta (95.3%) and Slovenia (97.45). The results in these countries show that the UAA is concentrated mostly in commercial farms and large enterprises. Although the share of family farms in total number of holding is more than 80% in almost all Member-states, the share of family farms in UAA shows different trends.

The access to land is pointed out as a main issue for family farming. There are wide variations that also influence rental contract conditions, which distorts the land markets [42, 26]. According to the Transnational Institute (2013) there are serious challenges related to the term “land grabbing” in the EU [43].

In Bulgaria this process is changing the rural regions substantially and therefore is leading to numerous social, economic and ecological challenges.

Other important indicator related to the topic is the generated standard output (Figure 5).

Family farms account for 59.5 % of the value of produced output in the EU-28. In Ireland (92.8%), Slovenia (89.1%) and Greece (88.4%) is registered the highest share of the indicator.

By contrast, the lowest share of standard output is generated in Slovakia (13.9%), the Czech Republic (15.1%), Estonia (20%) and Bulgaria (31.3%) [5].

Based on these data it can be outlined that the trends in standard output distribution are in parallel with land concentration tendencies.

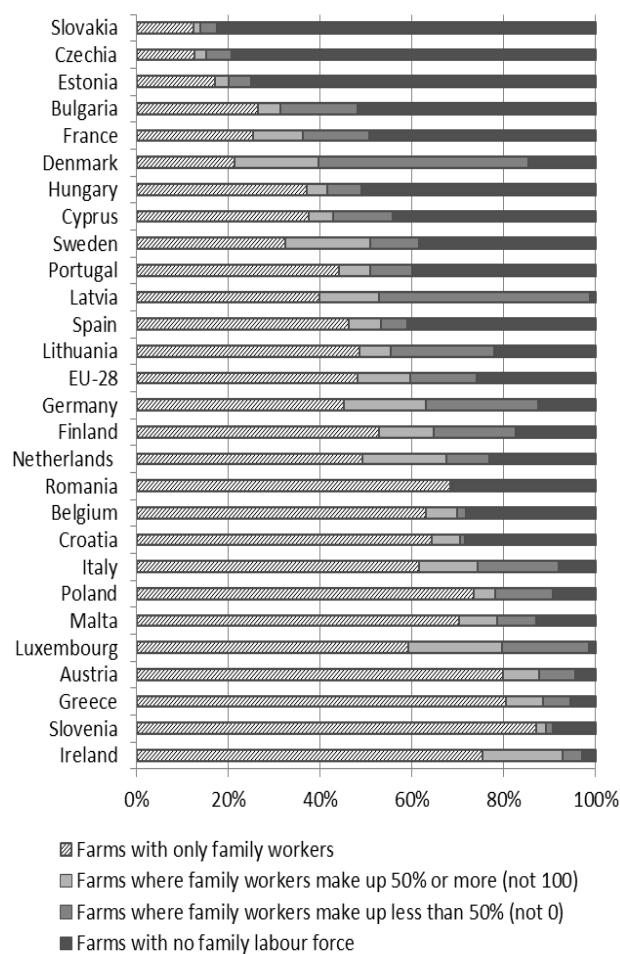


Fig. 5. Distribution of standard output by type of farm labour, 2016

Source: Eurostat statistics explained.

Another serious challenges for family farming is related to generation renewal and aging. (Table 1).

According to Eurostat (2019) one third of farm managers are 65 years or over. In family farms including only family workers, the share of managers aged over 65 is 34.3 % and is much higher than in non-family farms (9.3 %). In Cyprus and Romania more than 60 % of all family farms are managed by older farmers [3].

Young farmers are often employed in larger or commercial farms mainly due the better working conditions and bigger wage.

The share of young farm managers under 40 in family farms is the highest in Luxembourg (26.0 %), Austria (21.7 %) and Poland (20.0 %). On the other hand, in Cyprus (2.9 %) and Portugal (3.3 %) their share is the lowest.

