

## SMALL FAMILY FARMS CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SERBIAN AGRICULTURE

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### Abstract

Family farms can play a crucial role in the successful and sustainable development of Serbian agriculture. There are several reasons why family farms are significant for the sustainable development of Serbian agriculture, and some of the most important points are: economic contribution, food security, diverse agriculture, market access, local knowledge and tradition. According to the 2018 Farm Structure Survey (FSS), there were 564 541 farms in Serbia, of which 99.71% were classified as family farms with an average size of 4.5 hectares per farm. Moreover, the average economic size of a family farm is 8610 Euros and is 45% higher than in 2012, but still four times smaller than the average in the EU. When evaluating small family farms, it is very important to analyze the age and education level of the farm manager. The average age of the farm managers is 61 years, and in addition, the majority of farm managers (48.6%) have acquired agricultural knowledge only through practical experience. In order to support the capacity of small family farms for sustainable rural development in Serbia, the government and various stakeholders need to: provide policy support, educate and train farmers, improve access to resources and markets, develop infrastructure, and promote research and innovation that meet the needs of family farms. By focusing on these areas to increase the potential of family farms and providing the necessary support, Serbia can build a resilient, sustainable, and economically viable agricultural sector that benefits both rural communities and the overall economy.

### INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is a very important and topical issue nowadays, accordingly, the researches of many domestic and foreign authors focus on issues from this field. Due to concerns about the ecological consequences of development since the 1960s, the World Commission on Environmental Protection published the document "Our Common Future" in 1987, in which the term sustainable development was used for the first time. In this document, sustainable development is defined as "development which may ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the

ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987). A few years later, in 1992, in response to the increasing threat and degradation of agricultural resources due to the application of increasingly intensive production technologies, the United Nations defined sustainable agriculture under Agenda 21 as "a method of production that improves the quality of the environment and the resources on which production is based, meets human needs for food, is economically viable, and improves the quality of life of farmers and society as a whole" (United Nations, 1992).

Based on the concept of sustainable development and sustainable agriculture, sustainable rural development has been defined to include three dimensions: economic, social (societal), and ecological. Economic sustainability means ensuring economic equality, i.e., equal benefits for farmers as for workers in other sectors. Social, or societal, sustainability is achieved by ensuring equal development conditions for the so-called sensitive populations in rural areas. The ecological dimension of rural development refers to the rational management of natural resources and reducing the impact of resource use on the environment (Bogdanov, 2015).

In the development of the concept of sustainable rural development, agriculture plays a special role, which is considered the traditionally most represented activity in rural areas (Kvrgić and Ristić, 2018). Indeed, farms are of great importance in ensuring the socio-economic sustainability of rural areas.

Of particular note is the importance of family farms, which are the predominant form of organization of agricultural production in both developed and developing countries. Family farms occupy an important place in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 10 can be directly or indirectly linked to family farm agricultural production (<https://www.ruralforum.org/>).

Family farms, which occupy 70-80% of the world's agricultural land (FAO), play a key role in achieving the second Sustainable Development Goal - eliminating hunger and ensuring access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food throughout the year for all people.

Family farms not only represent the largest group of food producers globally (Savickienė & Miceikienė, 2018) and contribute to food security, but also preserve traditional foods while contributing to balanced diets, preservation of global agrobiodiversity, and sustainable use of natural resources (FAO & IFAD,

2019). By strengthening this multifunctionality of family farms, they will provide public goods for which there is increasing demand and contribute to the economic and social development of rural areas.

The abovementioned importance of family farms is also given in the Republic of Serbia, where family farms are the most numerous subjects of agricultural production. Therefore, in order to ensure sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas, it is important to study the capacities of family farms in Serbia, paying special attention to small family farms, which is the aim of this paper. The paper shows and analyzes the structure of agricultural farms according to the organizational and legal form, and the structure of family farms according to the area used for agriculture, the economic size, as well as the gender, age and education of the owner of these farms.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to the research objective, the method of analysis and synthesis, the descriptive method and the method of comparative analysis were applied. The data on the capacities of family farms in the Republic of Serbia were taken from the database and publications of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, i.e. the Agricultural Census of 2012 and the Farm Structure Survey 2018. For the comparison with the capacities of family farms in the European Union and selected countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, the data were taken from the statistical database of the European Union - Eurostat. In addition, the scientific and professional literature in the field was used, including textbooks, monographs, dissertations, scientific journals and other publications.

