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SUCCESSION IN SMALL FAMILY ORGANIC FARMS IN POLAND – CONDITIONS AND BARRIERS

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to present the results of research on the determinants of succession in small family farms engaged in organic production in Poland. Particular attention is given to identifying farm owners' attitudes toward the process of transferring the farm to the next generation.
Design/methodology/approach: The study was based on an analysis of surveys conducted among 128 small farms, as well as on in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) carried out with 15 participants. The survey questionnaire included questions regarding the age of farmers, the presence of a potential successor, willingness to transfer the farm, and the attractiveness of the farm to successors. The interview questionnaire included questions concerning the reasons for perceiving a farm as attractive and the reasons for developing farms when the goal is their transfer.
Findings: The research results indicate a clear succession problem in small organic farms in Poland, mainly resulting from the aging of farmers and the limited number of potential successors. Despite a high declared willingness to transfer farms to the next generation, only a small proportion of respondents have a clearly identified successor, which indicates a low level of actual succession planning.
Research limitations/implications: The main limitations of the study concern the relatively small number of organizations surveyed, which may limit the ability to generalize the results. Additionally, the analysis is based on subjective assessments by respondents, which may lead to some measurement errors.
Practical implications: The research results provide practical guidance for farm owners and institutions supporting agricultural development, emphasizing the importance of early and deliberate succession planning.
Originality/value: The article contributes a new, empirical perspective to the literature on succession processes in small family organic farms in Poland. It provides data on the actual identification of successors and the factors that stimulate or hinder the succession process. It also stands out by taking into account the specific characteristics of organic farms, allowing for a better understanding of the challenges and barriers to succession in the context of modern, sustainable agriculture.
Keywords: Succession, Small family farms, Strategy, Organic farming, Management.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to identify the role of succession as a factor determining the development strategies of small organic farms, with particular emphasis on the impact of the lack of an identified successor on their modernization and long-term sustainability. The study tested the main hypothesis (H1) that the absence of an identified successor significantly constrains the growth orientation of the farm and the owners' propensity to invest. Two secondary hypotheses were also formulated: (H1a) in small organic farms, there is a significant discrepancy between the declared willingness to transfer the farm and the actual level of successor identification; (H1b) the presence of an identified successor significantly increases the owners' propensity to undertake investment and modernisation activities.

Empirical research was conducted using two complementary methods. In the quantitative phase, a standardized survey questionnaire was applied to a sample of 128 small organic family farms (up to 10 ha of agricultural land), selected through systematic random sampling from the IJHARS register. In the qualitative phase, 15 in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) were carried out with farm owners randomly selected from entities meeting the research criteria. Both studies were conducted in the following voivodeships: Łódź, Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Masovian, and Greater Poland.

Small family farms have long formed the foundation of Polish agriculture, combining food production with the preservation of traditions and local socio-cultural identity. In recent years, growing interest in organic products has given these farms renewed importance. They are increasingly becoming places where innovative production solutions are implemented, sustainable farming methods are tested, and added value is created in both local and national markets. At the same time, their continued operation faces numerous economic, demographic, and institutional constraints.

One of the most important issues determining the future of family farms is the process of succession, understood as the transfer of the farm to the next generation. This process includes not only the formal transfer of ownership, but also the transfer of knowledge, experience, and production and organizational practices that enable the continuation of farm operations. In the case of small organic farms, the issue of succession takes on particular significance, as it also involves maintaining organic certification, adapting to market requirements, and implementing new production and management technologies.

Effective succession planning should therefore be regarded as one of the key factors ensuring the sustainability of family farms and their ability to adapt to the changing conditions of the agricultural sector.

2. Literature review

2.1. Succession in Family Organic Farms

Family farms constitute the foundation of the agricultural system of the Republic of Poland, which is directly reflected in Article 23 of the Polish Constitution (Konstytucja, Art. 23). This provision highlights their particular importance not only in economic terms, but also in social and cultural dimensions. In practice, these farms account for approximately 99% of all agricultural holdings in Poland, forming the primary organizational structure of individual farming (Czekaj, 2016). Their role extends beyond production functions and also includes social, environmental, cultural-civilizational, and rural settlement functions. Family farms are simultaneously places where farming families live and act as repositories of intergenerational values, traditions, and cultural norms shaping the identity of rural areas (Zolotnytska, 2021).

Organic farms operate within a distinct business model compared to conventional farms. Organic production is more labor-intensive and requires substantial knowledge resources, while also obliging farmers to comply with specific environmental standards and certification systems. These farms are also more likely to rely on short supply chains, direct sales, and stronger connections with local markets. As a result, succession in such farms involves not only the transfer of assets and managerial functions, but also the transfer of specialized production knowledge and values related to sustainable farming.

