

# Social isolation among young farmers in Quebec, Canada

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## Abstract

*What is the social reality of young farmers? How, and to what extent, does emerging farmers' future in agriculture impact on their level of isolation and emotional lives? What are the characteristics of the social and professional networks of young farmers in Quebec and what are the characteristics of the social support? And more broadly, what is the impact of the social isolation on the maintenance and renewal of family farms? These are the questions that led us to conduct a survey completed by 407 young farmers. We present a typology of social contacts created by crossing data measuring the size of the social networks and the feeling of loneliness. Four categories are presented: the socially competent group (41%), the solitary group (27%), the socially inhibited group (16%), and the last, most problematic, the socially isolated group, composed of the 15% of young farmers who, in addition to having a small social network, have a strong feeling of loneliness. We note that social isolation is related, among others, with the level of education, the single-couple situation, the relations with neighbors and the number of working hours. We also noted that social isolation does not necessarily mean geographically far apart.*

## Introduction

In recent years, the issue of youth mobility in rural areas has caught the attention of policy makers and researchers. Some findings seem obvious, such as the fact that developed countries are facing a phenomenon of growing concern: youth migration to urban centers, which weakens rural areas and benefits urban or semi-urban areas. Findings are the same for Canada (Dupuy et al, 2000) and some European countries (Auclair and Vanoni, 2003): this phenomenon will continue and possibly accelerate in the near future.

But although the issues of population decline in rural areas have been fairly documented even in Quebec (Gauthier et al, 2001), and although policies and strategies are already being deployed to slow down this phenomenon, the social reality of young farmers remains unknown. In France, the work of Gallant and Lambert (1993) highlighted the social reality of young people living in rural areas. Later, Mailfert (2007) was more specific and revealed aspects of the social reality of newcomers in agriculture wishing to start and develop their farm but, in Canada and in Quebec specifically, this work has yet to be done.

The main objective of the research presented in this document is to analyze isolation and social support among young Quebec farmers as well as the state of their emotional lives in connection with their future in farming. Initially, we will present the problem of farm succession in Quebec and its underlying demographic and social issues and we will cover a few red flags concerning the quality of the social and psychological lives of farmers. After having defined the concepts of social isolation, social support networks, and feeling of loneliness, we will present some of the results of a survey conducted in 2008-2009 that was completed by 407 young farmers in Quebec. We will present, among others, a typology of social contacts, as well as the characteristics of social support networks and an analysis of loneliness.

## 2. Starting and Staying in Agriculture, a Social and Professional Choice Put to the Test.

The context within which evolve emerging farmers in Quebec influences their social lives and their future in agriculture. To grasp the scope of this reality, let us first look at the social and demographic issues that face Quebec agriculture in general and young farmers in particular.

### 2.1 Farm Population Replacement Difficulties

Quebec's population, like that of industrialized countries, is aging. On the other hand, this phenomenon is more pronounced in certain areas where more migration to urban centers occurs. When looking at Quebec's agricultural sector, which is large and diverse and characterized by livestock production including dairy farming, we note that the migration towards urban centers is a variable phenomenon, less worrisome in areas of high agricultural density than in peripheral areas (MAPAQ, 2004). Still, some socio-demographic red flags sound the alarm. These red flags include the constant decrease of agricultural population, the difficulty with which farmer generations are replaced, the uncertainty of services in rural areas and the erosion of social and community networks. In fact, we note that the farm population has dropped by nearly 30% between 1991 and 2006, representing only 6.4% of the rural population and 1.3% of Quebec's total population (Statistics Canada, 2006). Also, as in many industrialized countries, the number of farms has steadily dropped. There are now about 31,000 farms in Quebec, whereas 50 years ago, there were over 150,000.

Even though young farmers show a real commitment to their region of origin that can sometimes condition their return after their studies (Parent et al, 2000), the decision to settle down and remain in agriculture is nonetheless put to the test. According to the *ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec* (MAPAQ, 2004), it takes about 1,000 start-ups per year in order to maintain the current number of farms. Currently, there are only between 600 and 700 per year.

The generation replacement rate (that is, the proportion of farmers under 35 years old compared to those over 55 years old), which was at 112% in 1991, went down to 35% in 2006 and continues to decline (Table 1 and Table 2). In other words, only one farmer out of three is currently being replaced. If this trend continues, there will be fewer than 10,000 farms in Quebec in 2040. The demographic data concerning young farmers is clear: we find fewer and fewer young farmers in Quebec and the renewal of the trade can no longer happen from "the inside" (Parent, 2011). These findings concerning agriculture and the difficulty to replace the agricultural population have led MAPAQ to develop a youth policy in 2005 with the goal to draw more youth to agriculture and give them favourable conditions.

