

Attracting new farmers for the future of agriculture

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Key messages

- Farmers play a central role in food systems, yet their contribution often lacks recognition. Views of the agricultural profession as “outdated” or “backward” contrast with the sector’s substantial contribution to social and economic goals.
- Over a quarter of people presently working in agriculture in OECD Member countries are over 55 years. Attracting new talent and a new generation of farmers is a challenge that many countries share, even if the barriers and drivers differ.
- Aging and labour shortages are not unique to agriculture, but the sector faces larger skills and human capital constraints than other parts of the economy. Despite the high potential gains from innovation and digital technologies to improve productivity, sustainability and resilience, agriculture struggles to attract the necessary new talent.
- Existing new entrants are often more educated, have stronger entrepreneurial skills, and are more likely to adopt digital technologies and other agricultural innovations. However, significant obstacles, such as limited access to land and credit or complex regulatory environments, continue to confront farmers and potential farmers in many countries.
- To attract and retain talent, governments could reimagine farming as a major activity that can address essential societal goals. They should embrace digital technologies and place innovation and skills as being at the heart of agriculture policy.

What's the issue?

Despite its key role in tackling the challenges of food systems, farming is not perceived as an attractive activity. Surveys across OECD Member countries confirm that citizens identify agriculture as a key sector for providing safe, healthy and high-quality food and tackling environmental challenges (Eurobarometer, 2020^[1]; AgriFutures Australia, 2023^[2]). Yet farming is rarely considered a top career choice by young people (OECD, 2025^[3]). Isolation and unfavourable working conditions such as low pay, long working hours, health risks, and fewer social interactions are all associated with farming and impact the sector's attractiveness (Campi et al., 2024^[4]).

As part of their [2022 Ministerial Declaration](#) (OECD, 2022^[5]) OECD Agriculture Ministers committed to “address labour challenges along the whole supply chain by developing policies to attract youth, women and new entrants to the agricultural and food sector and to strengthen the transfer of knowledge and skills to address the evolving needs of all those working in the sector”. Ministers called for evidence and policies to “accompany the transition of new entrants into the sector and of those needing to change activities or exit the sector to align future farming with broader food system objectives, on production and nutrition, livelihood and the environment”. To achieve this triple challenge and attract the needed talent, it is imperative to significantly improve the image of the sector. This presents a unique opportunity to redefine the job of farming, change social perceptions of farm work, and make agriculture attractive for a new generation of innovative farmers.

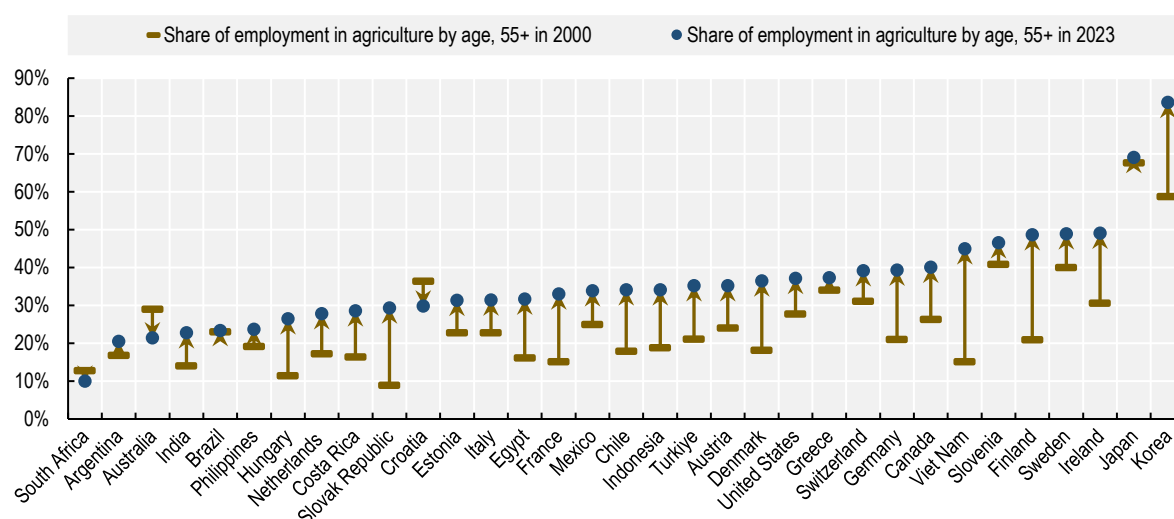
Attracting new talent for generational renewal in agriculture is no small challenge. While the share of agricultural employment of those 55 years or older is above 25% in OECD Members, it differs widely among countries. This share reaches more than 70% in Korea and Japan, where more than half of the farming population is over 65. In Canada, Sweden and Ireland more than 40% of farmers are 55 years or older, while in Italy, United States and Austria, the figure is above 30% (Figure 1). In Indonesia and Viet Nam 24% and 32%, of farmers are, respectively over 55 years.

