

Chapter 4

Family Strategies and Farming Changes: The Case of Family Farming in the Basque Country

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Public institutions establish agrarian and rural policies aimed at improving the economic conditions of farmers. Through these policies farmers may receive funds to modernize their farms, to move from traditional agricultural products to new ones, to start non-agricultural economic activities on the farm, etc. These measures regulate the conditions that must be met by the candidates, the productive changes they must introduce, and the amount granted by the institutions to those eligible. With these measures, the institutions exercise their power influencing the decision making of farmers. Thus, the conditions established for obtaining economic support lead to the introduction of criteria differentiating between farmers, and the definition of the changes to be introduced indicate the model of agriculture sought by the institutions.

Nevertheless, there are some farmers who choose not to become engaged in certain schemes in spite of meeting the conditions required. This fact suggests the existence of a differential farming behaviour with regard to agrarian policies. The aim of this chapter is to try to determine the reasons why not all potential beneficiaries decide to apply for a particular agrarian scheme. In order to achieve this aim, we will need to analyse how the internal dynamic of the family interacts with the external context where it is located. The hypothesis put forward is that the family takes a decision on its future as a family unit considering both internal aspects and external factors, and this decision will condition the productive changes to be introduced on the farm.

In order to test this hypothesis, a group of farmers sharing common characteristics will be analysed. The research will focus on farmers who specialize in the same area of production (dairy products), located in the same context (the Basque Country, Spain), and working on family farms (those which do not employ salaried workers). It is quite a homogenous group since their farming activities are regulated by the same constraints deriving from the Milk Quota programme, and they also share the new economic possibilities offered by the Basque institutional schemes. The research

has analysed the productive changes introduced on these farms and the reasons for these changes. We have tried to understand the productive trajectory of the farms within the context of where they are located – what we call the dairy agrifood system – and the decisions taken on family reproduction – what we call *family strategies*.¹

The information that has been gathered combines quantitative as well as qualitative material. Quantitative data comes from a survey carried out among 308 dairy farmers in 1985. Qualitative information proceeds from eight focus groups that were organized in 1992 involving different types of families. Although the survey data is quite old, it does not invalidate the results, since our objective is not to understand present changes but whether a relationship exists between productive change and the type of family strategy.

Family Farming and Family Strategies

One of the more comprehensive definitions of family farming is that given by Harriet Friedmann (1978, 1980). She defines a farm as a *form of production* constituted by the characteristics of the farm itself and the socio-economic context in which it is located. A family farm may be defined by three characteristics: it only employs family labour, it is located in a capitalist social formation, and it is able to reproduce itself when the final income covers the producers' needs and maintains, or replaces, the means of production.

The definition proposed by Friedmann is of considerable interest because it allows us to take into account two important dimensions of farming: the political and economic context in which farms operate, and their logic of functioning. By allowing room for the *macro context* we are forced to consider the farm as part of the whole society. This permits the inclusion of *external* aspects that are decisive for the farm's performance and progress, such as the model of agricultural development followed by agrarian policies, or relationships between agribusiness and the farmers. Since this definition also refers to the conditions for reproduction, it includes its logic of functioning, that is to say, the internal dynamics of the farm and family. Friedmann's theoretical approach has not gone unnoticed amongst social scientists. There are a number of authors who have made use of it in their research, or who have reformulated it or criticized it (Goodman and Redclift, 1985; Whatmore et al., 1986; Mauleón, 1997).

Friedmann's contribution provides an adequate characterization of family farming, but it does not permit an understanding – it was not her purpose – of the differences in productive changes introduced on the farm. Nevertheless, other authors have proposed a variety of criteria for understanding this diversity. Some of the most popular criteria are: the size of the holding (Nooij and Somers, 1986); the development of the family cycle or the natural history of the family (Galeski, 1977; Nalson, 1968; Chayanov, 1985); the role played by women in family farming (Bouquet, 1982; García Ramón, 1990; Evans and Ilbery, 1996); the level of the farm's commoditization (Ploeg, 1985); the external relations and internal differences (due to gender and age relations) (Whatmore et al., 1987); or the

work dedicated to the farm and the ability of farm income to reproduce the farm and the family (Djurfeldt and Waldenstrom, 1996).