	Canada	Quebec
< 35 y/o	-33.41	-26.26
35 - 55 y/o	-13.05	-11.62
> 55 y/o	9.22	16.51
Total No. of Farmers 2006	327,000 (-5.5%)	45,470 (-4%)
Average Age (2006)	52	49

Source: Statistics Canada (2006) and our compilation.

Year	Canada	Quebec
1991	62	112
1996	49	89
2001	30	53
2006	23	35

Furthermore, in recent years, some more alarming phenomena have attracted the attention of all circles. Some studies conducted throughout Canada, particularly in rural (ICIS, 2006) and agricultural areas (Lafleur and Allard, 2006) have showed the existence of links between health in general and the social environment, while emphasizing on the current vulnerability of the agricultural population regarding psychological health at work.

## **2.2 The social and emotional lives of young people in relation with starting, staying in agriculture**

In agriculture, we know that work and family life are closely tied together. However, the social bond is more complex and occurs within several spaces: the couple, family, friends, interest groups, professional associations, the surrounding community and society in general. For young people, however, some areas seem more important than others such as friends and family networks, especially the couple (Girard et al, 2002). In fact, the couple is seen as a key factor of a successful start-up (Parent, 2008).

In addition, there appears to be gender differences here waiting to be validated. In fact, a large, while relatively old, longitudinal study in France (Courgeau and Lelievre, 1986) showed that, unlike girls who grew up in agriculture, men doubled their chances of getting married when they left the farm. These results have been validated by Jegouzo (1991). Therefore, some phenomena concerning the maintenance and renewal of the agricultural profession are preoccupying: celibacy among younger farmers (which we must measure), the difficult work-family balance (considering that the farm is project of the couple), the erosion of the number of farms, the growing migration of young people to urban centers, the existence of myths that contribute to devaluing the farming profession, and the increasing problems of cohabitation in rural areas (Parent, 2011).

We have relied on all of these observations to analyse the young farmers' social and emotional lives, feelings of isolation, and social networks. The main purpose of this research is to make a diagnosis of isolation and, more broadly, to make a diagnosis of the social support networks that determine the quality of life of young farmers in terms of their future in farming and the future of farming.

## **3. The Theoretical Approaches to Social Isolation and Data Collection**

### **3.1 Defining Social Isolation**

In our modern society, when people lack meaningful social contacts, their quality of life and personal functioning are negatively influenced. The degree to which personal networks are meaningful largely depends on the degree of support that is provided within them. The subjective feelings that an individual has for the people in the network are essential for their well-being.

Social isolation is composed of two elements: the size of the network or the potential social support (objective criterion), and the quality of the network in terms of subjective well-being (subjective criterion). In connection with De Jong Gierveld et al. (2006) who established a distinction between objective and subjective isolation, the concept of loneliness is preferred. The presence or absence of the feeling of loneliness is central to the subjective well-being.

Moreover, an important function of a social network is the social support it can provide to an individual. In addition to the current concept of social support, the notion of reciprocity is also present. It is the expectation that one who has been helped will help in return (Gouldner, 1960). Reciprocity contributes to social cohesion (Komter, 2007). A lack of reciprocity coincides with negative feelings such as loneliness and depression (Buunk et al., 2001). Since social relationships are essential in an individualized society, those that fail to form a network of supportive relationships and fail to participate in social life become socially isolated and eventually socially excluded.

### **3.2 Towards a Typology of Social Contacts**

First, we wanted to assess social isolation among young farmers. To do so, we had to do a crossing of two realities: the number of people on whom young farmers can count (the size of the social network) and the feeling of loneliness. Social isolation is a crossing of an objective reality and a subjective feeling: this is why one can feel lonely while being surrounded, and vice-versa (Hortulanus, 2006).

Regarding the feeling of loneliness, respondents had to give an opinion on 11 statements regarding their social life (for example: “I miss not having people around me, I can always count on my friends” or “My circle of friends and acquaintances is too small”). This model focuses on the gap between what respondents’ desire in terms of affection and intimacy, and what they actually have. The greater the gap is, the greater the feeling of loneliness. Therefore, this model leads to the construction of a scale of loneliness.

As for measuring the objective part of isolation (the size of the social support network), we asked young Quebec farmers to precisely identify the people who can provide assistance of all kinds to them, such as material support (borrowing tools, equipment, small amounts of money, etc.), emotional support (having someone to talk to), information and advice support either as means of encouragement or time (such as getting help in work peaks). We also asked them to identify their household size and their network of friends, with whom they do sports or cultural or social activities. We then asked if the respondents had received such support over the last month. If so, they had to indicate the number of times, and their degree of satisfaction. Finally, the respondents had to provide some information about the network members (gender, age, distance, relationship with the respondent, their work in agriculture, etc...). Note that a weak social network is characterized by having six people or less.