A defining feature of family farms is the close link between the production unit and the household, where ownership, management, and economic responsibility remain in the hands of a single family. From a management perspective, succession in such entities is a multidimensional process burdened with a significant level of risk. It includes not only the transfer of ownership, but also the transfer of decision-making power, economic responsibility, and informal resources such as knowledge and relationships (Zajkowski, 2018; Ingram, 2023). Farm management is personal and long-term in nature, and economic decisions are strongly embedded in the family context (Soczewka et al., 2014). For this reason, ownership and managerial functions are traditionally passed from the senior generation to the junior generation, which constitutes the essence of succession. Today, this process represents one of the greatest and most important challenges faced by agricultural holdings, as its success or failure largely determines their economic viability and the sustainability of social structures in rural areas (Ślusarczyk et al., 2019).

In academic literature, succession is perceived not as a one-time legal act, but as a dynamic and multi-stage process involving the transfer of three key pillars of family farm functioning: knowledge, management, and ownership. This process should take place with respect for the values developed both by the family and by the farm itself (Fig. 1) (Lewandowska et al., 2017).

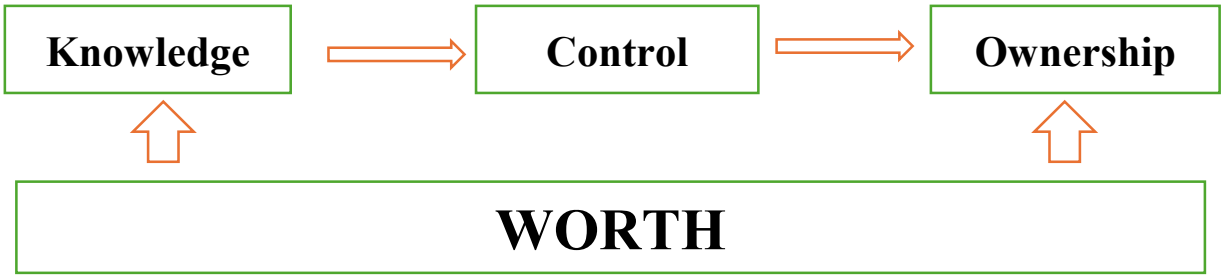

Figure 1. Succession – the transfer of knowledge, power, and ownership based on values.

Source: Own elaboration based on Lewandowska, 2015, p. 82.

The analysis of the subject literature indicates that the main areas of research on succession include planning the succession process, its course, and the identification of factors and barriers affecting the effectiveness of transferring the farm to the next generation (Szymczak, 2023; Dźwigoł-Barosz, 2018). The succession process is long-term in nature, and the succession plan is often conceptualized as a sequence of successive stages involving the gradual involvement of the successor in farm operations, the transfer of competencies, and the gradual reduction of the senior generation's professional activity (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Elements of a succession plan in family businesses.

Source: Own elaboration based on Lewandowska, Greser, Jakubowski, 2012.

The duration of the succession process depends on the specific characteristics of the farm and the individual situation of the farming family (Polkowska et al., 2024). In many cases, this process begins at a very early stage of the successor's life, starting with education and initial involvement in basic farm work. A critical moment is the transfer of managerial functions, that is, responsibility for making strategic investment and organizational decisions. In legal terms, succession most often takes place through donation, which is associated with strong emotional ties and the obligation to care for the senior, often legally secured in the form of usufruct rights. The specific nature of agricultural holdings means that the final stage of succession is often marked by the death of the senior, as, according to the common model of farm functioning, all generations of the family are involved in agricultural activity to varying degrees. Even after the formal transfer of responsibilities, seniors frequently continue to play an advisory role, supporting the successor with their experience and informal knowledge.

The literature indicates that a properly planned succession process may take from 7 to 10 years (Lewandowska, Andrzejczak, 2017), although in some approaches it may extend to as much as 20 years or even encompass the entire lifetime of the individuals involved (Zajkowski, 2018). Assuming a scenario in which the successor begins active participation in management

after completing higher education, full responsibility for the farm is typically assumed between the ages of 30 and 35 (Czekaj, 2016). For this reason, it is recommended to initiate succession-related discussions even 10-15 years before the planned retirement of the senior (Czekaj, 2018), as sudden and unplanned transfers of authority are among the main causes of failure in family businesses (Roszko-Wójtowicz, 2016).

The succession process should be considered not only in terms of generational change, but also as an element of the long-term development strategy of the farm. Decisions made during this period influence the direction of production specialization, the structure of assets, and the willingness to undertake investment risk. In this perspective, succession becomes a critical moment for redefining the farm's objectives, its competitive position, and its ability to adapt under increasing market and regulatory pressure. A lack of coherence between the senior's vision and the successor's plans may lead to developmental stagnation, whereas a well-planned and gradual transfer of authority fosters continuity in management and supports rational strategic decision-making.

