



Reflections and challenges of starting a small-scale farm in Denmark

By FLUF (Frie Bønder - Levende Lands Ungdomsfront) & Forum for Madsuverænitet

Context

Denmark is a highly industrialized agricultural country: 60% of the landmass is arable land with 80% of the production being livestock production - mainly fodder production - and 80% of the total production is oriented towards export¹. In 2015 a law was passed that made it possible for foreign pensionfunds and companies to buy land in Denmark while at the same time removing the cap of how much land a farm or farmer was able to own. This liberalization or deregulation of the law for ownership of land has caused what in Danish is referred to as "strukturudviklingen" - structural development - which in essence means that farms have gotten bigger and bigger, and the numbers of farmers have decreased rapidly. All of this is caused by speculation in land where farmers through subsidies and especially the hectare based subsidy have been encouraged to buy more land and become bigger. The result is that there are around 5800 full-time farms left in Denmark but the area taken up by agriculture remains the same, making the average size of a full-time farm over 200 hectares and the average price of a farm is around 6 million euros². These farms are mainly focused on livestock production or monoculture grain production.

This has created a narrative that small-scale farming doesn't exist in Denmark, and if anybody was to create a small-scale farm that wanted to do anything else than the "main-stream" industrial agriculture it wouldn't be profitable and can only be viewed as a part-time very expensive hobby. This narrative is obviously false as there are still quite a lot of small scale farms existing in Denmark - a lot of them full-time and trying to challenge the narrative of what agriculture is and should be (fig. 1).

¹ Foder til Føde. Danmarks Naturfredningsforening, Rådet for Grønt Omstilling et. al. 2020

² [De små lukker og de store bliver større. Information.dk - 9/6-25](http://www.information.dk/9/6-25)

Bedrifter efter bedriftstype, enhed, område, areal og tid		2024
Alle bedrifter		
Bedrifter (antal)		
Hele landet		
Gårde 0,1 - 10 ha	7 487	
Gårde 10 - 25 ha	6 163	
Gårde 25 - 50 ha	3 909	
Gårde 50 - 75 ha	2 093	
Gårde 75 - 125 ha	2 255	
Gårde 125 - 175 ha	1 482	
Gårde 175 - 250 ha	1 429	
Gårde 250 - 400 ha	1 416	
400,0 ha og derover	1 394	
Total antal bedrifter	27 628	

Fig 1. Number of farms after size. Danmarks Statistik

These farms often have a diverse production targeted towards local communities with direct sales on markets, in farm shops or through different CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) schemes.

These farms consider themselves, and are viewed by the local communities as more than “just” producers - they are important actors in the local community, and besides producers of food they are caretakers of the landscape, important social and cultural carriers, and for many of them also very engaged in different national discussions regarding food policies, agriculture, climate, biodiversity, health etc. While these farms try to produce food for the local community they are not isolated islands in the landscape but an integrated part of the web of rural life, and have an important role as such. Sadly, as is the case all over Europe, this is not viewed as valuable by conventional policies and in a traditional economic perspective, and therefore these farms exist not because of different agricultural policies and subsidies but more despite those policies.

What we have tried to do here is to gather some of the thoughts and reflections of a small number of these farms to highlight the perspectives from the fields and farms on what needs to be done to ensure a more healthy agricultural system. One that understands that we need to support the creation of many more small farms. A system that understands that real transition can only happen if we support and value small scale farmers, understand that the youth are the future of farming, and that we need food for local communities and not

products for export and global markets. This should therefore function as inspiration and a road map for the work to be done. Of course this is only a small part of the ideas, stories, and reflections that are happening in the countryside but it's a start - a start that shows that works need to be done and we already have people doing the work - trying to change agriculture and the food system instead of waiting for it to happen.

The Farms

Drys, Høsteriet, Jordbruget Soldug, Lerbjerggård, Mosegården, Trustrupgård & Yduns Have

We have talked with seven different farms to collect their stories and reflections on how it is starting up a small-scale farm in Denmark as a way to get the view from the peasants themselves, and specifically to show the different challenges and bottlenecks that they all face, and that even though the farms have their own particular context, some similar themes and aspects are experienced by all of them. The farms are from different parts of the country but centered on Sjælland and in Eastern Jutland. By mapping out these common experienced challenges we want to show concrete points that need to change or be addressed in public policies to support the creation of many more small-scale agroecological farms and thereby enable a real agricultural transition.