By doing a crossing of the network size, inspired by Barrera (1986) and the feeling of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld and Havens, 2004), we build a typology of social contacts composed of four categories (Table 3)

- The *socially competent*: large social network and low feeling of loneliness;
- The *socially inhibited*: small social network and low feeling of loneliness;
- The *solitary*: large social network and high feeling of loneliness;
- The *socially isolated*: small social network and high feeling of loneliness.

The study was done using self-administered questionnaires that were sent by mail to a representative sample of 1480 farmers in Quebec aged between 18 and 37 in november 2008 and january 2009; 407 answered, which is a turnout rate of over 27%.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Characteristics of the Participants

The majority of respondents (58%) come from areas where farming is intensively practiced. The gender proportions of the study participants are quite realistic if we look at the census of emerging farmers conducted by MAPAQ (2008). Indeed, a quarter of the participating farmers are women. In Quebec, in 2006, only 5% of the emerging farmers were under the age of 25 while 53% were between 25 and 34, and 42% between 35 and 40. In our study, 7% of farmers are aged under 25, 72% are aged 25 to 34 and 21% are aged 35 and over, which is an overrepresentation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> age group, and an underrepresentation of the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Data about the main source of income of the study participants (or the type of production) is similar to reality. Without going into too much detail, note that the majority of participants are dairy farmers.

### 4.2 What about Social Isolation?

Although 58% of young farmers agreed with the statement saying that "farmers are socially isolated", we note that their reality is more nuanced. As mentioned before, the extent of social isolation will be obtained as a category of a typology by crossing an objective reality (the size of the social support network) and a subjective reality (the feeling of loneliness). Table 3 shows that even if 41% of young farmers in Quebec are psychosocially competent, nearly 60% of them are at risk of being in a situation of social isolation. The fact that 15% of participants (socially isolated) have few people to count on and are unhappy about it is a disturbing and worrying phenomenon. The persistence of social isolation is one of the most important factor that could lead the exit of farming.

Table 3 - Typology of social contacts

		Size of the social support network	
		Large network	Small network
Feeling of loneliness	Low	Socially competent (41%)	Socially inhibited (16.3%)
	High	Solitary (27.4%)	Socially Isolated (15.3%)

### 4.3 Determinants of Social Isolation

The most important factors correlates with social isolation are the level of education, the marital status (single male being most isolated), the number of hours worked, the perception of the financial health of their farm and the quality of the relationship with the immediate neighbourhood. All of these elements are more important than the geographical factor.

#### 4.3.1 Social isolation and the young singles farmers

Marital status deserves some attention. This is an important determinant of social isolation but also intriguing it may be, this aspect is not well documented in scientific literature although many sociologists have studied the way of life of singles, in urban society however. A widespread idea is that singles have less difficulty creating larger social networks than other individuals. For Kaufmann (1995): singles have more social contacts than individuals in a couple. Degenne and Forsé (1994) come to a similar observation in their work on social networks: singles without children have the most social contacts. But the reality of young farmers is very different.

In their case, young single farmers more often have a small social support network (49%) than those that are in a common-law relationship or married (28% each). Worse, singles are more affected by social isolation (26%) than to those in a common-law relationship (15%) or married (10%). Also, more singles define themselves as being socially inhibited (small network, no loneliness) as opposed to married people or those in a common-law relationship (24%, 18% and 12% respectively) . Therefore, because of their lack of social contacts, singles who work in agriculture are more at risk of falling into a situation of social isolation. This finding is worrisome if we consider the fact that sociability usually declines with age (Degenne and Forsé, 1994).

Alongside these results, we also wanted to know young people's perceptions about certain aspects of their social reality (Figure 1).