Particular importance is also attached to the transfer of intangible capital, including practical knowledge, relationships with business partners, and the farm's reputation. The younger generation represents a significant source of innovation, especially in terms of digitalization of management processes, implementation of precision agriculture technologies, and the search for new distribution channels. However, the course and outcomes of succession vary significantly depending on the farm's economic potential, its functions, and the family's sources of income, which means that there is no single universal model of generational change and that an individualized approach is necessary.

Intergenerational cooperation in family farms is often based on the concept of intermentoring, which assumes the mutual exchange of knowledge, values, and competencies between the senior and the successor (Wiktorowicz, 2020). The younger generation brings a higher level of formal education, openness to innovation, and familiarity with modern information technologies, while the older generation offers practical experience, knowledge of local market conditions, and a greater propensity for responsible financial decision-making.

The takeover of farms by young successors is one of the key factors supporting structural change and increasing the competitiveness of agriculture. Young farmers are more likely to introduce changes in management style, diversify income sources, and implement organic farming, which is perceived as an opportunity to achieve higher added value and benefit from environmental subsidies (Ślusarczyk et al., 2019). At the same time, differences in approaches to modernization may generate conflicts. Older generation farmers more frequently report communication difficulties, noting that younger individuals tend to favor exclusively modern solutions at the expense of proven methods (Ginter et al., 2016).

2.2. Factors Stimulating Succession

The decision to transfer a farm results from a combination of economic, institutional, and personal factors. A key role is played by support instruments offered under the Common Agricultural Policy, including structural pensions and premiums for young farmers. For example, under the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027, it is possible to obtain a "young farmer premium" of up to PLN 200,000 to start agricultural activity or modernize a farm (Baer-Nawrocka, Kiryluk-Dryjska, 2023). Family tradition and the desire to preserve the "family heritage" also remain important motivating factors (Ślusarczyk et al., 2019). Demographic and health conditions of the senior generation, as well as social insurance system requirements determining eligibility for retirement and disability benefits, are also significant (Wojewodzic, 2017).

Factors delaying generational change are economic, social, psychological, and structural in nature. These include, among others, the low profitability of small farms, the outflow of young people to urban areas, the strong attachment of seniors to land, and agrarian fragmentation, all of which significantly slow down the pace of succession (Market Research World, 2025; Florek-Łuszczki, 2023; Stępniowska, 2013).

The absence of potential successors is one of the main factors leading to the liquidation of farms. Despite systemic support, Polish agriculture is facing a growing demographic crisis. The farming population is aging—between 2010 and 2020, the average age of farmers increased by three years, and the share of individuals aged 55-64 rose from 17% to 26%. One in three small farms reported a lack of successors, which in the long-term leads to farm closure or leasing land outside the family (Dudek, 2023). However, this phenomenon is secondary to the low economic attractiveness of agriculture. Changes in the work and lifestyle model of rural populations mean that demanding labor combined with relatively low and unstable agricultural income—especially in farms with limited economic potential—is perceived as an unattractive option.

As a consequence of these conditions, the phenomenon of apparent or deferred succession has emerged (Wojewodzic, 2013). It can be described as a compromise that allows current owners to access full retirement benefits while not forcing potential successors to abandon their personal aspirations. In such cases, the beneficiary becomes a farmer (the formal owner of the farm) somewhat against their will, while the actual farm work continues to be carried out by the senior generation.

It should be emphasized that in farms with lower economic potential, owners often rely on multiple sources of income. Agricultural production and investment are frequently limited, and the farm may serve residential or investment functions (Chmielewska, Zegar, 2022). An additional factor is the persistent masculinization of agriculture, which limits women's participation in succession processes (Dudek, 2023; Rodriguez-Lizano et al., 2020). As a result,

this leads to a reduction in family labor resources, affecting not only small but also large farms (Zegar, 2023).

Existing research on farm succession focuses primarily on conventional holdings or examines the agricultural sector as a whole, without distinguishing the specific characteristics of organic farms. While the literature does identify general barriers to succession — demographic, economic, and cultural — it largely overlooks the question of whether belonging to the organic sector, objectively regarded as promising and supported by systemic policy instruments, modifies owners' attitudes toward intergenerational transfer planning. There is also an absence of empirical studies addressing simultaneously three dimensions in relation to small farms of up to 10 hectares: the level of succession readiness, the farm's growth orientation, and the owner's subjective assessment of its attractiveness for potential successors. Existing analyses rarely operationalize the gap between declared willingness to transfer the farm and the actual identification of a successor as a distinct diagnostic variable.

