

## Farmers in French society<sup>1</sup>

The social grouping formed by “farmers”<sup>2</sup> is currently undergoing a sea change. Leaving aside prejudice and media presentation, what do we really know about them? What can be learned from statistics and sociological research? Are farmers a category apart, with their own lifestyles and values? Or, on the contrary, are they losing their specific identity as they merge with the prevailing model in contemporary French society? Although a degree of convergence with the rest of the population is to be seen where living standards and consumption are concerned, they still retain specific features with regard to demographics, the way they allocate their time and, especially, their relationship with work and their local regions.

Over the period from 1980 to 2007, the working agricultural population fell from 8% to 3.4% of total working population<sup>3</sup>. Farmers are now in a minority even in rural areas. But, going beyond the numbers, the whole of the farming community is currently undergoing a sea change, and without the rest of society really realising that it is happening. Today, farming activity no longer calls on contributions from every family member and it is increasingly the case that the wives of farmers have jobs off the farm. New farmers setting up in the industry no longer come solely from farming backgrounds. This greater openness to the outside world goes hand in hand with radical changes in skills and qualifications: farmers are now running farms as businesses and young farmers receive training to match the demands of today's world. The present note provides an update on the changes now under way, singling out in turn the aspects that relate to living standards (1) to consumption (2), to family (3), to leisure and cultural activities (4) and, finally, to value systems (5).

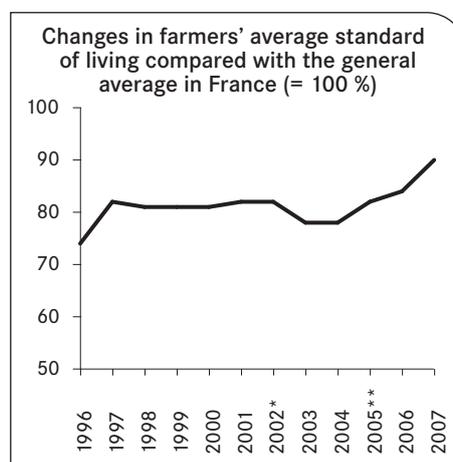
### 1 - Income and living standards: problematic comparisons

It is very difficult to compare farming income with the income of other categories of household given that the income of non-salaried members of the working population in agriculture is subject to major variation from one year to the next (+20% in 2006/2007, -22% in 2007/2008, -32% in 2008/2009 for

all professional holdings<sup>4</sup>), unlike the income in other categories, in which changes are slow and gradual.

Where households are concerned, measurement of living standards, which is a better indicator<sup>5</sup> in estimating social disparities, reveals levels below the average but which are “catching up” – at least until 2007 (more recent figures seem to show a probable downturn in this trend).

In reality, this apparent catching-up of lost ground masks major disparities in individual circumstances. Moreover, the level of poverty<sup>6</sup> in the farming community continues to be far higher than the average: 24% compared with 13% in 2006, a gap that is tending to widen<sup>7</sup>. However, it should be remembered that the calculation of poverty levels, based as it is on income flows, fails to take account of the major assets held by farmers.



\* *Rétopolation*

\*\* *New data series*

Sources: Insee-DGI, taxable income surveys 1996 to 2005; Insee-DGFIP-Cnaf-Cnav-CCMSA, taxable and social income surveys 2005 to 2007

### 2 - Consumers no different from the others

Despite their lagging living standards, farmers – like the rest of the French population – have benefited from the astonishing upsurge in consumption over the last 40 years, significantly improving their day-to-day comfort. In 2007, they all possessed the principal household appliances, and even possessed more of these items than the general average for France.

They are average for ownership of television sets and video recorders, but above average for communication devices, especially mobile telephones. Virtually all farming households own a car and twice as many as the national average own two. The percentage

1. This note is the first in a series looking at changes over time in the socio-professional category formed by farmers.

2. There are several definitions of what a “farmer” is, depending on the way in which the data have been collected and the various different surveys, as well as the perimeters assigned to the group according to statistical source: Ministry of Agriculture, Insee [French national statistics office], MSA [Agricultural mutual fund], and so on. The definitions applied may differ according to the themes examined here.

3. Insee, Employment Survey.

4. *Agreste Primeur*, no. 234, Estimated accounts by category of agricultural holding 2009: a sharp drop in incomes despite falling costs, 2009. [http://www.agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf\\_primeur234.pdf](http://www.agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf_primeur234.pdf).

5. Living standard is defined as household disposable income divided by the number of units of consumption (uc), with the first adult in the household accounting for 1uc, other individuals aged 14 or over for 0.5uc, and children under 14 0.3uc.