The proposal offered in our research differs from the previous criteria and is an attempt to elaborate a typology of family farming from what Cardesin's calls the *family's reproductive project*, that is, whether or not a potential successor decides to continue with the farm as a way of living. This explanation has a background in the agrarian social sciences (Greenwood, 1976; Potter and Loblely, 1992; Marsden, 1989). Nonetheless, while other authors consider that the decision to emigrate or to continue on the farm constitutes a mere *potentiality*, or one of the aspects that can influence the introduction of changes, in our view, it is an event of the first order that will affect farming practices.

Our view raises the need to distinguish between the farm as a production unit, the family as a reproductive unit, and the household as an entity that embraces both (Cardesin, 1992, pp. 47–9). Productive changes are there to serve the reproductive project of the family group. Individual and family group actions consist of adapting their efforts to the opportunities and limitations that arise in ensuring the family's survival during its life cycle. This way of understanding family farming is part of the family strategies approach, a theoretical outline that is gaining importance nowadays.² Thus, it is our hypotheses that the family, a sociological variable, emerges as the independent variable capable of explaining innovations on the farm.

We are dealing with a criterion that does not invalidate or exclude others that are mentioned. On the contrary, it brings them together by considering the family as a unit where decisions are taken (not without conflicts), and which embraces members of the family (whether a potential successor decides to continue with the farm), the family as a whole (whether the members of the family – especially the mother – show sufficient support for a common family plan), the farm (productive characteristics of the farm), and external factors (agricultural prices and policies, or possibilities of finding an off-farm job). Previous criteria proposed by other authors concerning the characteristics of the farm or the family (women's role, successor, etc.) emphasize only partial aspects, but fail to offer a more global perspective of the family group. And criteria focused on aspects related to external aspects do not take into account the possibility that family farms may react differently in spite of a common external context.

In order to confirm that innovation on the farm depends on the strategy adopted by the family, a typology of six families was drawn up. Three variables were used to build up that typology: the age and level of commitment to farming of the *central person*, and whether or not there is a successor. By *central person* we refer to the family member most engaged in the farm; in most cases it refers to the father. The presence of a successor is relevant since this shows whether the family has agreed to some extent that an offspring will reproduce a new family on the basis of the farm's income. The next variable, the age of the *central person* on the farm, has been grouped in three intervals: less than 49 years old because it is still too early to know if an offspring will take over the farm; from 50 to 64 years old because a successor may exist; and over 65 years old because after that age there is not a successor (otherwise the *central person* would be

the offspring), and because family reproduction depends to some extent on a pension. Finally, the commitment to farming of the *central person* is also important for understanding present family reproduction, since farmers engaged in earning an off-farm income may reproduce the family and even the farm activity through the incomes generated by external employment. By combining these variables, the six different types of families used in this research emerged (see Table 4.1).³

Table 4.1 Types of families

Age of central person	Commitment of central person	Successor
1. Aged family		
2. Adult family	Exclusive commitment	With successor
3. Adult family	Exclusive commitment	Without successor
4. Adult family	Partial commitment	Without successor
5. Young family	Exclusive commitment	
6. Young family	Partial commitment	

The Dairy Agrifood System in the Basque Country

The Basque Country is located in the North of Spain. It has a population of around 2.1 million inhabitants concentrated in the capital cities of its three provinces. Sixty-eight percent of the population resides in the metropolitan areas of Bilbao, San Sebastian and Vitoria. The services sector is the most important economic activity. In year 2000, 59.7 percent of the employed population, and 59.8 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), proceeded from the services sector. The agro-fishery sector, on the contrary, only represented 2.3 percent of employment and 1.8 percent of the GDP (EUSTAT, 2001, pp. 61, 211).