Six of the farms are small-scale farms that produce vegetables on an area ranging between 0,5-2 hectare - even though a couple of them have animals mainly for grazing purposes or layers for egg-product, and all of these farms grow vegetables in the market garden system with permanent beds. The last farm is 10 hectares and grows mainly vegetables but also grain in a field scale system. All of the farms sell their products either through direct sales to restaurants and cantinas, direct sales to private consumers from markets, a farm shop, or through a CSA-scheme. Almost all of the farmers interviewed have at one point been part of a formal agricultural education and most of them finished it. Five of the farms have people employed on the farm be they interns or "workers" that they pay a salary or food and accommodation.

These farms are also very present in the regenerative farming wave that has swept Denmark in the last five years where there is a heightened focus on soil health, photosynthesis optimization, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, and reduction of external inputs. In Frie Bønder - Levende Land [FBLL] we would probably consider the methods and practice used

by the farmers as examples of agroecological practices but because that term in Denmark (and other places) have a complicated relation to “mainstream” or conventional agriculture we in FBLL often use the term “naturnært landbrug” or nature-near agriculture instead; but since most of these farms don’t use these terms themselves we won’t force them into this category.

Another similarity between the farms presented here is that they are almost all young farmers below the age of 41, and come from a different background than agriculture, but have chosen for different reasons to change path and take up farming.

The Reflections and Experiences

Through the different conversations and surveys we saw that there were several different aspects that all of the farms touched upon as obstacles or things to be improved or changed. We have sorted these into the following four categories: Education, Finance and Access, Sales and Economy, and Community.

Education & Lack of Training

As mentioned, almost all of the farmers interviewed have at some point been part of a formal agricultural education and taken it at the organic farming school while some finished and others didn’t. While it was a common theme that the formal organic agricultural education had its lacks, three of the farmers highlighted that issue. They stated that the education doesn’t reflect what the majority of the students actually want to learn and their vision of agriculture. The education reflects the mainstream view of agriculture meaning that it teaches three main types of farming: Pig production, dairy production and plant production (grains and fodder). Implicit in this is the idea that this is what agriculture is, and there is no alternatives or reason to question it, if anything is to be asked it is how can we optimize and make our current production more efficient. There is only a focus on big scale industrial agriculture and not in any way on small-scale farming meaning that you are not being taught how agriculture can be different, or being taught in things you can relate to if you think small-scale.

Since all of the farms are growing vegetables they all critiqued how there is no focus on vegetable production but only on industrial scale animal production or mono-culture grain production, again stressing that this is not actually what the students are asking for or what

agriculture in general needs. The general narrative in Denmark is that we need to produce and eat more plants and vegetables both for climate and health reasons, and there is therefore a big question of why this is not being taught?

Since agricultural education is a formal education it is highly influenced by the main farming lobby in Denmark - Landbrug & Fødevarer - which is the Danish member of COPA-COGECA and therefore they have a big say in how the education is made and shaped, which might be why there is such a narrow focus on anything besides the conventional view of agriculture.

What the farms are therefore asking for is an education and training related to what they want to do and how to start as a young farmer. There is a need for targeting and supporting young farmers to enable them to start and create a farm both with practical knowledge but also with technical knowledge on how to start and run a business, and this should not only be for big scale industrial agriculture but also for small-scale production for human consumption as this is what is needed. When starting as a new small-scale farmer you both have to take on many different roles and tasks and all these require knowledge and training, but also role models that pave the way and show how it can or has been done:

“The biggest challenge was that I suddenly had to be a carpenter, accountant, farmer, boss, sales manager and so on - all at the same time. There were a lot of things that I didn’t know anything about and the learning curve was really steep.” (Høsteriet)

Six of the farms have for that reason also close ties with the Regenerative Farming School, which is a private education created in 2022 by passionate people from the regenerative movement. The school has tried to fill this gap that the formal education won't by creating an education which is tailor made for people that seek to work mainly with small-scale market gardening, but animal husbandry is also possible, and four of the farms have interns from the school to whom they pay a salary or work in exchange for food and accommodation, and through this internship are entitled to enroll in the school.