Moreover, the share of older farmers has increased in most countries over the last two decades and aging has become a policy issue. The number of farmers over 55 increased from 59% to 84% between 2000 and 2023 in Korea, while this share doubled in France and Chile, and tripled in Slovakia over the same period. It should be noted, however, that in few countries - such as Austria, Croatia or Estonia - the share of young farmers under 26 has increased.

Notwithstanding similarities in the direction of observed aging trends, the driving forces, consequences, and policy choices in each country are diverse (Asai and Antón, 2024^[6]).

Figure 1. The agricultural population is getting older, with disparities across countries

Share of employment in agriculture of farmers above 55 years, 2000 and 2023



Source: [FAOSTAT](#).

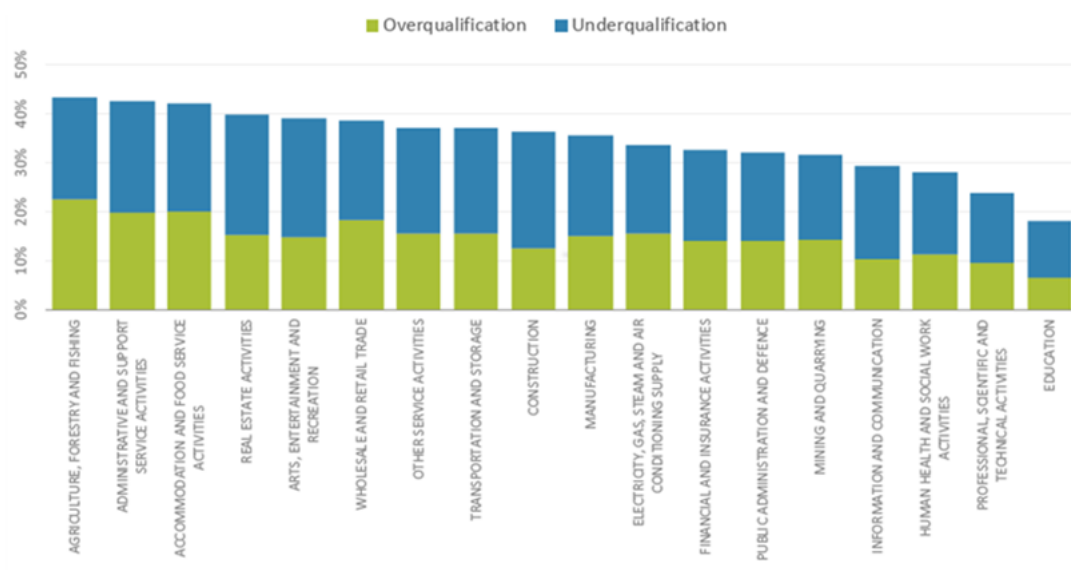
Note: The indicators are missing for some countries in 2000 or in 2023; the nearest available year is shown.

Why is this important?