Dairy production is one of the most important agricultural activities. Of the 43,193 holdings that existed in the Basque Country in 1989, 5,465 specialized in dairy farming. This means 12.6 percent of the existing farms, and they are organized mostly around the work realized by the members of the family. The number of farms without paid workers rises to 5,317 (97.3 percent of existing milk producing farms). This group of farms is the target of this research. It is a homogeneous group as far as the kind of work involved, geographical location, and productive specialization.

The structural characteristics of dairy farms can be examined more precisely through data given by the Agrarian Census of 1989 (EUSTAT, 1991).⁴ Some of the most relevant data are the following:

- The use of land is very much oriented towards feeding cattle: 90 percent of Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA) is occupied by meadows and pastures.

- An important number of farms (58 percent) has a small forest area: a 4.9 ha average of pine trees or other commercial timber.
- They have a very reduced area: the average per farm is 9.2 ha of Total Area and 5.5 ha of UAA.
- These are farms with a very reduced productive capacity: 70 percent of those with between 1 and 5 ha of UAA did not reach 4 European Size Units.
- The main form of land tenure was that of ownership: 68 percent of UAA is worked by proprietors.
- The number of people employed on dairy farms reached some 13,000; thus an average of 2.4 people work on each farm (compared to 1.8 for the whole sector).
- Some of the farmers have a low level of commitment. The 2.4 persons engaged on the farm do work that is equivalent to 1.4 Annual Work Unit (AWU). The reasons for this low amount of work are varied. In the case of the owners of the farm (who work an average of 0.68 AWU), this is due to their advanced age (27 percent of the owners are over 65), or to the fact that their main activity is outside the farm (20 percent). Thus, only 54 percent of the owners are younger than 65 and work exclusively on the farm.

This panorama refers to the year 1998, and dairy farms today may have very different characteristics since the Milk Quota Scheme has reduced the number of farms to a third of those existing in 1998. The farms that are least dependent on dairy production, those smallest in size, are the group that has been reduced in the greatest proportion.

An important aspect for an understanding of the external context, where the dairy farms are located, refers to how the milk is commercialized. Milk produced in the Basque region had the following destinations in 1999: 5 percent was consumed in the operation, 90 percent was delivered to dairies, and 5 percent was sold directly to the consumer (EUSTAT, 2001, p. 277). Although there are several dairies, there is a situation of quasi-monopoly because one of them, Iparlat, gathers around 82 percent of the milk delivered to the dairies. It is a firm owned by institutions, savings banks and farmers. Iparlat affects dairy farming through two mechanisms: the payment formula for the milk, and the management of the milk quotas. The payment formula is characterized by its having a low *starting price* and significant premiums and discounts according to the quality and quantity of the milk. Through premiums the starting price can be increased by up to 20 percent, and with the discounts, it can be reduced by as much as 23 percent. Since the final price obtained for the milk depends to a great extent on the quality and the quantity demanded by Iparlat, this system of payment results in two main consequences: it consolidates the most modernized farms, and it encourages small farmers to abandon milk production since it is no longer profitable. The second mechanism is through the management of the milk quotas. Iparlat is able to collect and reallocate the surplus milk from farms, which exceed their allocated quotas thanks to those farms that do not reach their milk quotas.

A final decisive element for understanding the link between the dairy farm and the external context is the agrarian policy implemented by the Basque institutions. Perhaps the two most relevant measures are the implementation of the Milk Quota Scheme, and the Investment Aid programme. The Basque Government is encouraging small farms to join the schemes for abandoning milk production. The quotas recovered through these schemes are then distributed freely among farmers who have carried out reforms on their farms, or who are producing more milk than that allowed by the quota system. In other words, this policy favours the enlargement of some farms. The second relevant agrarian policy is the Investment Aid Scheme. Through this measure, the provincial authorities are giving considerable amounts of aid for modernization to the more viable farms. These grants are directed towards genetic improvement, mechanization and the construction of cowsheds.