## RESULTS

The most numerous and significant units in the organization of agricultural production in Serbia are family farms, which can be concluded from the fact that the number of family farms in Serbia is significantly higher

than the number of farms of legal entities and entrepreneurs. From the Agricultural Census of 2012 to the implementation of the Farm Structure Survey 2018 the number of family farms decreased from 628,552 to 562,895. As the total number of farms has also decreased, the share of family farms in the total number of farms

has increased, reaching 99.71% in 2018 (Table 1). Legal entities and entrepreneurs account for less than 1% of the total number of farms.

**Table 1. Structure of farms by legal form in 2012 and 2018 in the Republic of Serbia**

Legal form	2012.		2018.	
	Number	%	Number	%
Natural person	628.552	99,52	562.895	99,71
Legal person	3.000	0,48	1.646	0,29
Total	631.552	100	564.541	100

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

In the Republic of Serbia, according to the data for 2018, there are the most family farms using up to 2 ha of utilized agricultural area, with their share in the total number of family farms being 39.51% (Table 2). These are small family farms, which have the largest share in the total number of family farms in the European Union and in the selected countries Bulgaria and Romania. In Romania, where one third of the European Union farms are located (Eurostat, 2022), small family farms have the largest share in the total number of family farms, 72.93%.

Some authors emphasize the important role of small family farms in achieving and improving food security, employment of a large part of the population, poverty reduction and sustainability of rural areas (Ardakani et al, 2020; Guarin, et., al, 2020; World Bank, 2008). The Strategy of development of agriculture and rural areas of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014 – 2024 (Official Gazette of RS, number 85/14), states that small family farms are an indispensable part of the rural economy due to their number, share of land potential and specific way of working.

**Table 2. Structure of family farms by size of utilized agricultural area in the Republic of Serbia and the EU-27 (%)**

UAA (ha)	Serbia	Bulgaria	Romania	EU-27
	%			
< 2,00	39,51	49,89	72,93	44,14
2,01-5,00	32,34	17,52	18,02	21,91
5,01-10, 00	17,08	9,40	5,52	12,59
10,01-50, 00	10,25	16,14	3,00	16,01
> 50,00	0,82	7,06	0,54	5,35
Total	100	100	100	100

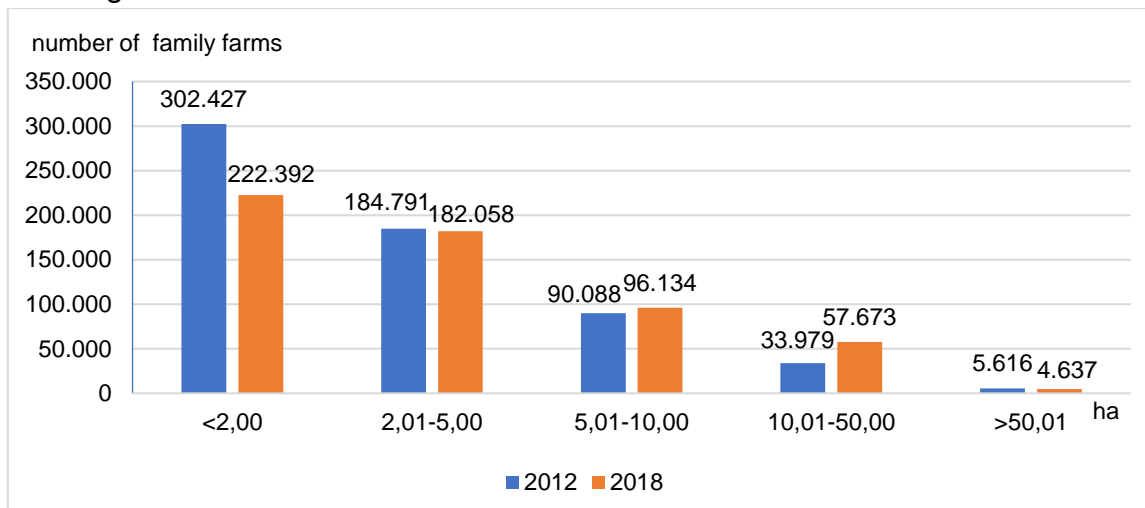
Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018 and Eurostat, 2020

In the context of the decline in the number of family farms in Serbia, the largest decrease was in small family farms with up to 2 ha of utilized agricultural area (Figure 1). Although the process of closure of small farms is a consequence of the general economic development of the country, the

decline in their number takes place over a long period of time and under the influence of various factors (Bogdanov, 2007). Their number is decreasing under the influence of the aging process of villages, migration, globalization, increased concentration of capital in agriculture, and numerous other

factors (FAO, 2020; "Official Gazette of RS," No. 85/2014). In Serbia, sectors such as milk production are relatively dependent on production in small farms. In this context, the question arises how to ensure production growth in the future under the

conditions of a decrease in the number of these farms (SEEDEV, 2021).