3. Methods

The research procedure was divided into two complementary phases, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the first phase, a survey method was applied using a standardized questionnaire. The study covered a sample of 128 farms selected through systematic random sampling. The unit of analysis was a farm defined in accordance with the definition provided in the Civil Code (Dz.U. 2019, poz. 1145, art. 553). For the purposes of this study, organic production was defined in line with Council Regulation (EC) No. 834/2007 of 28 June 2007 on organic production and labeling of organic products (Dz.U. L 189 z 20.07.2007 r., art. 2 lit. a).

In the second phase of the research, the Individual In-Depth Interview (IDI) method was employed, allowing for a more detailed analysis of respondents' attitudes, motivations, and experiences related to the succession process in farms. This phase involved 15 farms selected through simple random sampling from among entities meeting the adopted research criteria.

Both stages of the study were conducted in four voivodeships: Łódzkie, Kujawsko-Pomorskie, Mazowieckie, and Wielkopolskie. Farms included in the study met the following criteria: agricultural land area not exceeding 10 hectares (Sass, 2021), engagement in certified organic production, and operation within the territory of Poland. Due to the lack of access to online contact data, both the survey and interviews were conducted through direct, face-to-face meetings with respondents.

The applied sampling frame was based on an official register of organic farms; however, it should be noted that the database did not contain information on the total area of agricultural holdings, but only on the area under organic production. To ensure consistency with the adopted research criteria, each respondent was asked to provide information on the total farm size prior to the interview. In cases where the farm did not meet the defined threshold (up to 10 hectares), the interview was discontinued.

Despite the use of a formal sampling frame and randomization procedures, the obtained research sample cannot be considered fully representative of the population of small organic farms in Poland. This limitation results primarily from difficulties in accessing respondents. Owners of small family farms often demonstrate low willingness to participate in research, which leads to non-response bias and restricts the ability to generalize findings. Additionally, the necessity of conducting the study through direct contact further constrained the pool of potential respondents, favoring individuals more open to interaction and potentially more engaged in farm management.

Another factor affecting representativeness is the lack of complete structural data in the sampling frame, which prevented full control over the distribution of key characteristics of the population, such as total farm size or economic strength. As a result, the sample may not fully reflect the heterogeneity of the population of small organic farms.

The structure of the sample indicates a dominance of farmers aged 36-55, with a relatively low share of young farmers, which reflects broader demographic trends in Polish agriculture but may also influence the observed attitudes toward succession and investment. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution, particularly in terms of extrapolation to the entire population.

The study is also subject to potential measurement error resulting from the use of self-reported data. Respondents' answers may be influenced by subjective perceptions, social desirability bias, and difficulties in accurately assessing future intentions, especially in relation to succession planning. This is particularly relevant for variables such as willingness to transfer the farm or perceived attractiveness for successors, which have a declarative character.

To mitigate these limitations, a mixed-methods approach was applied. The qualitative phase (IDI) served to deepen the interpretation of quantitative results and to identify underlying mechanisms shaping farmers' decisions. The triangulation of methods allowed for increasing the internal validity of the study, although it does not eliminate the limitations related to external validity.

A key element of the research design was the selection of analytical variables, which was directly guided by the identified research gap. The literature review indicates that existing studies on farm succession focus primarily on conventional farms or analyze the agricultural sector in an aggregated manner, without distinguishing the specific characteristics of organic farms. While the literature identifies general barriers to succession—demographic, economic,

and cultural—it rarely attempts to operationalize these factors in the context of small organic farms and their development strategies.

In response to this gap, three complementary analytical dimensions were adopted: the level of succession readiness, the developmental orientation of the farm, and the owner's subjective assessment of the farm's attractiveness for potential successors. Within these dimensions, key research variables were operationalized, including: identification of a successor, declared willingness to transfer the farm, propensity to undertake investments, and perceived attractiveness of the farm.

Particular importance was assigned to the variable capturing the discrepancy between the declared willingness to transfer the farm and the actual identification of a successor. In this study, this discrepancy was treated as a distinct analytical category. This approach extends existing research, in which this aspect is typically implicit or analyzed only indirectly.

Thus, the selection of variables was both theoretically grounded and exploratory in nature. On the one hand, it was based on insights derived from the literature on succession; on the other, it addressed the need to operationalize phenomena that have so far been insufficiently captured empirically, especially in relation to small organic farms.

A further methodological limitation concerns the scope of the statistical analysis. The quantitative phase of this study employs descriptive statistics. This decision reflects the exploratory nature of the research design and the constraints associated with the sample size (n = 128). Applying inferential tests, such as chi-square or Mann–Whitney U, to a sample that cannot be considered fully representative of the target population would risk producing results that are statistically significant yet theoretically or practically misleading. The relationships identified in this study should therefore be regarded as preliminary findings, subject to verification in future research conducted on larger, representative samples and employing inferential statistical methods, including logistic regression or structural equation modelling.