Aging threatens economic growth: as baby-boomers exit the labour market, the working-age population decreases and labour shortages prevail in all sectors (OECD, 2025^[7]). Yet while aging is prevalent in almost all economic sectors of OECD Member countries, the serious gap in the level of skills needed to meet present needs, coupled with labour shortages and barriers to entry, make this an especially pressing policy issue in agriculture. Notwithstanding increasing mechanisation, automation, and productivity growth, agriculture continues to be heavily dependent on human labour, including seasonal workers, but the sector often faces difficulties in recruiting and retaining suitable labour.

Additionally, the agriculture and food sector has the highest rate of skills misalignment, including both over- and under-qualification, across all economic sectors (Figure 2), with these gaps projected to amplify. The increased adoption of new technologies in the sector may help to reduce overall labour demand, but will call for more educated and highly skilled workers. Furthermore, the share of seasonal and temporary workers, often coming from foreign countries, and the demand for entrepreneurial and management skills, digital know-how and marketing, are all expected to increase in response to the demands of new food systems (Ryan, 2023^[8]).

Figure 2. Skills mismatches are highest in agriculture: Over- and under-qualification by sector



Source: Figure 2.6 in Ryan (2023^[8]).

The sustainable transformation of food systems depends on attracting and retaining talent that can adopt innovative solutions. Indeed, agriculture is evolving and offering opportunities for career development for those willing to accept the broadening role of food systems. Innovation and digitalisation are opening opportunities to transform the sector into an engine of environmental and social sustainability. Innovation is providing ways forward on demands for food security and nutrition, environmental goods and biodiversity, and improving the working conditions and opportunities of farmers (Box 1). To adopt these technologies, however, requires improving farmers' skills.

Box 1. The role of digital technologies in improving sustainability and attracting talent

Digital technologies in agriculture have significant potential to enhance the sustainability of farming, mitigating adverse environmental pressures, and improving human wellbeing (Campi et al., 2024^[4]). Digital applications such as drones, GPS mapping, sensors, artificial intelligence and blockchains, can be used in automated systems and precision farming to reduce resource use, as well as to monitor livestock diseases and the impact of agricultural practices (FAO, 2019^[9]). Digital technologies can increase resource efficiency, enhance water and soil quality, improve pest control and reduce waste, emissions and risks.

Attracting new farmers and retaining talent in the agricultural sector remains particularly challenging due to the physically demanding nature of the work and the conditions of a rural lifestyle. Digital technologies can positively impact the wellbeing of farmers and agricultural workers. Robotics can automate repetitive and heavy tasks, lowering health risks and reducing the workload of farmers, and freeing time for a social life. Digital technologies connect farmers and facilitate knowledge sharing and social contact. Evidence also shows that digital technologies alleviate long-term stress once the tools are effectively adopted by farmers.

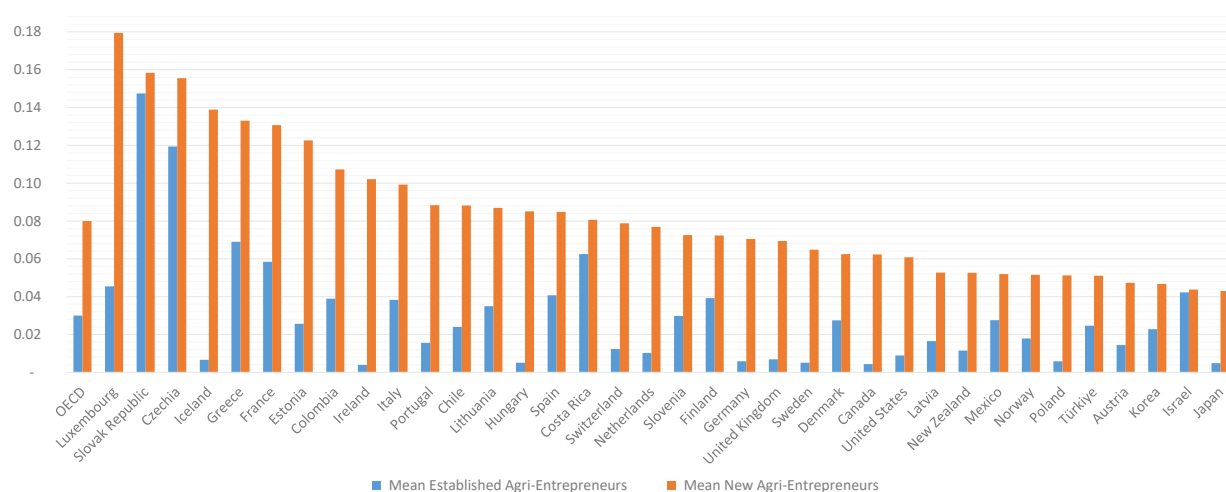
Young farmers often show a higher interest in sustainable practices and organic agriculture (Baiardi and Morana, 2021^[10]) and have greater potential to implement new farming technologies (McFadden, Casalini and Antón, 2022^[11]). Digital technologies have a strong potential to boost innovation in agriculture and simultaneously increase farmers' wellbeing, attract young and highly skilled new entrants, and enhance environmental sustainability (Asai et al., 2023^[12]).