**Figure 1. Number of family farms by size of utilized agricultural area in 2012 and 2018 in the Republic of Serbia**

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia

Due to the decrease in the number of farms with up to 5 ha and the increase in the number of farms with 5 to 50 ha, the average size of family farms increased from 4.5 ha in 2012 to 5.2 ha in 2018. However, the average size of family farms in Serbia is still smaller than in the European Union, where it is 11.3 ha (Eurostat, 2020). In addition to the small size of the utilized agricultural area, the problem of family farms in Serbia is the fragmentation of farms. The aforementioned problems mean that economies of scale cannot be exploited, which in turn leads to high unit production costs and low marketability, which is reflected in the fact that farms have the performance of natural or semi-natural farms (Simonović et al., 2017).

The low average size of utilized agricultural area also results in a low economic size of farms in Serbia. According to 2018 data, the average economic size of a farms in Serbia is 8,610 euros, which is 45% more than in 2012, when it was 5,939 euros. The

increase in 2018 is due to a decrease in the number of farms and an increase in their economic value in the observed period. Although the average economic size of farms in Serbia has increased, it is more than four times lower than the European Union average (34,785 euros). Compared to the European Union countries (Eurostat, 2016), only Romania has a lower average economic size than Serbia (3,538 euros). Although the average economic size of farms in Serbia is determined by family farms, as they account for 99.71% of the total number of farms, the average economic size differs significantly depending on the organizational and legal form and amounts to 7,470 euros for family farms, while for legal entities and entrepreneurs it amounts to 398,518 euros (Paraušić et al, 2019). The analysis of the structure of family farms by economic size in Serbia shows that the largest share of family farms (27.64%) belongs to the smallest economic size with standard production of less than

2,000 euros per year (Table 3), while the smallest share of family farms (0.3%) is in the class with the highest economic value (100,000 euros and more). In the European Union, the share of family farms with economic size up to 2,000 euros is also the largest, although there are differences in the distribution of family

farms by economic size among the countries of the European Union. For example, the share of family farms with a standard production of more than 100,000 euros in the Netherlands is more than 60%, while in Romania it is about 0.16% (Eurostat, 2020).

**Table 3. Structure of family farms by economic size in the Republic of Serbia and the EU-27 (%)**

Ekonomska većina (evro)	Srbija	Bugarska	Rumunija	EU-27
	%			
< 2.000	27,64	39,23	73,00	39,28
2.000-3.999	23,54	17,45	13,75	15,47
4.000-7.999	23,11	14,23	7,46	13,33
8.000-14.999	14,77	11,36	3,07	9,49
15.000-24.999	6,22	6,84	1,28	6,10
25.000-49.999	3,34	5,86	0,92	6,45
50.000-99.999	1,08	2,80	0,34	4,60
> 100.000	0,30	2,23	0,16	5,29
Ukupno	100	100	100	100

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018 and Eurostat, 2020

The small average economic size of family farms points to certain problems related to the financing and sustainability of these farms and, consequently, of the rural areas where they are located. It is about the lack of equity, cheap credit, markets, as well as low prices for agricultural products (Simonović et al., 2017). Due to the distance to the market, where they usually sell their products to middlemen, unfavorable prices, as well as payment terms, purchasing products is one of the main problems faced by small family farms (Stojanović and Popović, 2019). In this context, agriculture is not a stable source of income for the majority of small family farms, which affects the increase of poverty in rural areas (Tosović-Stevanović et al., 2021). To achieve greater economic benefits, increased production should be accompanied by greater market integration of agricultural producers (Borychowski et al., 2020).

An important segment of the structure of family farms is the distribution of agricultural labor. With 1,318,593 people employed in agriculture on family farms in Serbia, these farms dominate the total number of people employed in agriculture (98.6%), with an average of 2 people per farm. Expressed in GRJ equivalents, work in family farms accounts for 97.2% of the total labor fund in Serbian agriculture, which is equivalent to 645,733 GRJ. In addition to the decrease in the number of persons employed in family farms compared to 2012, the total number of GRJ remained unchanged, which indicates a higher utilization of the existing labor force in farms and can be interpreted as an indicator of the reduction of hidden unemployment (Bogdanov and Babović, 2019).