4. Results

The age of farmers is an important factor influencing their investment decisions as well as succession issues. The analysis of the age structure allows for the identification of three main groups: young farmers (up to 35 years), middle-aged farmers (36-55 years), and older farmers (over 55 years). From the perspective of farm development dynamics, three types of populations can also be distinguished: developing (25-35 years), stabilized (36-55 years), and declining (over 55 years).

The vast majority of the surveyed farmers (66%) fall within the 36-55 age range, which indicates that the studied population is relatively stable in terms of professional activity and production experience. However, attention should be drawn to the relatively low share of

young farmers. Farmers aged 25-35 account for only 6% of respondents, while those aged 36-45 represent 13%. This small proportion of young farmers suggests that most farms are managed by individuals in their most active working years, combining production experience with full work capacity.

The significant share of farmers aged 46-55 (53%) also indicates that in the coming years many farms will face the necessity of addressing succession issues. This is particularly important given that as many as 28% of respondents are over the age of 55, which confirms the widely observed trend of an aging farming population.

The influence of age on farmers' willingness to pursue farm development is clearly supported by the empirical data. Farmers under the age of 45 show the highest acceptance of this goal (83%), while among those aged 46-55 this share drops to 47%, and among those over 55 it falls further to 44%. Notably, farmers aged 46–55 most frequently report not pursuing this goal at all (41% of respondents in this group), while farmers over 55 most commonly express indifference toward farm development as an objective (44% of respondents). These figures directly quantify the conservative turn observed among older farmers: the transition from the 36–45 to the 55+ group corresponds to a near-halving of active development orientation, from 83% to 44%. This pattern corroborates the qualitative findings from the IDIs, which indicate that reduced investment activity among older farmers stems from a perceived sufficiency of current farm development and, above all, from the absence of a potential successor.

Farmers in the 55+ age group possess substantial experience, established production orientations, and a relatively strong economic position. In theory, these factors should determine a strong development potential; however, in practice, this group tends to adopt conservative strategies. The dominance of a cautious approach to management limits the full utilization of available resources in the process of farm modernization. This conservative attitude results from several interrelated factors (Fig. 3).

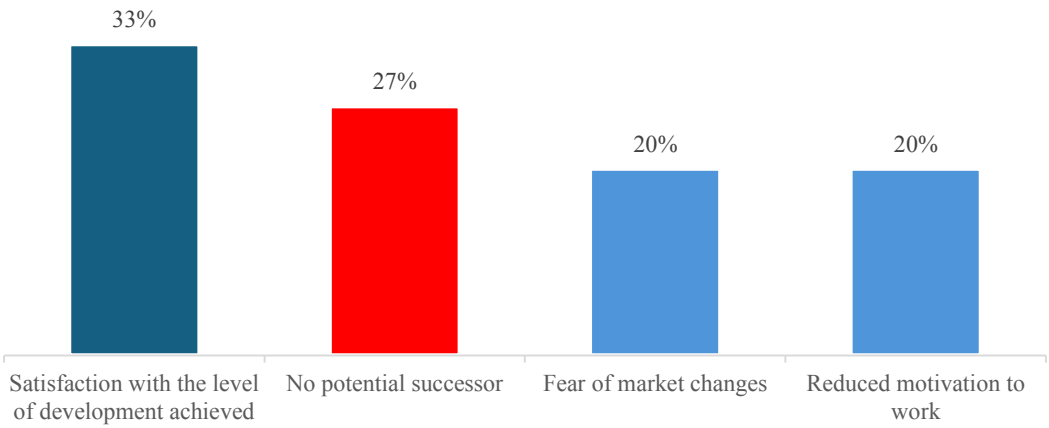

Figure 3. Reasons for limiting strategic investments in farms by farmers aged over 55.

Source: Own study based on individual in-depth interviews.

A key factor contributing to the decline in investment activity is the subjective perception of having reached an optimal level of farm development, ensuring economic stability and satisfaction of financial needs until retirement. From this perspective, further modernization is seen as economically unjustified or burdened with excessive risk. An equally significant barrier is the lack of a potential successor. In the opinion of respondents, the absence of a successor directly translates into a decline in motivation to undertake new initiatives. The absence of any prospect of farm transfer creates a self-reinforcing, self-destructive feedback loop: the farmer sees no purpose in further developing an entity that will cease to exist upon their withdrawal, which in turn leads to increasing professional apathy and disengagement from intensive farm management. In this context, other factors identified by respondents—such as fear of market volatility or a general decline in willingness to work—can also be viewed as derivatives of the absence of succession. The fear of market risk becomes more acute when there is no one to inherit the accumulated achievements, and the lack of a successor effectively removes the motivation to cope with a dynamic business environment.