In Bulgaria, both the share of young farmers and older managers is higher than the EU average.

Table 1. Farm managers by age class (%)

Countries	Family farms	
	Managers less than 40 years	Managers 65 years of over
EU-28	9.92	32.26
Belgium	8.24	18.24
Bulgaria	12.66	35.61
Czech Republic	7.57	23.36
Denmark	5.55	25.21
Germany	13.01	7.49
Estonia	9.00	28.93
Ireland	12.60	28.85
Greece	8.18	33.13
Spain	7.03	28.56
France	9.40	13.47
Croatia	9.57	32.66
Italy	7.51	40.03
Cyprus	2.94	43.71
Latvia	8.94	29.66
Lithuania	11.76	30.57
Luxembourg	26.00	29.00
Hungary	12.13	30.26
Malta	6.10	29.10
Netherlands	7.35	17.11
Austria	21.67	6.98
Poland	20.03	11.59
Portugal	3.31	50.10
Romania	7.31	44.27
Slovenia	9.16	28.87
Slovakia	16.56	19.56
Finland	7.14	6.86
Sweden	9.83	23.26

Source: Farm structure survey.

In general, the generation renewal is substantial issue, especially with regard to the future of European agriculture. Zagata, Sutherland (2015) suggest that “young farmer problem” affects mainly small farms, which are predominant structures in the agriculture of Southern and Eastern European countries [46].

The issue with aging of farm manager may have negative effect on the future sustainability of family farming in the EU, since older farmers are usually with lower education, less willingness to take risk and to implement innovative technologies [18].

Impact of Covid-19 on family farming

Nowadays agriculture is facing number of challenges such as climate change, ensuring food security and sovereignty. COVID-19 as a global pandemic is a major concern and put the lives of billions at risk [23]. This crisis has significant impacts on countries, regions and the most vulnerable groups of the society. Family farmers are also affected by the pandemics.

The impact of the crisis related to COVID-19 can be found in the following directions: (1) The market access of the farmers is limited due the closed farmers’ markets and lack of procurement opportunities. On the other hand, during the pandemic there are changes in consumer’s behavior and perceptions; (2) The restrictions during the health crisis led to restaurant closures and decrease demand for fresh products. This is affecting family farmer’s productive capacities and small holding are particularly vulnerable. (3) Majority of family farmers, together with their main professional activity rely on agriculture to provide an additional income. In rural areas, COVID-19 led to decrease of their main income due restrictions and closures in various sectors. Based on that family farming becomes important source of employment in order to ensure normal standard of living. 4) On the other hand, often except agricultural production, family farmer’s income is supplemented by permanent or temporary additional employment. The pandemic caused crises in economic activities and small businesses in rural areas and on that basis in family farmers' wellbeing. This process can affect negatively family farming production potential and opportunities for development.

In order to address the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, European Commission (2020) [16] proposed measures that can be divided into: (1) Measures to ensure food supply chain- for seasonal workers and secure food systems; (2) Measures that directly are supporting farmers and rural areas like flexibility of financial instruments implementation under Rural development program (RDP). There are also new measures for farmers and small and medium enterprises under Pillar II. (3) Market

measures like private storage aid for dairy and meat products. Also there is flexibility for market support programmes in the some sectors (fruits and vegetables, olives and olive oil, apiculture). (4) CAP simplification and flexibility related to the deadlines for CAP payment applications and less farm on-the spot monitoring visits.

The COVID-19 pandemic has consequences for family farming such as disruption of the food supply chains because of lockdowns, but also a major economic issues [47]. The situation remains uncertain. According to the World Health Organization, even worse consequences are expected in the future years [29]. Some authors predict that this virus will continue to circulate for a least couple more years [40].

There are various studies related to the institutional modelling of changes in the CAP and the impact on agriculture and rural areas [13, 33, 19, 39].