The structure of the labor force by the size of utilized agricultural area shows a high concentration of labor on small farms, where 34.8% work on farms up to 2 ha and 32.4% on farms from 2 to 5 ha of the total number of people involved in agricultural activities (Bogdanov and Babović, 2019).

Considering that on average 2 people are employed in agriculture on one farm, the majority of employees in Serbian agriculture are family members of the farm owner and the managers themselves, which is particularly pronounced in small family farms. Also in the European Union, the majority of employees in small farms are managers (53.2%) and family members (41.7%), while the share of non-family workers is low and is about 5% (Eurostat, 2013).

The gender structure of managers of family farms shows that the share of male managers of family farms in 2018 is slightly lower compared to 2012 and is about 80.6%. The share of women in the managers of family farms is 19.4%, significantly lower than their share in the total labor force in the farm of 42.3%, indicating an unequal approach associated with more power and responsibility in the farm (Bogdanov and Babović, 2019).

In the structure of family farms by the age of the owner in Serbia, the participation of

managers younger than 35 years is decreasing, while the participation of managers older than 65 years is extremely high in 2018 compared to 2012 (Figure 2). The dominant participation of managers older than 65 in 2018 indicates that the age structure of family farm managers is increasingly unfavorable. The natural migration of the population from agriculture and villages resulted in devastation, i.e., complete emptying of certain villages and larger rural areas. The migration from rural to urban areas mainly involves the young, able-bodied and educated population. The depopulation trends lead to more pronounced gender differences, i.e. the decline in the number of inhabitants in rural areas is more pronounced among the female population than among the male population (Đurić, 2018). The successful development of agriculture and rural areas, especially in the aspect of modern technical and technological achievements, cannot be achieved by an aging labor force, which is usually characterized by low skills (Božić and et al, 2011).

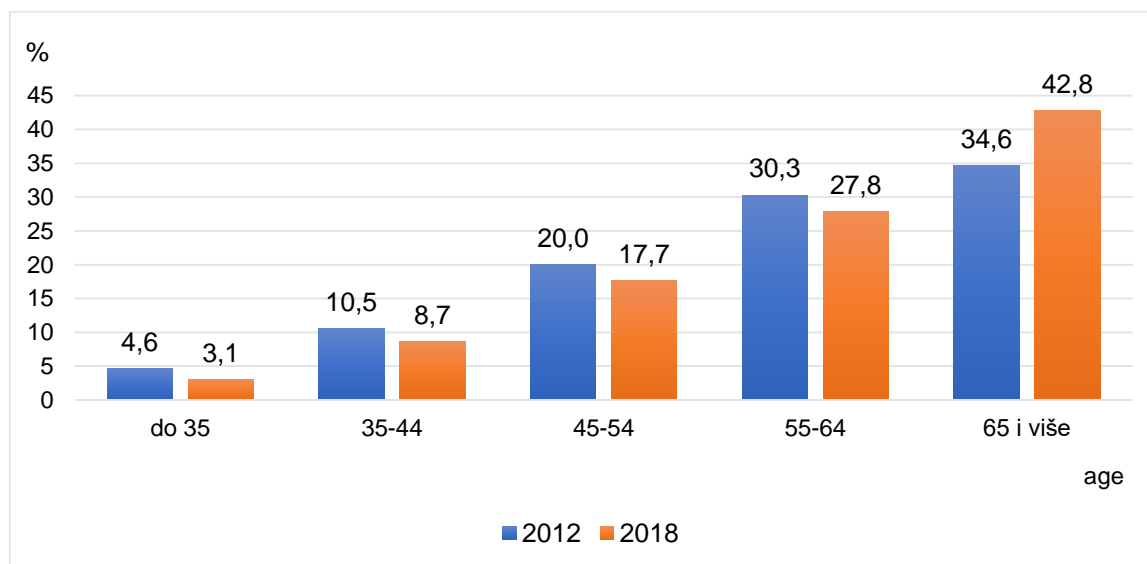


Figure 2. Changes in the age structure of managers the head of family farms in 2012 and 2018 in Serbia (%)

Source: Agricultural Census of 2012 and the Farm Structure Survey of 2018

Compared to 2012, the average age of farms in Serbia has increased in 2018 and is 61 years old. The distribution of land between farms in the smallest and medium categories results from the exit of farms

from the sector and the reduction of activities in agriculture, which is mostly caused by the aging of the farm owner (Bogdanov and Babović, 2019). The European Union also faces the problem of

age and low educational level of farm managers. One third of the heads of family farms in the EU (33.2%) were 65 years old or older in 2020, and the majority (57.6%) were older than 55 years (Table 4). Only 6.5% of family farm managers in the European Union will be under 35 years of age in 2020, and this percentage is down from 7.5% in 2010. Such a high

percentage of farmers over 65 years of age calls into question the sustainability of family farms in the European Union as well. Bulgaria and Romania also have an unfavorable age structure of the heads of family farms.