Empirical data reveals a fundamental deficit in succession preparation processes among the surveyed farmers, indicating a discrepancy between the declarative and the actual implementation of intergenerational transfer. Although 34% of respondents declared having a potential successor, only 46% of this group were able to identify a specific individual, meaning they possessed at least a preliminary succession plan. Such a significant disparity demonstrates that, in the majority of farms, succession remains hypothetical and is characterized by a low level of operationalization. In light of the findings, succession issues extend beyond individual farmer decisions and constitute a structural challenge requiring more effective mechanisms to stimulate intergenerational transfer of agricultural assets.

To statistically verify the relationship between farmer age and the ability to identify a potential successor, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test was applied. At a significance level of $\alpha = 0.01$, the null hypothesis of independence between the two variables was rejected, confirming the existence of a statistically significant stochastic relationship between farmer age and the likelihood of identifying a successor. This result provides statistical support for the descriptive findings presented above: younger farmers demonstrate a markedly lower propensity to have identified a successor, while the oldest age group (55+) shows the greatest divergence between declared willingness to transfer the farm and actual successor identification. The chi-square test thus reinforces the conclusion that age is not merely a demographic background variable, but a structurally significant determinant of succession readiness in small organic farms.

Despite the low level of successor identification, a pro-succession orientation dominates within the studied group—79% of respondents plan to transfer their farms to the younger generation. Farmers aged 46-55 and those over 55 show the greatest readiness to hand over their farms. This suggests the existence of a pro-succession orientation that becomes more pronounced as professional activity declines. The analysis of the succession structure confirms

the strong embeddedness of traditional inheritance patterns in small farms. This aligns with existing literature, pointing to the phenomenon of patrilineal succession. In the vast majority of cases (92%), sons were indicated as potential successors, highlighting the persistent dominance of male offspring in the farm transfer process. This phenomenon is multidimensional, as it stems from entrenched socio-cultural norms and a conservative division of roles within rural families (Fig. 4).

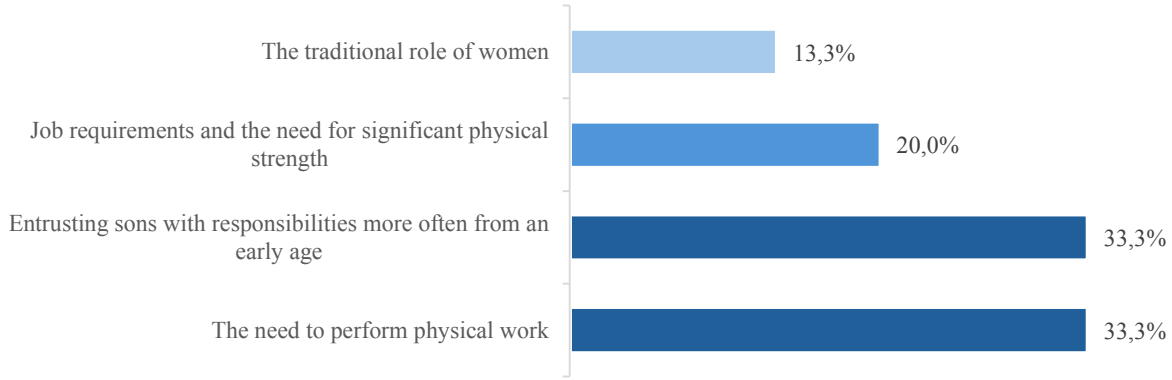

Figure 4. Why are farms more often inherited by sons rather than daughters?
Source: Own study based on individual in-depth interviews.

The dominance of sons in the succession structure is conditioned by deeply rooted socio-cultural constructs that shape perceptions of professional predispositions. In common understanding, agricultural work is associated with physical labor, which naturally directs farm owners' preferences toward male offspring. However, it should be noted that the ongoing mechanization and automation of production processes in modern agriculture significantly reduce the demand for heavy physical labor, making this argument increasingly less justified in light of actual operational requirements.

An important factor sustaining this model is the nature of early socialization within farming families. The long-term and systematic involvement of sons in farm work facilitates the transfer of practical knowledge and the internalization of the successor role, thereby reinforcing a sense of "natural" generational continuity along the male line. This process, strengthened by normative expectations within local rural communities, creates a specific "succession pathway", in which choosing a son is perceived as the solution most consistent with tradition.

A consequence of this phenomenon is the marginalization of daughters in the succession process. Although they increasingly possess higher qualifications and managerial competencies - key assets in managing modern farms - they remain outside the main succession stream. This leads to a mismatch between the competency profile of potential candidates and the culturally embedded model of a successor, which in the long term may limit the innovative potential of farms. This phenomenon reflects the underutilization of the educational potential of the female part of the younger generation, which, in the context of agricultural modernization, may constitute a barrier to improving farm management efficiency.