Finance & Access

On this aspect the farms differ a little but are mainly sharing the same experiences. The farms differ because two of the farms own their land and the rest rent land either on an already existing farm or in the case of two of the farms through an association that buys up land and farms to rent it out to young farmers to create a small-scale food production. They therefore haven't experienced so much an issue of access to land but more an issue of

getting funds and in which way you can access land. The average price of a hectare in Denmark is between 25.000-30.000 euro depending on the quality and location of the land, and the context for starting up a farm therefore changes quite a lot if you want to buy or rent land³.

Several of the farms described how it is impossible to borrow money from the banks if you want to start a small-scale production and farm, as the land they want to buy is simply too little; as in many other places the bottlenecks here are the banks that act as gatekeepers. The farmers describe how banks don't want to lend money to anything besides mainstream industrial agriculture as they don't see how this is a viable business model even though the farmers presented well-worked business plans and showed very specific ways that they could earn money. Again here is a need for role models that show this can be, and already is being done.

So in the case of buying land, a lot of the farmers experienced that if you don't already have a lot of money saved up or well-paid jobs it's very hard - next to impossible - to borrow money from the banks, and that you are therefore pushed more towards looking for models for renting land. If you then manage to get a loan from a bank then that bank also have a say in which way you can use the land, and in that way lose agency and a degree of autonomy as is the case of Mosegården that want to convert unused farmland into forest but are not allowed to by the bank because in their view the property will then lose value.

As mentioned, access to land is not an issue that the interviewed farmers have experienced but more of access to funds. Several of the farms stated that if they were to start up again it would require around 20.000 euro to start the business and earn money from year one if you already had access to rented land. Most of them stated that starting up as a young small-scale farmer you don't really expect help from any of the official institutions or subsidy schemes, if you want to start up it requires a lot of savings or a strong network and/or community to both help you financially and practically. This shows that it is possible to start up and earn money but it requires a lot of already saved up capital, and that itself is a gatekeeper of who is able to take up farming and start a farm.

The subsidies that were designed for helping young farmers - the Young Farmer subsidy - is not really something that you count on in the way you start a farm and structure a business if you are a small-scale producer. The reason for this as was described by the different farms

³ [Kampen om Jorden. Agrocura.dk - 27/9-25](#)

is that it's not designed for our type of small-scale farming, it's based on "normative rates" meaning that it's an official system that is calculating how much time you as a farmer use on your production depending on how many hectares you produce on and what crops you grow or what your production is, not taking into account how much you produce pr. hectare or the value produced. Drys and Lerbjerggård both describe how this has categorized them as part-time farmers even though they have at times been working 70 hours a week and have records to show that they are full-time farmers. This of course adds to the notion that the whole support and subsidy system is made for big scale industrial agriculture and that we as small-scale agroecological farmers don't fit into the different categories. While this sometimes can feel that it's a general tendency we have to remember that this is very much a Danish notion and derives from a political prioritization, Denmark is one of only two countries in the EU that doesn't have a model of Complementary Income Support for Young Farmers and neither have we implemented the Complementary Redistributive Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS) which effectively is the tool that redistributes CAP aid from the larger farms to the smaller farms.

From the farmers interviewed, the funds to start their farm were found in other ways - some used up their savings, another farm got a loan and used their savings and others used a mix of their own savings and borrowing from family and friends. Two of the farms as mentioned have a special agreement with an association - in one of cases the associations bought the land and rent it to the farm on a very favorable deal while at the same time investing in the farm and infrastructure; for the other they have a more "normal" rent deal although the association have a very positive attitude towards them. Although these models are still quite rare they are getting more and more popular, and hopefully they will grow as this will make it easier for young farmers to start up.