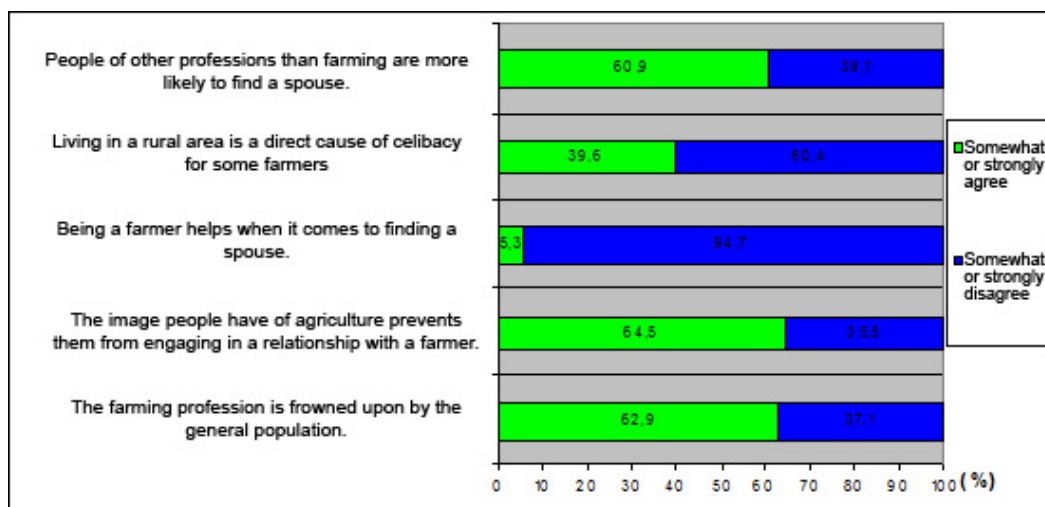


Figure 1 - A Few Perceptions of the Social Reality of Young Farmers

We find some uneasiness among the population of young farmers. First, they feel that the general public has a bad image of their profession (63%). Also, they believe that their profession and the fact that they live in a rural area are obstacles or barriers to involvement in an intimate relationship.

#### **4.4 Social Isolation by Gender and Age**

By crossing the typology of social contact with gender, we observe that women and men are socially isolated to almost the same proportions (17% against 15%). It is only by looking more closely at the constitution of their social support network that some differences emerge. Women manage to surround themselves with more people than men. Actually, nearly 75% of women have a large network of social support, compared to 66% for men. These findings about the reality of young Quebec farmers differ from those by Degenne and Forsé (1994) which were that men tend to have more social contacts than women.

When we do a crossing of the level of social isolation, the size of the social support network, and the feeling of loneliness with the age of the participants, it is clear that the 26 to 34 y/o age group is in better shape than the others. The younger ones are more isolated and more often have a small network of social support, while the older ones are those who most strongly feel loneliness. Future analyses will help us discover what specific characteristics of 26-34 y/o farmers could explain these results.

#### **4.5 Social Isolation and Gross Family Income**

There is some correlation between the typology of social contacts and gross family income. Two trends are emerging concerning this reality. First, the lower the gross family income is, the more socially isolated participants are (small network of social support with moderate or high feeling of loneliness). For example, nearly 25% of those who earn less than \$ 20,000 CAD (approximately 13,000 Euros) are socially isolated. Also, in conjunction with previous findings, the higher their gross family income is, the more socially competent the young farmers are (large network of social support and low feeling of loneliness). But this is true to some extent only: it changes beyond \$ 100,000 CAD (65,000 Euros). Like what, money alone may not bring happiness, but it helps!

#### **4.6 The various forms of social support**

By focusing on the forms of social support, we can observe that certain needs of young farmers in Quebec are only partially fulfilled. As we've explained, each type of support refers to a form of help that each participant can or wants to get. It can consist of:

- material support for the family or for themselves;
- material support for their farm;
- emotional support;
- support by means of advice or information;
- support by means of encouragement;
- support by means of time and energy;
- support by means of going out and doing social activities together.

Participants were asked to what extent they had felt a need among each type of support. It is obvious that going out and doing social activities is what lacks the most among the participants. In fact, nearly 95% of them said they felt a little (50%) or a high (45%) need to get out, get their minds off daily life, and do social activities. Then come the needs concerning time and energy (90%), emotional support (83%), advice or information (81%), encouragement (80%), material support for the farm (67%), and finally material support for themselves or their families (49%).

### **5. Conclusion**

This work provides a critical mass of new knowledge on subjects that have received little attention from researchers so far, such as social isolation and the quality of social support in agriculture. Be-

cause it's undermines the future of farming, especially family farms, this diagnosis on the social reality of young people can improve the farmers' awareness of the situation, and can hopefully influence decision makers and enable them to develop better targeted actions. This can include actions or strategies related to the issues that were identified in the youth policy of the *ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec*.

The most important thing to notice is that isolation is a social phenomenon that occurs not only among the usual populations such as the elderly, the vulnerable, the disabled and the marginalized. Our results show that nearly 60% of young farmers in Quebec are at risk of social isolation, and that 15% of them effectively are isolated. This observation comes from the fact that 32% of the participants have formed only a small network of social support and that 43% have a moderate or high feeling of loneliness. In addition, social isolation is directly related to the marital status of young farmers. Singles (26%) are the most socially isolated compared to those in a common-law relationship (15%) or those who are married (10%).

Still, many other dimensions need to be analyzed. Examples include social and community involvement, social activities, virtual communities, social recognition, pluriactivity (other jobs), experience in farming (starting up, life on a farm before starting up, etc.), the levels of stress and depression, forms of social support and especially the composition of the social support network. There is still a lot of work ahead !

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