A key determinant of the dynamics of succession processes, alongside the declared willingness to transfer ownership, is the subjective perception of farm attractiveness from the perspective of potential successors. Research results indicate a relatively high level of optimism in this regard—75% of respondents perceive their farm as potentially attractive to the younger generation. However, a more detailed analysis reveals that these assessments vary significantly depending on the respondents' age.

The highest share of positive evaluations was observed among farmers aged 46-55 and, to some extent, among those over 55. This may be attributed to their well-established professional experience and the fact that their farms have reached a stage of developmental stability, which enhances their perception of the farm's market value and socio-economic prestige. On the other hand, the most critical views were identified among the oldest respondents (over 55). Despite their strong emotional attachment to the land, these farmers make a rational assessment of the structural barriers affecting small farms. Their skepticism results from an objective evaluation of profitability, which, in their opinion, often cannot compete with alternative employment opportunities available in the modern labor market.

Consequently, the assessment of succession attractiveness is dichotomous. On the one hand, it is a derivative of the emotional capital of the owners and the perceived intrinsic value of the farm, and on the other, reflect a sober appraisal of the real economic conditions that determine the chances for long-term continuation of the business in the future.

The results of in-depth interviews indicate a gradual redefinition of the role of small farms in the perception of their current owners. Respondents demonstrate a high level of economic realism, acknowledging that under current market conditions these farms are losing their primary function as the main source of livelihood and are increasingly becoming supplementary or complementary activities (Fig. 5).

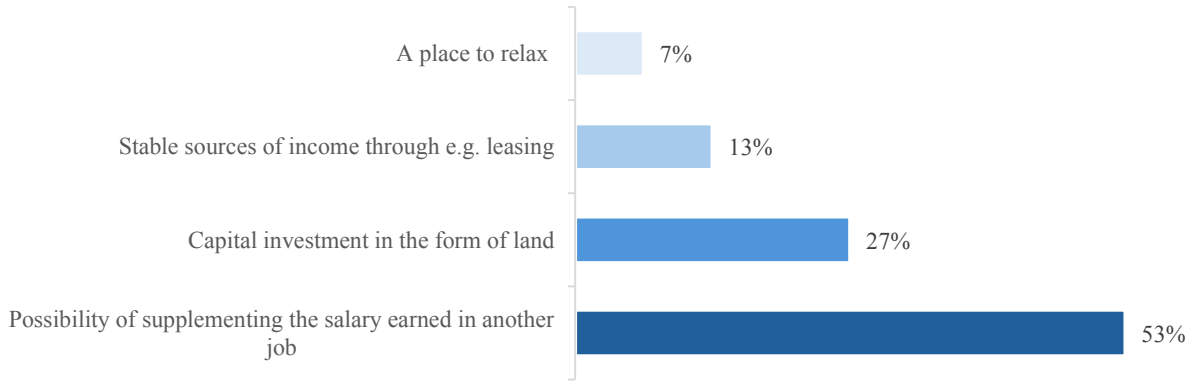

Figure 5. What factors influence the perception of a small family farm as attractive for future generations?

Source: Own study based on individual in-depth interviews.

Farm owners recognize that the small scale of production, combined with increasing mechanization, opens up new opportunities for so-called pluriactivity. The dominant factor determining the attractiveness of a farm and enabling its continuation—indicated by more than half of respondents—is the possibility of generating additional income, which significantly supplements household budgets primarily based on off-farm employment. In this model, agricultural production evolves into a supporting activity which, due to reduced labor intensity, allows for the effective combination of multiple professional roles without the need to abandon rural living.

An equally important pillar of the attractiveness of small farms is their capital dimension, understood as treating land as a secure store of value. Ownership of agricultural land is perceived by respondents as a stable financial safeguard and, through leasing arrangements, allows for the generation of passive land rent. This makes it possible to retain economic benefits from landownership while eliminating the need to engage in direct, labor-intensive crop or livestock production. A less frequently mentioned, yet still present, factor is the non-productive function of the farm, seen as a place of relaxation and a space for maintaining ties with the region. Overall, the findings suggest that the contemporary attractiveness of small farms is based on a hybrid model combining an income function (as a source of supplementary earnings) with a capital accumulation function, where land becomes a strategic asset for future generations.

The presence of a potential successor is a key factor influencing the development activity of the studied farms. Empirical analysis reveals an important interaction between the succession structure and the declared pro-development orientation (Fig. 6).