Community

All of the different farms mentioned community as a key word - both in getting access to land and finance as mentioned above, but also that a lot of them really value the help that the local community do for the farms - both by volunteering to help with the physical work but also the more intangible support. Another important community is the farm-to-farm community: The farmers have all been getting knowledge and inspirations from other farmers regarding production of vegetables, help with the administrative job, sales, finance and economy for starting up, contact to lawyers and accountants etc, and as a way of getting peer-to-peer training and knowledge. This is an invaluable resource among the small-scale

farmers and shows that the notion of competition among small-scale producers is not so much of a problem, but everybody wants to see more and better farms.

Mosegården also stated that community was one of their initial reasons for starting up in the first place: *“The farm is also a collective and is an experiment in trying to think of the farm as a community-based farm, and trying to achieve food sovereignty for the consumer.”* Which is also the reason why they are mainly trying to sell their products through a CSA-scheme that is based on solidarity; meaning that they give the option to differentiate the price of the scheme as a way to try to make their products available to people with a lower income.

Another farm also mentioned that the local community is one the main drivers for why they produce the way that they do:

“We want the farm to be a valuable part of the local community where a farm is not only a producer of food but also a social and cultural part of that community, and where the community also feels a sense of ownership and are all invested in the farm to exist. Where farming is a social action that produces food for the local community and doesn’t become an elitist luxury product.” (Jordbruget Soldug)

Sales & Economy

All of the farms do direct sales to private consumers either through markets, in their farm shops or a CSA-scheme where most of the customers learn about the farms through “word-of-mouth”, while some of the farms also sell to restaurants and cantinas. Even though it would be less work to just do the production and sell to a distributor all the farmers have chosen not to as it’s very hard making a living from growing vegetables, and by paying a distributor you are losing too big an amount of the value produced.

“The CSA-model is a safe and stable income that is also able to free the produce for the general market and prices going up-and-down. People that buy through their CSA want a wide selection so both high and low value crops are all part of the same package, meaning that you are not that dependent on producing mainly high value crops.” (Drys)

The farmers are also explaining the importance of creating the relation between the farms, consumers and the food produced, that if we want to change agriculture and the way that we

are growing food we also need to change the consumers' relation and understanding of what they eat and why they should eat somethings instead of something else.

Some of the farms explained how they would like to mainly sell to public schools and institutions because they want to feed the local community but because of the ways public procurement policies are structured they can't:

"As a farmer if you want to compete regarding public procurement it's always only focused on price and nothing else. So even if the institutions want to buy from you because of the way you grow or that you are part of the local community, they can't because they can only look at the price. And we can't - and don't want to - compete with the prices in industrial agriculture." (Jordbruget Soldug)

The main challenge when starting and running a farm is of course the economy. You work a lot - often around 50-60 hours a week - for a very low salary so it's very hard making ends meet:

"The economy! It's very hard earning enough money to pay a decent salary, pay VAT and the bills, while getting the investments back." (Høsteriet)

It's hard to compete against the bigger industrial farms as they also get a lot of subsidies like the hectare based subsidy which they can use to pay salaries, and this is intensifying the pressure on small farms that don't have the same advantages but still have to comply with the same standards. Mosegården explained how they see that there are a lot of procedures and demands that industrial agriculture has to comply with because its focus is on global export but small-scale farmers that focus on producing food for the local community also have to comply with these adding an extra burden on an already difficult situation. This is also referring back to workload that was mentioned where paperwork and administrative work are taking up a lot of time and space because it's complicated and the small farms usually have to do it all themselves. As Yduns Have explains:

"The contact with Food Safety Authorities is very draining. We have a smaller egg-production, and there's so much control and rules we have to follow that makes sense for big industrial productions but not for us. For example, we can't drive our chickens to the slaughter even though we have so few. [...] I think the main problem having a small farm is the versatility - not that it's small. We have a lot of different responsibilities and challenges on a daily basis that all require a lot of time and concentration." (Yduns Have)

On average from the farmers we talked to it's around a full work day or 10 hours a week they use on administrative work, and two of the farms have chosen not ask for EU-subsidies or be part of the organic certification system for these exact reasons - it's too much work and the amount of support you get more or less corresponds to the expenses you have used for the process.