We may conclude from previous analysis that dairy farms in the Basque Country tend to have a small productive dimension because existing non-farming incomes allow farmers to reproduce the farm and the family. Agrarian policies and Iparlat try to eliminate the smallest farms from production through different mechanisms. The question here is to know how family farms react to this institutional power and, more precisely, whether different innovations in production, at the farm level, depend on the family strategy.

Family Strategies and Productive Innovations

Since the family typology reflects different family strategies, in this chapter a brief description of productive changes introduced by each type of family will be presented.

Aged Family

It is a family whose *central person* is over 65 or is between 50 and 64, and its incomes come from a pension, mainly from an early retirement scheme. This family has no heir. In 53 percent of the cases there are no children, and in 38 percent there is an offspring over 21 working only a few hours a day. This type of family has a rather small farm. An average of 4 hectares of grassland, 6.2 Cattle Units (it is an index where each type of animal has a different weight), and the total Horse Power of their machinery used in the meadows is only 11 Hp. Its small dimension can be explained by the scarce work available. More than half (56 percent) of these farms lack a tank for keeping the milk refrigerated and hygienic. The scarce volume of production and the investment required for buying and installing such a tank (fitting electricity, preparing the premises for its installation, etc.) does not make it a profitable acquisition. Nonetheless, since 68 percent of milk produced by these families is sold through dairies, the absence of the cooling tank indicates that they will obtain a great reduction in the milk price due to the lack of bacteriological quality. The price per litre ob-

tained would be much less than that obtained by other farmers. Fortunately, this type of family does not depend only on an agrarian income. The pensions they receive are almost as important as their agrarian incomes, representing some 41 percent of their total income. In this way, pensions are contributing to the renewal of personal and productive consumption on these farms. Because of the non-existence of a successor, productive changes introduced by these families attempt to maintain the family income through some of the following ways: increasing their agrarian income by the direct sale of milk; reducing personal and productive expenses; and joining a Scheme for Abandoning Milk Production.

Adult Family, Exclusive Commitment, with Successor

It is made up of families where the *central person* is between 50 and 64 years of age and works exclusively on the farm together with an offspring over 21 dedicated exclusively to the work on the farm. It is the kind of family with the highest working capacity. In these families, the reproduction of the new family will be through the farm. The great dependency on agrarian income and the high availability of labour may explain why this type of family possesses a big farm (10.1 ha, 22 *cus*, and 48 *Hp* in machinery). This suggests that these are families that have invested a lot and would find themselves deeply in debt despite benefiting from public funding for the modernization of the farm. Farms with this type of families are not only bigger, but also reach higher levels of intensification of production. On average there are some 3 *cus* and 6.6 *Hp* per hectare. Productive changes are oriented towards the increase of its productive dimension: increase in production (77 percent of these farms have increased their Cattle Units between 1980 and 1985), and the improvement of technology (85 percent had a milk cooling tank in 1985). In other words, these families tend to modernize the farm. Their ideal type of farming is that of a highly modernized and specialized farm. They do not want other models of farming based on a diversification of incomes or on-farm transformation: 'I'm not convinced by rural tourism, or by selling 50 or 100 cheeses per month. In my case such income covers superfluous expenditure, but it doesn't solve any problems. I think that nowadays, those of us who produce milk, live from the milk ... yes, yes. We are dedicated to nothing else' (2:16).

Adult Family, Exclusive Commitment, without Successor

This type of family only differs from the previous one in that there is no successor. The farms belonging to these families show some characteristics similar to the previous type, but they are smaller in terms of hectares, *cus*, and *Hp*. It seems that the presence of a successor is related to the size of the farm. These appear to be well-prepared farms which do not grow more due to the lack of an heir and which cannot reduce their productive capacity because they depend on their agrarian income for covering their costs. These families are 'stagnant.' They do not modernize, as do the previous ones,

Table 4.2 Productive characteristics of dairy family farms by type of family. Average values in 1985