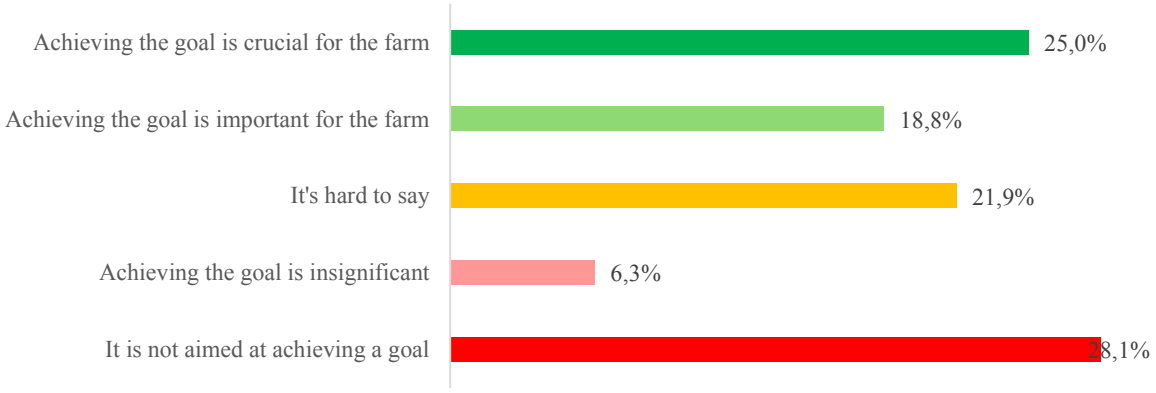

Figure 6. Implementation of the objective: "farm development with the intention of transferring it to the younger generation".

Source: Own study based on survey research.

While the share of farms strongly oriented toward development (considering it a key or important objective) amounts to 43.8%, in the group of farms identified as "succession-oriented" (i.e., those with a potential successor), this indicator shows a clear upward trend, reaching 58%. Moreover, within this group, as many as 35% of farmers assign development

goals the status of a strategic priority. This relationship indicates that having a successor fosters the concretization of investment plans and extends the planning horizon. The successor thus acts as a motivating factor that stabilizes the owner's investment intentions.

These findings are further corroborated by the results of a correlation analysis. The calculated Pearson correlation coefficient demonstrated that, at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.01$, the null hypothesis of independence between the variables can be rejected, confirming the existence of a statistically significant stochastic relationship between the presence of a potential successor and the pro-development orientation of the farm owner. This result confirms that having an identified successor significantly increases the farmer's propensity to undertake investment activities and to pursue the objective of farm development with the intention of transferring it to the next generation. In other words, the successor acts as a motivating factor that concretises investment plans and extends the strategic planning horizon.

Farmers' decisions to undertake development activities in farms with limited land area are also justified by concern for the future of the next generation (Fig. 7).

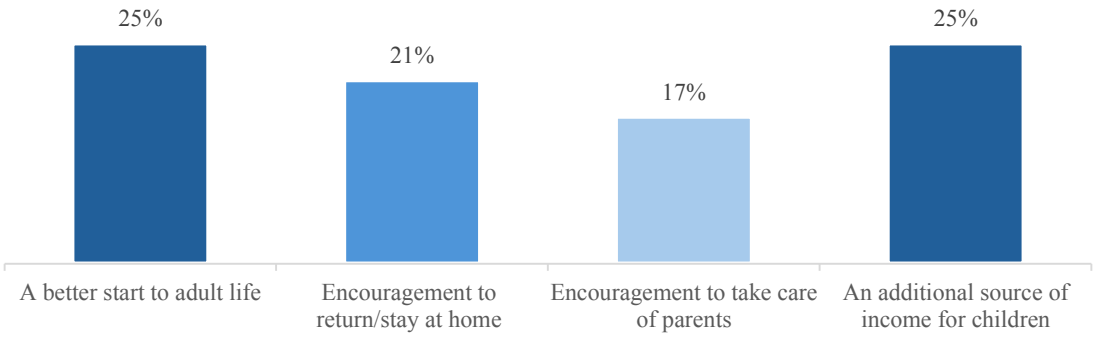

Figure 7. Factors motivating farmers to develop their farms with the intention of transferring them to the younger generation.

Source: Own study based on individual in-depth interviews.

The analysis of motivations indicates four complementary areas in which farmers perceive the rationale for modernization. The first is the desire to provide children with a better start in adult life (25%), which in practice means transferring a fully "equipped" working environment. An identical share of responses (25%) refers to the creation of the farm as a durable financial asset, constituting a significant form of capital security for children.

Modernization also serves a sociological function. Investment activities are aimed at creating conditions conducive to the return of children to their hometowns or encouraging them to remain on the farm, which is closely linked to the desire to maintain intergenerational continuity. An additional factor is the intention to secure future care from offspring by creating attractive living conditions for them in rural areas.

This suggests that investments in small farms are not driven solely by calculations of operational profit, but rather by a long-term strategy aimed at safeguarding family interests. Awareness of economic limitations resulting from small land areas leads farmers to adopt

measures focused on reducing labor intensity and simplifying production processes as much as possible. As a result, the farm adopts the model of a supplementary unit generating residual income, which serves as a useful addition to household budgets based on off-farm employment. