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► To cite this version:

Hélène Brives, Sylvie Cournut, Caroline Mazaud, Marie Taverne, Colin de Verdier, et al.. Do farmers groups support quality of work life? A framework for analyzing group farming in France. 2nd International Symposium on Work in Agriculture. Thinking the future of work in agriculture, Mar 2021, Clermont-Ferrand, France. hal-03257837

HAL Id: hal-03257837

<https://hal-vetagro-sup.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03257837>

Submitted on 11 Jun 2021

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Do farmers groups support quality of work life? A framework for analyzing group farming in France

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Abstract: Group farming can be a powerful lever to face ongoing technical and societal transformations of agriculture, environmental challenges and to facilitate new farmers setting up. Despite expanding activities of farmers groups, new generation of farmers are sometimes reluctant to involve in groups which arose in a very different social, economic and political context, during the modernization period. Our research explores the following hypothesis: the difficulty to attract new generation of farmers is linked to different visions and aspirations of governance and work organization within the group. Younger generations of farmers express high expectations in terms of quality of work life. Farmers groups functioning is analyzed to understand how different types of work organization and governance impact quality of work life. The objective of this paper is to report on the analytical framework mainly built upon the definition of quality of work life and to illustrate what quality of work life means in a context of farmers groups.

Key words: Farmers groups, quality of work life, work organization, governance

Group farming is of renewed interest to face ongoing technical and societal transformations of agriculture and environmental challenges. Farmers groups favour knowledge and practices exchange for agro-ecological transition (Compagnone *et al.*, 2018), experiment and problem solving (Brives, de Tourdonnet, 2015 ; Navarrete *et al.*, 2018), relocation of food chains (Filippi, 2004), reinsurance and creation of social ties (Sabourin, 2012), redefinition of professional identities (Goulet, 2008).

Recent research on farm machinery cooperatives (CUMA - *Coopérative d'utilisation du matériel agricole*) show the importance of land, work and investment pooling (Lucas, Gasselin, 2018). Farmers groups are a real lever to facilitate young farmers setting up. Despite expanding activities of farmers groups, new generation of farmers are sometimes reluctant to involve in groups which arise in a very different social, economic and political context, during the modernization period. An exploratory study on 46 farming groups in Auvergne and Rhône-Alpes area (France) relates recurrent conflicts between farmers generations (Nani, 2018). These conflicts arise mainly about the functioning of the collective: « *We would love to give them the lead but nobody wants it* » (interview of a farmer from older generation, translation by the authors), « *Seniors don't listen to us* » (interview of a farmer from younger generation, translation by the authors).

Our research (within the CO-AGIL project) explores the following hypothesis: the difficulty to attract new generation of farmers is linked to different visions and aspirations of governance and work organization within the group. Younger generations are now experiencing various forms of on-farm work organization (and not only family farming) changing relationship to work (perceptions and expectations). Being an expert, being autonomous (especially for women), work-life balance appear to be essential (Dufour, Dedieu 2010). A large European survey showed that younger generations put a lot of expectations on work and value occupational activities that are meaningful (being useful to others, helping people),

offering learning opportunities and with a kindly atmosphere (relations within co-workers) (Méda, 2013). Younger generations (male and female) expectations refer to what is defined as « quality of work life » (ANACT, 2016). Beyond working conditions, quality of work life includes : autonomy at work, meaningful occupation, learning opportunities and a working community enabling problem solving, practices exchanges, dialogue and involvement in decision making (and more precisely on how work is organized).

The objective of this paper is to report on our framework for analyzing governance and work organization in farmers groups. A keystone of our framework is that good quality of work life cannot be achieved without the feeling of work well-done (Clot, 2010 ; Dejours, 2010). The definition of “work well-done” is highly controversial. Common controversies can be found in companies that demand an increase in productivity (work well-done is to deliver a high number of products or services) while workers feel their work is well-done when they are able to recognize that products/services are of good quality. Being proud of products/services delivered and satisfied with conditions of cooperation at work are key elements giving meaning to work. Therefore controversies over what is “work well-done” are normal cause of conflict. However it is hardly discussed within working groups and frequent source of tensions. We hypothesize that within farming groups, different perceptions of what is “work well-done” can be found. These controversies lead to conflicts, tensions and impact work organization (division of labour, cooperation), governance and involvement in the group. Therefore work organization and governance in farmers groups will be characterized by questioning:

- Conflicts and controversies about what is “work well-done”
- Division and delegation of tasks (including outsourcing or mutual aid)
- Special focus is done on the work of piloting and decision making to understand governance
- Capacity of the organization to provide autonomy and meaning in work, recognition, opportunities for cooperation and learning opportunities

This framework is tested on four case studies: two farm machinery cooperatives (CUMA) and two farmers groups organizing field experiment, field tours and educational programs. Farmers of these groups are interviewed and group activities are observed. Preliminary results, obtained in the two CUMA cases can be described as followed:

- Tensions around competing definitions of “work well-done” occur in both farm machinery coops.
- Tensions occur around maintenance and use of equipment: non-recognition of maintenance and fixing done for free by a small number of farmers, regular maintenance after each use.
- Tensions also occur around the availability of equipment although work organization is very different in the two CUMA (one hiring a driver).
- In one CUMA, botched work (no minimum maintenance after use + taking too long to do something) is described as the work of the oldest or of the young people who do just like their father.

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