Based on a different model of family farmers, government policy could be directed in different aspects. The profit maximization family farms generate good income and have competitive advantages compare to the other family holdings. In practice, their behaviour is very close to that of the large commercial businesses. Therefore these farms are more successful in accessing investment support under Pillar II. On the other hand, their number is small and does not require specifically targeted measures expect the proposed by European Commission. However, it can be assumed that: (1) if producers are competitive but limited by the technologies in the long run agricultural productivity can be increased changing resources or/and technologies, such as large-scale irrigation facilities, innovations implementation, etc. (2) if the efficiency of farmers is hampered by a lack of knowledge in the field of new technologies - the policy should focus on raising their awareness and human capital development

However, most of the family farms are smaller than profit maximizing holdings. For this group agriculture could be considered as a main source of income. In the European Union, these farms are the important

agricultural structure. Agricultural support can have significant effect on them due their large number and significant potential. In some Member-states these farms face serious difficulties in applying and receiving financial support for investments [27]. On one hand, their size is too large to participate in small farmer's schemes. On the other hand, they have been engaged in agriculture for a long time and do not meet the criteria for young farmers. In Bulgaria, although investment measures of the RDP provide opportunities for support for small family farms, the requirements could be complied mainly by the largest profit optimizers due to the heavy administrative procedures. The high ceiling of the eligible activities under the investment measures, the formal requirements and the relatively expensive consulting assistance regarding the value of the project, make the participation in these measures difficult for the smaller producers. For these farms, the effective and well-targeted agricultural policy is essential.

In the other models of family farms behaviour, the agriculture is a source of additional income rather than a main activity. Due pandemic, there is a decrease in income from non-agricultural activities in rural areas and the government should focus on social measures.

In some Member-states, including Bulgaria, agriculture is an additional income for retirees. The rest of the income of these producers comes from different types of pensions which often are low. Therefore, for them agriculture is vital, although they do not have significant growth potential. These farm households are very important in the processes of poverty reduction in the country. For this type of farms, measures with a stronger social focus could be useful.

On the other hand, for hobby farmers, have various motives - free time, the desire to consume environmentally friendly and quality products, enjoyment of rural life, farming related to tourism activities and more. These farms can be classified as "boutique" or "hobby farms", which are not of great economic importance. It could not be expected the latter to be seriously affected by

the various instruments of agricultural, economic or social policy. However, due the pandemic their significance could increase. Established in 1962, the CAP main goal was to ensure a stable supply of affordable food and support farmers and their reasonable living [36]. Over the last 60 years, EU policy has changed and evolved, but family farming remains one of the main official priorities. However, numerous studies (Pe'er et al, 2018; European Court of Auditors, 2018) pointed out that financial support is unequally distributed and ineffectively targeted [37]. Therefore, it's the instruments for family farmer support can be further developed [15].

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, some conclusions and recommendations could be highlighted:

- (1) Family farms remain an important part of the rural economy and play a key role in social development and biodiversity maintenance;
- (2) Family farms are the most common structure in the EU agriculture. However, in the majority of the Member-States they have small average size;
- (3) Access to land remains a major problem for family farms, with some negative processes such as "land grabbing" and market distortions.
- (4) Generation renewal is other major challenge for family farming;
- (5) The COVID-19 pandemic as a global challenge has had consequences for family farming;
- (6) Experts predict that the crisis will continue and will have long-term consequences in a number of sectors;
- (7) Family farm remain major source of income in rural areas, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, agriculture policy should consider their vital role and propose measures well-designed for their different needs and models of development

Family farmers are a key factor for sustainable development of rural areas. These agricultural holdings have a personal interest in protecting the environment, as well as in

increasing the socio-economic development of rural areas.

During an economic or other crisis, society relies on them. The market is not able to take into account the positive externalities that they create, hence there is an underestimation of their social significance. Therefore, the awareness of family farming role in those processes needs to be improved. On the other hand, different types of farmers react in a different way to the agricultural policy.

Knowing and observing the specifics of the individual groups of family farms could help the governments in shaping the future agricultural policy of the EU.

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