6. Monetary poverty: an individual (or a household) is considered poor if he or she is living in a household whose standard of living is below the poverty threshold, defined in this context as 60% of the median.

7. Insee-DGI, Taxable income surveys.

of agricultural families with computers and Internet connections has increased very rapidly, with Internet access in particular rising from 27% in 2004 to 53% in 2007, a figure above the French average at the latter date (48.5%)<sup>8</sup>. Items for which they are still “lagging behind” are certain high-tech products of more recent date such as home cinemas (8% have one, compared with 16% in the population as a whole), or mp3 players (22% compared with the national average of 40%)<sup>9</sup>.

Comparison of the ways in which farmers' budgets are allocated reveals that their consumption patterns have evolved in the same direction as the average French household: lower “food-related” expenditure (alcoholic beverages and tobacco included) and more spending on “leisure, culture and education”. Nevertheless, the percentage devoted to food has fallen by less than for other social categories, which may perhaps be put down to the estimates of internal consumption included in Insee [French national statistics office] calculations. The same is true of spending on “transport”, the high level of which might be due to the difficulty of establishing how total expenditure under this heading is split between farm and household. Lastly, spending on “housing” is traditionally lower for farmers because they often own their accommodation: 88.2% do so, compared with 57.1% for all households according to the INSEE housing survey in 2006<sup>10</sup>.

Farmers' housing conditions, which were for many years significantly infe-

rior to those of the rest of the population, have substantially improved over the last forty years. In 1970, 60% of their housing had no tap water supply. In 2002, only 2.3% of housing had no amenities<sup>11</sup>. However, disparities do remain: in 2006, 13% of farmers' housing was of poor quality, against 7% for all households, 9% for manual workers and 10% for rural populations<sup>12</sup>. The accommodation occupied by farming households is generally more spacious than for the rest of the population, but in many cases it is also older.

### 3 - Moving in the direction of the “standard” family

Farming families seem to be less involved than other families in the fundamental changes that are affecting contemporary family life. The average farming household continues to be bigger than the typical French household, in particular because the generations continue to live together. In 2006, only 4% of male or female farmers aged 20 to 69 were divorced, compared with an average of over 8% for the French population as a whole, but this figure rose by almost a percentage point over the period 1999 to 2006<sup>13</sup>. Single-parent families are also less numerous among farmers and births to unmarried parents are rarer. Farmers also attach greater importance to family life: three-quarters of them live near their parents (less than 30 minutes away), and of the latter, 85% see their mother every week, whereas this is the case for only

64% of middle managers living in similar geographical proximity<sup>14</sup>.

Contrary to a generally accepted idea (one encouraged by the reality TV programme *L'amour est dans le pré* [love in the meadow]), farmers are not more likely to be living without a marital partner than other population categories. Indeed, this tends to be less often the case than the French average, except for men aged 60-64 and especially those aged 65-69 years, who are still lagging far behind the average<sup>15</sup>. It therefore appears that this feature of the older agricultural sector, one often studied by sociologists<sup>16</sup>, is fading as the younger generations replace the old.

Where the choice of marital partner is concerned, the farming community has long been characterised by a high level of endogamy. Even today, farmers are still the social group in which people marry and live most often with “people like us”: 72% of women farmers living in couples have partners who are farmers and 51% of male farmers in couples live with a woman farming partner<sup>17</sup>. Given the specific nature of work on an agricultural holding, it seems only logical that husband and wife should in many cases share the same occupation. However, looking not at the woman's occupation but at her social origins as defined by the occupation of her father, it is clear that homogamy in the farming industry

8. Insee, Statistical survey of income and living conditions (SRCV) 2007.

9. Ministry of Culture/DEPS, *Les pratiques culturelles des français à l'ère numérique*, [The cultural practices of the French in the digital era] Ed. La Découverte, 2009.

10. 88.2 % against 57.1 % for all households, Insee, Housing Survey 2006.

11. Housing lacking one of the following: running water, an inside toilet or a bathroom.

12. Insee, Housing Survey 2006. The quality of housing is defined in accordance with various criteria such as running water, humidity and heating.

13. Between 3.3% and 4.2%. Insee, Population Censuses 1999 and 2006.

14. INED [national institute for demographic studies], survey of family and intergenerational relations (ERFI) 2005, “How Often Do you See Your Parents?”, *Population & Société*, no. 427, 2006.

15. “Single” is defined here not in relation to marriage as such but as living without a partner. Insee, Population Survey 2006.