	Aged family	Adult family, exclusive, successor	Adult family, exclusive, without successor	Adult family, partial, without successor	Young family, exclusive	Young family, partial
Hectares of UAA	4.0	10.1	7.8	4.8	11.0	5.9
Cattle Units	6.2	22.0	16.8	8.7	24.4	9.1
Horsepower	11.0	48.0	33.0	26.0	45.0	28.0
Cattle Units/Ha	2.9	3.0	2.8	3.0	3.3	1.7
Horsepower/Ha	4.0	6.6	4.7	9.2	5.9	6.1
<i>Sources of income:</i>						
% from agriculture	57.0	92.0	95.0	44.0	94.0	39.0
% from pensions	41.0	7.0	4.0	1.0	5.0	6.0
% off-farm work	3.0	-	1.0	55.0	1.0	55.0
% delivered to dairies	68.0	63.0	66.0	69.0	59.0	52.0

given the lack of a successor and the old age of the parents: 'Yes, if there were younger people, yes. Some years ago I was going to make a pavilion, but there was a nephew at home who didn't like cows, and later he went to work in Bilbao. I said ... pavilions now ... at 56 years old, am I going to make investments? Things are running down, in the past we had a lot of cattle and now considerably less. And increasingly less ...' (3:33).

Adult Family, Partial Commitment, without Successor

This family has a reduced size of farm. Its productive capacity, however, is slightly higher than the *aged family*. Though this type of family does not have much machinery in absolute terms, its reduced area makes it the type of family with the highest number of *Hp* per hectare (9.2 *Hp*). It seems that these families try to compensate for the lack of labour with greater mechanization. Capital investment in these farms is high and since they receive little or no public economic support, due to the fact that they are part-time farmers, we must conclude that income generated by off-farm employment is invested in the farm. Since this income is contributing to the renewal of personal and productive consumption, it seems that this domestic group is interested in maintaining the farm's activity in the short-medium term. Although agrarian income is reduced, we are dealing with the type of farm which least depends on this, since 55 percent of its income comes from off-farm work. Lastly, this is the type of farm which most tends to sell milk to the dairies (69 percent of milk produced). The intensity of work that is required for direct selling and the absence of a successor are,

Table 4.3 Introduction of productive changes by type of family between the years 1980 and 1985

	Aged family	Adult family, exclusive, successor	Adult family, exclusive, without successor	Adult family, partial, without successor	Young family, exclusive	Young family, partial
Increase in Cattle Units	36	77	48	40	76	59
Increase in Horse Power	12	52	20	25	42	24
Decrease % milk to dairies	9	9	6	10	13	6
Acquisition of milk cooling tank	44	85	73	55	90	47

Note: Association between each productive change and the type of family has been measured through the Chi-square test. The association is significant at a 95 percent level of confidence, except for the evolution of the percentage of milk sold to dairies (significance level is 0.70).

perhaps, the reasons that prevent them from having the manpower needed to carry out the direct sale of milk. On those holdings where the farmer combines work on the farm with an off-farm job, the couple is subjected to a hard rate of work. It is the mother who carries most of the workload and who makes it possible for the farm to exist. There are many reasons why these couples *sacrifice* their lives, but in many cases farming generates the additional income they need to provide their children with a higher level of education. The participants in the focus groups pointed out how important the mother's role is for this type of family. We should note that they did not refer to the women's role but to the mother's role: 'I recognize this and I say it . . . the merit is not ours. I've said this many times. The merit belongs to our wives. The man is always held up as deserving credit . . . The man hasn't done a thing. Without his wife he wouldn't have done a thing. If the man has one of those wives who says: you busy yourself with your cows and all that, then you're stuck on your own . . .' (10:23).

Young Family, Exclusive Commitment

These families hold similar farms to the *adult family, exclusive commitment, with successor* type. They are large farms (here we find the farms with the biggest number of hectares and CUS), they depend on farming for their living (94 percent of the total income comes from agrarian production), and have highly professionalized agrarian practices (90 percent have a milk cooling tank, and 78 percent practice cattle breeding). It is also the type of farm that has a more intensive production because the high price of the land makes it difficult to increase the size of the holding. The cattle load

represents some 3.3 CUS per hectare. This greater intensification may be due to recent investment, which in turn forces them on to a greater production and productivity. These families carry out modernizing changes on the farm such as increasing the volume of production (76 percent have increased CUS) and technological improvement (90 percent have a milk cooling tank). These are the farms that have most reduced the percentage of their production sold to dairies (a reduction of 13 percent between 1980 and 1985). This productive change may be explained because their high economic debt forces them to increase income from the sale of milk.

Young Family, Partial Commitment

This constitutes a domestic group where the family's reproduction is achieved through an off-farm job. They keep the farm on after finding another occupation because they enjoy the work with cows. A vocational element for the continuation of the farm seems to be present in this type of family. In fact, this is the type where agrarian income contributes least to the family's income. This family shows certain characteristics, which make it different from the rest. Firstly, the most extensive form of farming (only 1.7 CUS per hectare). Secondly, it has a much more diversified production, where calf fattening is of some importance (on 76 percent of the farms). Finally, this is the type of family which most tends to sell its milk directly to consumers (only 52 percent of the produced milk is sold to the dairies). The above suggests that this family sells directly more frequently because they need to compensate for the lesser income from fattening by increasing their earnings from the sale of milk.

Conclusions

Productive changes introduced by family dairy farms in the Basque Country seem to depend on a number of conditions, such as the farm's capacity for generating an adequate level of income, the possibility of finding an off-farm job, the family coming together on a common plan or strategy, whether the would-be successor sees the working conditions inherent in dairy farming in a positive way, or the mother's role. It has become clear that the role played by mothers over 49 years old is crucial, because of their self-sacrifice both in supporting the offspring's decision to take over the farm, and in maintaining productive activity where the farmer only works part-time. These mothers, rather than women in general, seem to be a key aspect in family farming.

Families take decisions evaluating their own resources (labour, economic, desires, etc) and the external context within which they are located (prices, policies, possibilities of an external job, etc). After considering all these elements, the domestic group decides whether a successor will continue farming. The concept *family strategy* summarizes possible decisions, and the typology of families is a good indicator of the possible strategies. Since the holding is an economic resource serving family interests, farm changes will

vary depending on the family's decision. Therefore, although family farming is a homogeneous type of farming, family farmers are not a homogeneous type of family.

The type of family is a good indicator of this reproductive plan, and forms an appropriate criterion for understanding the present characteristics of farms and future productive innovations. The Basque public institutions must be aware of the differential behaviour of family farming facing the agrarian policies they draw up, and they need to consider the domestic group rather than the farm as a unit of analysis. The functioning and changes of the Basque farms cannot be understood from a strictly productive and economic logic.

Although the concept of family strategies seems to be adequate, further thought must be devoted to understanding aspects such as the decision-making process in the domestic group, the type of strategies available to family farming (productive, personal, collective etc.), or the influence of the holding's location on the strategies available.

Finally, we must conclude that the *agrarian question* in the Basque Country, the development of capitalism in agriculture, is not leading to the consolidation of capitalist farming (that with salaried workers), but to the differentiation of family farming according to its degree of modernization. This differentiation process is not spontaneous, but rather a consequence of the model of agricultural development being encouraged by the Basque institutions, through measures such as the re-allocation of production rights and the Investment Aid scheme.

Notes

1. Additional information on this research approach may be found in the author's Ph.D. thesis (Mauleón, 1998).
2. This approach is increasingly popular for understanding agriculture since most farms are structured on a family basis. There is a growing tendency towards its application for understanding the productive changes in family farming in the European context (Martini and Pieroni, 1987; Blekesaune, 1991), in Latin America (Chonchol, 1990), or the United States (Schulman, 1994).
3. It is important to note that a seventh type of family is not included in the typology: *Adult family, partial commitment, with successor*. There were only two cases in the survey, and they were eliminated from the analysis. It seems that on those farms where the father works on a part-time basis, succession is not common.
4. The data available from the latest Agrarian Census, of 1999, is still partial and provisional.

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