Because of the difficulties of making the farm profitable a lot of the farmers interviewed have extra jobs besides the farm to add an extra income, some only through the off-season when vegetables are over, and some during the season. This of cause add some stability to an otherwise precarious economy but also add an extra work to an already heavy workload. Several of the farms explained that especially the first couple of years it was really needed to have a job on the side until the business was stable enough to make a profit, and around half of the farms had as one of the main priorities to be rid of the need to have a job on the side, while they rest still have a job on the side but mainly by choice. The reason here was to reduce the stress that came with the economic pressure. By having a part time job on the side you can reduce the burden coming from only making money from sales.

Most of them explained how especially in the beginning they have endured longer periods of time without being able to pay themselves a salary but over the years this has stabilised and now all of them are earning money but of course not a lot and usually below the average wage in Denmark, underlining the fact that the farmers involved are not in this business because of money but despite the low wages and precarious state they continue because find purpose in the work - either because they are attracted to the way of life or that they want to show that another kind of agriculture is possible and needed, and of course for most these aspects overlaps.

Drys and Lerbjerggård are both run by two people, each of them make around 2.500 euro/month before taxes, their employees or interns work less (30 hours a week) earning around 1.250 euro/month, and these numbers seem to be a bit above the average for a small-scale vegetable producer in Denmark but these are by now well-run market gardens and established businesses. But even though these numbers are in the higher end of self-employed small-scale farmers they are still well-below - more than half - of the average income in Denmark which is around 6.500 euro/month⁴.

⁴ [Månedsløn 2023. Danmarks Statistik](#)

This also reflects a general tendency in Europe where farmers in general earn 47% of the average income in Europe, and farmers under 40 years have the lowest average income in Europe, while women farmers at the same time earn less than men⁵.

Wishes

As seen in the different experiences and reflections of the farmers there are already quite a lot of ways we can go in trying to make it easier for young farmers to start up if they want to start a small-scale farm and challenge the narrative of what agriculture is and should be.

- One of the main things mentioned was the hectare-based subsidy. All of the farms stressed that we need to change the system so it doesn't support agriculture just because of how big it is but that we need to look at what and how it produces. Instead of a "blind" support we need to support real sustainable practices and farms so it incentivise farmers to grow with an eye towards biodiversity, soil health, climate emissions, diversity of crops, and to support farms for the way they produce and how much food they produce making it easier for smaller farms to get access to the subsidies. With the way it is now, we are maintaining a system that doesn't work, is not sustainable in any way, and is contributing to creating inequality and worsening climate change.
- A related topic was looking into financing and the influence of banks. We need to both change the Young Farmer subsidy so it's possible to be acknowledged as a full-time farmer even though you are a small-scale farmer, that the system is not only looking at size and crops but on production and food produced. This must also be translated to banks so that they understand that agriculture is not a better business or production just because you are bigger - it's often the other way around - and that it's therefore easier to get funds to start up or develop your production.
- An educational reform is needed so it's possible to be educated in agroecological farming, an education that shows other aspects of agriculture than the big scale industrial agriculture. But also an education that prioritizes teaching people how to start up a farm and the work related to it - the practical, theoretical, and administrative work.

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2658/oj>

- Several of the farmers also mentioned a support scheme that could help with the administrative work. That's it's possible to get free help for all the paperwork and to loosen the administrative burden - especially in the beginning when everything is new. One of the farms also suggested that there could be less administrative work for smaller farms. For example, farms below 20 hectares have to do less administrative work and have less controls.

“There’s so much to fill and documents to send to authorities that has to be done pr. company or farm, and when you have a smaller company with fewer employees it just takes proportionally longer time.” (Yduns Have)

- Several farms also suggested that a way to help with the economy of farming could be to remove VAT from vegetables and fruit grown locally both to ensure that the local producers earn a higher percentage from the sales but also to encourage consumers to eat more healthy, sustainable and local. Related to this was also the wish to change public procurement policies so it would be able for municipalities and public institutions to prioritize buying from local agroecological farms as a way to generate a stable safe income for farmers but also for the local community to get a closer relation to the local farms and food.

The ideas and reflections collected here are to give an overview of the different challenges that small agroecological farmers face in starting up their own production, of course it's only a brief and narrow insight into a topic that requires much more work and studying, but most of all it requires political willpower. A lot of the knowledge is already there, it just needs to be acted upon.

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