16. Including Pierre Bourdieu in *Célibat et condition paysanne* [Being single and the farmer's condition], 1962.

17. Insee, Study survey of family history, 1999 in *Données sociales* [social data] 2006.



1. Notably: goods and services for personal care, jewellery and leather goods, child-minding outside the home, insurance and financial services, sundry other services (legal services, subscriptions to associations, etc.). Source: Insee, Family budget survey 2006 (covering Metropolitan France)

### Consumer durables in 2007

Socio-economic group	Refrigerator	Freezer	Microwave oven	Washing machine	Dish-washer	Car	Two or more cars	Colour TV	VCR or DVD player	Landline telephone	Mobile telephone	Computer	Internet connexion
Farmers	100.0	91.9	80.8	96.7	74.7	99.4	60.3	97.8	84.6	96.3	86.6	68.3	53.1
Whole population	99.7	84.1	78.9	93.5	46.2	80.5	33.7	97.3	83.3	87.1	76.9	58.9	48.5

Source: Insee Statistical survey of income and living conditions (SRCV)

remains at a high level: in 2000, 55% of all farmers were living with a partner from a farming background<sup>18</sup>. However, despite this, Giraud and Rémy refer to a “gradual broadening of marital options”, especially for young farmers: whereas in 2000 70% of the female partners of farmers aged 60 to 65 come from farming families, this is the case for only 39% of partners aged 25 to 30<sup>19</sup>. The recent expansion in the rural population, plus the increased time young farmers spend in education and training, provide opportunities for more numerous and more varied social contacts. Moreover, becoming the marital partner of a farmer is less and less synonymous with marrying his job, as is shown by the rising numbers of farmers’ wives with jobs off the farm.

#### 4 - Little free time for leisure activities

The constraints of running a farm explain the remaining major disparities where leisure activities are concerned. Despite the progress in technology, farmers have a much longer working week than other occupational categories: 54 hours per week on average, compared with 52 for self-employed tradespeople, retailers and company managers, 42 for middle management and 36.5 for manual workers<sup>20</sup>.

Furthermore, these long working hours are subject to extreme variations from one week to the next and around a fifth of all work is done at the weekend. Farmers do have free time, but it is difficult to predict when and this does not match standard leisure periods, this does not lend itself to organised activities.

This feature, in addition to their geographical isolation and family traditions, explains why farmers’ cultural activities are more limited than for other groups: in 2008, 91% of farmers had never attended a jazz concert, 84% a classical or rock music concert, 78% a ballet or modern dance performance and 43% had never been to the theatre – figures comparable to those for manual workers (with the exception of the theatre) and higher than the average for the rural population generally<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, more farmers than middle managers or self-employed tradespeople had attended a traditional dance performance or a circus, which tend to be held less exclusively in urban areas. Additionally, in 2005 69% of farmers had not read a book in the previous twelve months, against 51% for self-employed tradespeople, retailers and company

managers. An increase can however be seen where the cinema is concerned: whereas only 12% had been to the cinema during the previous year in 2000, the proportion had risen to 39% in 2006<sup>22</sup>. Like the average French citizen they watch television every day, but farmers read daily newspapers more often (50% read one more or less every day, compared with an average in the general population of 29%), especially regional dailies<sup>23</sup>.

Where sports activity is concerned, this saw a striking increase in the farming community over the period 1967 (19%) to 1987-1988 (31%), but no more recent figures are available. We do know however that access to sport is generally more limited in rural areas due to numerous obstacles: lack of resources, facilities and infrastructure, limited number of participants, making teams difficult to form in collective sports, and problems in finding trainers, for example<sup>24</sup>. Information is also lacking on activities which, on the face of it, would be practised more often by farmers, such as hunting and rambling.

Again, due to the constraints imposed by their work, farmers take fewer holidays than the rest of the population: 38% went on holiday in 2004 compared with 65% for the French generally, or 45% for the populations of isolated rural areas<sup>25</sup>. When farmers do go on holiday, they do so for shorter periods (a little under 10 days over the whole year on average, against 20 days for self-employed tradespeople, retailers and company managers and 18 for manual workers). Work-related reasons are cited by 55% of farmers when explaining this lack of holidays away from home, compared with less than one in ten for the French population as a whole. Although farmers spend the least time away on holiday, the figure has nonetheless risen by 14 points over ten years, given that just 24% took holidays in 1994.

Lifestyles (i.e. patterns of consumption, leisure, holidays) reflect the usual differences between social groups. Where farmers are concerned, those differences are even more marked in the area of the values and aspirations that anchor their sense of identity.

#### 5 - Attachment to traditional values and close involvement in the life of society

A high percentage of farmers continue to engage in religious practice: in

2005, 64% of women and 37% of men stated that their religious observance was either occasional or regular, which is the case for only 35% of women and 27% of men outside the farming community<sup>26</sup>. As Bertrand Hervieu and Jean Viard point out: “compared with other social groups, this is a strong and specific feature that relates to a large extent to the fact that farmers spend their entire lives in a fixed location within structural boundaries laid down from childhood”<sup>27</sup>. This goes hand in hand with an attachment to traditional values: opposition to abortion, marital infidelity and homosexuality is more widespread in the farming community than among the French as a whole. Daniel Boy has also shown<sup>28</sup> how farmers’ ideological universe continues to be shaped by an attachment to the values of private enterprise and liberalism (in the economic as well as in the wider sociocultural sense of this word). Similarly, greater value is attributed to discipline and personal effort among farmers than in the population as a whole. However, attitudes do vary with age: 83% of farmers aged 65 and over agree with the idea that school should instil a sense of discipline and personal effort above all else, compared with just 39% of those in the 18-24 age group.

Although farmers now represent no more than 2% of the country’s electorate, their political weight is disproportionately greater since they vote more often than other socio-professional

18. C. Giraud, J. Rémy, “Les choix des conjoints en agriculture” [Choice of marital partner in the agricultural world], *Revue d’Études en Agriculture et Environnement*, 2008, pages 21-46.

19. This can also be put down to the fact that since there are many fewer farmers in the general population, the number of marital partners from agricultural backgrounds will also necessarily decline.

20. Coverage: people of working age, 15 years or over in employment, Insee, Employment Survey 2007.

21. Ministry of Culture, Department of research, prospective analysis and statistics (DEPS), *Les pratiques culturelles des français en 2008*.

22. Insee, Statistical survey of resources and living conditions (SRCV).

23. Ministry of Culture, DEPS, *Les pratiques culturelles des français en 2008*.

24. S. Guillou, “Sport rural : le bonheur est-il dans le pré ?” [Rural sport: is happiness in the meadow?], *En jeu* no. 429, 2009.

25. Insee, Standing survey on household living standards (EPCV), 1999-2004.

26. Insee, Standing survey on household living standards (EPCV), 2005.

27. B. Hervieu, J. Viard, *L’archipel paysan. La fin de la République agricole*, [The farming archipelago. The end of the agricultural republic] Éditions de l’Aube, 2001.

28. D. Boy, *Attitudes politiques des agriculteurs* [The political attitudes of farmers]. CEVIPOF, Cahiers no. 12, March 1995.

categories<sup>29</sup>. They continue to be strongly rooted in the political right: in 2008, 42% declared a preference for the UMP (the party of the current right-wing presidential majority)<sup>30</sup>.

Attachment to their occupational identity also continues to be a strong feature. It is farmers, along with middle managers, who most often define themselves in terms of their work (69% and 71% respectively), whereas this is true of only 44% of manual workers<sup>31</sup>. This strong sense of identity is based on a shared body of collective notions. A majority of young farmers, when asked the question "Why did you choose farming as a career?" answered "Because it is a job in which you can feel free" and indeed many consider freedom and personal initiative to be the values most characteristic of the difference between them and other young people starting out in the world of work<sup>32</sup>. Their relationship with the local region is also important: 40% of farmers define themselves by the places to which they are attached, the equivalent figure being 28% for the French population as a whole and 32% for those living in rural areas<sup>33</sup>.

They stand out in terms of their close involvement with a range of organisations in civil society such as non-profit associations, trade unions or political parties, and by higher levels of unpaid social activity (7 points higher than the average in 2002)<sup>34</sup>. In 2006, 41% of all farmers were members of at least one non-profit association, against only 31% of self-employed tradespeople, retailers and company managers, and 25% of manual workers. And of those farmers, 42% held a post of responsibility in the relevant association, against a national average of only 23%<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, this is subject to a process of erosion: in 1982-1983, 61% of men and 31% of women in the farming community were members of non-profit associations and 17% and 3% respectively held posts of responsibility<sup>36</sup>. This over-representation can be put down largely to their involvement in associations related to union or industry representation: 54.5% of farmers were union members in 1996, compared with only 23% of manual workers<sup>37</sup>.

