Transformative spaces for agriculture? Analysing how Finnish farmers discuss their work

Agenda

1. Context: Why we need to understand better agricultural change?
2. Approach to understanding bottom-up agricultural change
3. Analysis (showing some data)
4. Results
The old problem: population grows—will there be enough food?

UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s tone 2002: No reason to worry about food sufficiency – fertilization will increase the yields almost everywhere.

During the past 15 years, UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s tone has changed...

Increasing competition for natural resource and emerging resource bottlenecks mean that global agriculture can no longer operate using a "business as usual" approach – the input-intensive agricultural development model used for the past 40 years is no longer sustainable, and a "paradigm shift" in food production is needed.

FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva at the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture, 16 January 2015, Berlin


Human activities are shifting the balance of our planet

Also food production and consumption needs to change

http://www.stockholmresilience.org/images/10.1930/4a43556aee7bbd87/105761/145956022891/planetary-boundaries.jpg
Change in farming needed: UN Sustainable Development for the 21st Century expert priorities for sustainable agriculture

Need to understand the farmer’s perspective in general

This study begun as ethnographic approach to farming

7 interviews (appr. 3 h each on farms, including field visits)
- How it is to be a farmer?
- Past, present & future of the farm?
- Fertilization practices?
- The role of knowledge in farming?
Looking for research gap: Farmers’ identities have been perceived as being rather stable with little evidence of emergence of change-enabling identities toward sustainability

- Agricultural producer identity (focus on crops & production) dominates
- Agribusiness identity (focus on economic growth) often combined with producer identity
  → The prevalence of these identities is found to support the "business-as-usual" in agriculture
- Conservation identity (focus on conserving nature or traditional values)
- Diversification (focus on increasing the sources of income)
  → These “sustainability-supporting” identities are found as not becoming widespread
But what if identities are studied as a side-product of change rather than as fixed entities?

Setting CLA aside

- Original intention was to use Causal Layered Analysis to focus at
  - litany,
  - system
  - world view
  - myths
Without participatory workshops it seemed to suit better for analysing why change is difficult
I wanted to explore why change nevertheless DOES OCCUR
I complemented the data with 4 more interviews on specific change projects
Methodological questions for now

- How to conceptualize change?
- How to operationalize identity?

Tentative frame for conceptualizing change

"Individualizing" the sustainability dimensions

- Economic
- Social
- Cultural
- Environmental

Assumption: farmers seek to align these dimensions

Obs! Individually experienced sustainability is not "objective" sustainability
Identity issues show in how farmers talk about changes that they’ve made

• Interviewee 2, shift to organic, then sticking to the ”old ways”: (Conservationist, but diversifier into tourism)
• Interviewee 1, incremental improvement to keep the farm productive (diversifier/producer)
• Interviewee 5, experimenting with selling directly to consumers (husband: producer, wife: diversifier)
• Interviewee 3, shifting to vegetarian products (agribusiness)
• Interviewee 4, shift to knowledge-intensification in all operation (diversifier, producer)

Analysis: Economic rationale & change

• Personal risk-aversion: ”The risk is too big when you strive for top yields. I’m not cut out for it. (...) It’s good to experiment when you have the subsidies. It will not cost that much.” (2, shift to organic)
• Intergenerational risk-aversion: ”We’ve tried to develop it on such a scale that there would be no extra burden for the next generation. The debts will have been paid” (1, incremental improvement)
• Find your focus: ”Even though you farm different crops, you can’t start making a special product of each of them. You must focus. You can’t do 15 different things. The focus from your base escapes. You must make your living also.” (5, experiment with selling directly to consumers)
• Make sustainability profitable: ”I still think that the sector’s problems relate to general management and product development and marketing.” (3, shift to vegetarian products)
• Make everything smarter: ”[We aim at] resource efficiency. Whatever the resource, we try to use it reasonably.” (4, shift to knowledge-intensification)
Analysis: Wellbeing & change: finding one’s way to be a farmer

- "A death in the family changed my life. This was a traditional farm at the time. The sorrow was big, introduced all kinds of pondering and a view that one needs to slow down. I had already a couple of organic hectors, and then I changed the whole farm.” (2, shift to organic)
- "EU came and we had to decide how to develop and we had a permission for pigs ready. Someone said to me that think twice whether to invest in pigs or into yourself. Which one is more flexible? I woke up, yes – I could opt the easier way. And then, I invested into myself and started to study more.” (1, incremental improvement)
- (5, experiment with selling directly to consumers): seems to live a balanced life, business as usual
- "I did not risk investing in the wrong technology, so I invested in myself, to my wellbeing. I reduced the drinking of alcohol, started to be more socially active, and emphasized family and that kinds of ideal things, to feel better and have the energy to think creatively” (3, shift to vegetative products)
- "Without exceeding the limits of one’s strength, we try to use [the resources] efficiently. One must not exaggerate, it has been seen what happens when one goes over one’s limits. If one’s mind can’t take it, nothing works. Of course yield per hectare needs to be big, that’s why we do this. But not with any price, no.” (4, shift to knowledge-intensification)

Analysis: ”Nature” is not protected but to be involved with, sensibly

- Wise use of nature: "I don’t consider faba bean’s nitrogen that important. Much better to farm so that there remains organic mass in the soil, keeping it porous and breathing. If you only harvest hay long enough, you get a meadow. That’s why I leave long stubble. Then it starts to grow again. This is how the soil remains healthy for longer. I’m not too greedy with hay. (2, shift to organic)
- Human-nature system: “I’ve been teaching [students of animal husbandry] nutrients and farming, and they were shocked when I asked how the hay was fertilized, and they said you need not fertilize as it’s horse feed. Then they give commercial nutrients to horses! (...) They lack the vision that in order to be well, the horse - or a human for that matter - needs those nutrients. And these come from food. This is the way you need to think about [agriculture].” (1, incremental)
- Humans influence nature: “I see that the environmental thing is of course important and proper. But it’s so that as the restrictions to the use of plant protecting agents came…. With many pesticides, you are not allowed to go close to water bodies without certain type of sprayer. But I think it’s funny. If it is windy, I would not go spraying. Water body or not, the spray would not go on top of the weed if the wind was blowing. And the tank costs insanely, it would not make sense to spray it in the wind” (5, experiment with selling directly to consumers)
- Natural-economic system: “...it’s insane that they farm corn [which is prone to erosion], letting the carbon of the soil escape as carbon dioxide and at the other end they try to make biofuel out of corn to move cars in environmentally friendly manner. Pardon me - what?! And that’s publicly supported.” (3, shift to vegetative products)
- Smart interaction with nature: “[Autumnal plants] have always interested me (...) I did not originally understand how sensible is, but with learning about erosion and other things it appears smarter and smarter to farm autumnal plants. First of all, plant cover all-year round, reduced erosion, and so forth...” (4, shift to knowledge-intensification)
Analysis: Identity/ethos & change

• “My father and my son both wonder why I farm this way. I think this way is economically possible for me. It’s the way of least bother. Makes no sense to go against the rules.” (2, shift to organic farming)

• “…my philosophy is that there’s no problems, only solutions. You can’t fight this system or this time. You must adapt and find the best possible way in this moment where you live” (1, incremental improvement)

• “If you run without moving, it won’t help. Everything changes. Likewise, no-one uses the old 386 for data processing anymore. That’s how it is. If you run without moving, it’s the beginning of the end” (5, experiment with selling directly to consumers)

• “…I want to show myself that I can solve this riddle of unprofitability of farming in Finland - I want to make it a crown jewel” (3, shift to vegetarian products)

• “… changed my farming tactics (...) mainly as I’ve started to do advising for various [publicly funded] projects. I got a boost for these issues. [...] The more I know through advising, the more I get for myself. When I was younger, I was just a farmer, I did not utilize professionals much. Now I can and must utilize them a lot. I have a great network, I am happy that I dare and can do things.” […] “When people see how well the project goes, they may get an interest on what this guy is doing, how does it gather 200 people together, just like that” (4, shift to knowledge-intensification)

Results

• Each change narrative has a unique trajectory and “flavor”

• A change narrative makes sense as an interplay of experiences and values rather than as an expression of stable identity in a changing world

• Practises change as farmers find ways to act more in accordance with their values ← learning new ways through networks; education

• But values can also be re-ordered: ← Driven by personal crises and the joy of overcoming challenges
Thank you for attention

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