Source: Campi et al. (2024^[4]).

New entrants in agriculture are transforming the sector. In most countries, new entrants tend to have a higher level of education and greater entrepreneurial skills, and include a larger share of women, than is the case amongst established farmers (Campi et al., 2024^[4]). New entrants are also more likely to adopt technology and innovation (Figure 3). Research also suggests that identifying a successor encourages older farmers to invest in innovative strategies and to adopt new technology (Bertolozzi-Caredio, 2024^[13]).

This digital and sustainability transformation could be facilitated by improving the policy environment. Social perceptions would likely change over time as farming becomes a path-breaking sector offering valuable career opportunities. Policies responding to existing labour and skills mismatches in agriculture should reduce barriers to entry and take into account broader regional development policies that support entrepreneurship and wellbeing in rural areas and make farming an attractive business (Asai et al., 2023^[12]).

Figure 3. Technology adoption is systematically higher among new entrants



Source: Figure 2.5 in Campi et al. (2024^[4]).

New farmers, however, often face significant barriers such as limited access to capital, credit and land (sometimes exacerbated by current policies), and regulatory complexities. These barriers are specific to each country and location, and they can have different effects across specific groups. For instance, women and Indigenous Peoples often face specific barriers and biases that hinder entrance to the sector. In addition, barriers challenging generational renewal in agriculture are often exacerbated by the “brain drain” of young talent from rural to urban areas (Asai and Antón, 2024^[6]).

What can policymakers do?

- **Champion an inspiring image of farming as a sector with a bright future that is at the frontier of addressing major societal challenges.** Food systems are responding to new demands in terms of food security and nutrition, of addressing their negative environmental impacts and maximising their positive impacts, and providing a better quality of life for farmers and farm workers. Embracing digital technologies and innovation in agriculture opens new opportunities for a significant leap forward that can attract new talent and contribute to boosting food systems transformation.
- **Address the barriers faced by new entrants and the drivers of entry, including the impact of existing policy packages.** Barriers and biases impede the attraction of new talent. Instead of rushing into new policies, governments need to question the impact of existing policies on creating barriers and on enhancing the dynamism and innovation of the sector. For instance, it is known

that area payments impact the value of land which can hinder entry and excessive regulation inhibits investment in finding new solutions.

- **Look outside the box of traditional agricultural policies.** Structural policies are more likely to have long term effects. This includes investing in public services and digital infrastructure, as well as looking at education policies, developing ambitious skills strategies, and removing policies that create barriers to attracting new talent. Bringing innovation to the centre of the policy debate and designing and implementing policies that enhance the potential of agriculture will improve the sector's productivity, sustainability and resilience, thereby facilitating the transformation of food systems.
- **Share experiences and learnings.** Attracting new entrants to agriculture having diverse profiles and talents is indispensable and challenging. It requires a change of mindsets and social perceptions to acknowledge the role of farming in contributing to societal goals and the opportunities to improve the wellbeing of those working in agriculture and food value chains. Sharing experiences and learning from the diverse career paths of new entrants and existing farmers will contribute to improving knowledge and broadening the profile of farming.

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