Lastly, farmers are highly involved in local political life, often holding elective office. Nevertheless, while in 1983 they still accounted for one third of all town mayors in France, the percentage had fallen to 15.6% by 2008<sup>38</sup>. Writing in the 1960s, H. Mendras has already

suggested the key to understanding this mobilisation<sup>39</sup>: "agricultural producers (...) are highly dispersed and highly divided and possess only limited economic power (...). They compensate for this weakness with political power". One can also see in this an attempt to compensate for the individual character of their work and the solitude that this entails: "patterns of sociability, the relations between people, are changing, and this reinforces the role of work-related locations where these isolated men can meet each other – in particular, cooperatives, the agricultural mutual society, trade unions, town councils, the bank, and so on. In short, such institutions are their community meeting places, especially as in many cases farmers rarely patronise cafés or leisure facilities"<sup>40</sup>.

\* \*  
\*

In 1967, Henri Mendras was expecting to see the disappearance of the features that set the farming community apart, and its convergence with other social and occupational categories: "agricultural producers will be simply one occupational group among others, with their own specific characteristics and interests (...). They will no doubt be fairly similar to groups described in some statistics as "intermediate": the new middle classes comprising middle management, self-employed professionals and certain retailers (...). Increasingly, teenagers will choose a farming career in the same way that they choose any other career. They will learn about the job in the classroom and not from their fathers. Dividing their time between school and their 'modern' families, country boys will grow up in a situation analogous to that of young city-dwellers, with whom they will share the same youth culture and the same 'peer group' of friends. Worshipping the same 'idols' and reading the same magazines, they will have the same values and the same ideals". While not everything in this prophecy has come about, it is nevertheless true that his vision of the general trend was completely accurate. Solange Rattin wrote in 1996 that henceforth "farming is no longer a way of being but an occupation"<sup>41</sup>.

Although "farmers" as a group still present striking characteristics, especially where family life, personal values and political engagement are concerned, it is clear that there is a strong trend toward convergence with the rest of the population, particularly in terms

of consumption and lifestyle. The factors driving this convergence, such as the growth of organisations of corporate type, longer periods in training and education, the opening out of marriage to include other social categories, are likely to last or indeed to become stronger. Given this, it is reasonable to conclude that this trend towards the "dilution" of what is special about the farming community will continue into the future. Specifically, it is possible to surmise that generational replacement will be a powerful vehicle for change in this social group, especially given the fact that such replacement will occur more rapidly and on a larger scale than for other groups: today, 35% of active farmers are aged 50 to 64, whereas on average this age group accounts for only 25% of the total number of those of working age in employment<sup>42</sup>.

Céline Laisney  
Trend Analyst

Centre for Studies and  
Strategic Foresight

celine.laisney@agriculture.gouv.fr

29. The centre for studies into French political life (CEVIPOF), electoral panel 2007.

30. The French institute for opinion polling (IFOP), Analysis of farmers' political views, 02/2009.

31. Insee, Life History survey 2003 (IP937).

32. F. Purseigle, *Les sillons de l'engagement. Jeunes agriculteurs et action collective* [Ploughing the furrow of engagement. Young farmers and collective action], L'Harmattan, 2004.

33. Insee, Life History survey 2003 (IP937).

34. Insee, Survey of non-profit association activity 2002, *Économie et statistique*, no. 372, 2004.

35. Insee, Statistics on resources and living conditions (SRCV) 2006.

36. Insee-INED, Survey of social contacts, *Portrait social*, 1993 p.103.

37. J.T.S. Keeler, "Agricultural Power in the European Community: Explaining the Fate of CAP and GATT Negotiations", *Comparative Politics*, 28-1, 1996, pp. 127-149.

38. According to a study conducted by the DGCL (General directorate for local communities) during the election period in March 2008.

39. H. Mendras, *La fin des paysans* [The end of the small farmer], Paris, Futuribles, 1967..

40. B. Hervieu, J. Viard, *L'Archipel paysan. La fin de la république agricole*, Éditions de l'Aube, 2001.

41. S. Rattin, "L'agriculture n'est plus un état mais une profession", *Insee première*, no. 420, January 1996.

42. Insee, Employment Survey 2007.

Ministère de l'Alimentation, de l'Agriculture  
et de la Pêche

Secrétariat Général

Service de la statistique et de la prospective

Centre d'études et de prospective

12 rue Henri Rol-Tanguy

TSA 70007

93555 MONTREUIL SOUS BOIS Cedex

Tél. : 01 49 55 85 05

Sites Internet : [www.agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr](http://www.agreste.agriculture.gouv.fr)

[www.agriculture.gouv.fr](http://www.agriculture.gouv.fr)

Directrice de la publication : Fabienne Rosenwald

Rédacteur en chef : Bruno Héralut

Composition : SSP Beauvais

Dépôt légal : À parution © 2010