**Table 4. Structure of farms by age of managers in the Republic of Serbia and the EU-27 (%)**

Starosnagrupa	Srbija	Bugarska	Rumunija	EU-27
	%			
do 35	3,29	9,00	5,77	6,49
35-44	9,28	15,54	12,31	13,51
45-54	19,28	20,57	22,45	22,43
55-64	29,08	24,07	19,82	24,37
65 iviše	39,07	30,82	39,65	33,20
Ukupno	100	100	100	100

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018 and Eurostat, 2020

The educational profile of farm managers in Serbia is not favorable in terms of agricultural knowledge. More than half of farm managers (54%) have agricultural experience acquired exclusively in the field, 38% have secondary education in a field unrelated to agriculture, only 3% have graduated from secondary agricultural school, 1% have graduated from an agricultural college or college, 4% have graduated from another college or college, and 7% have attended courses on agriculture in 2018. Differences in the education of farm managers of farms of different sizes, whether expressed by available agricultural land or as economic value, exist between the largest farms and others. Thus, the share of persons with higher education is higher only in the categories of the largest farms (Bogdanov and Babović, 2019). The skills required to handle new technologies exceed the capabilities of many small family farms, so these farms use labor-intensive methods, resulting in lower labor productivity than large farms.

Due to the above problems faced by family farms, especially small family farms, some authors point out that small family farms are an obstacle to rural development (Matkovski et al., 2020; Davidova et al., 2009). As one of the solutions to the above problems, many authors consider diversification of profitable activities of family farms in rural areas in order to generate additional income from non-agricultural sectors.

The exclusive focus of rural areas on primary agricultural production contributes to the lowering of the standard of living of the rural population, which in turn leads to population out-migration and distortion of the demographic image of the village (Merenkova et al., 2019). The problem of high rates of population out-migration from rural areas due to the lack of employment opportunities and low income levels, as well as the desire to reduce poverty levels and increase the quality of life in rural areas, led to attention being focused on the rural non-farm economy sector (Mirković, 2011). The rural non-farm economy solves key problems, i.e. it employs surplus rural labor, enables the reduction of farm production risk, and contributes to the

acceleration of economic growth in rural areas (Bogdanov, 2007). The experience of developed countries shows that the economic and demographic sustainability of rural areas can only be achieved through targeted support for the development of non-agricultural economic activities (Ristić, 2013).

Diversification of economic activities has a positive impact on sustainable rural development in all three development dimensions. The impact on economic sustainability is realized on the basis of activities organized within holdings, such as processing of primary agricultural products in smaller processing plants, placement of food products, rural tourism, which can contribute significantly to the stability of farm income and thus to the economically sustainable development of rural areas. The impact of the diversification of economic activities on the environmental sustainability of rural development and the conservation of natural resources is reflected mainly in the organization of organic agricultural production, based on the principles of sustainable development. The social and especially the demographic sustainability of rural areas can be achieved to a large extent through the development of the tertiary sector, which would lead to an increase in employment and thus an influx of young, active people into rural areas (Đurić, 2021).

## CONCLUSIONS

Family farms in Serbia have a dominant share in the total number of farms. The structure of family farms, both in terms of utilized agricultural area and economic size, shows that in Serbia about one third of family farms belong to the lowest categories of both agricultural land used (up to 2 ha) and economic size (up to 2,000 euros). The foregoing shows that family farms, especially small family farms, are of great importance in Serbia. Their importance is reflected in ensuring food security and food safety, employment of a

large part of the population, reduction of poverty and sustainability of rural areas.

However, family farms also face numerous problems that are particularly pronounced on small family farms. These include fragmentation of managership, lack of equity, favorable credit, markets, and low prices for agricultural products, as well as numerous global challenges such as globalization, growing competition, climate change, etc. In addition, there is an unfavorable age and education structure of farm managers with an average age of 61 years, and furthermore, most farm managers have acquired agricultural knowledge only through practical experience.

Given the importance of small family farms, the government and various stakeholders should direct national programs toward rural development measures that can contribute to the economy by improving competitiveness and diversification, as well as provide support for farmer education and training, improve access to resources and markets, develop infrastructure, and promote research and innovation that meet the needs of family farms. In this way, Serbia can build a sustainable agricultural sector that benefits both rural communities and the economy as a whole.

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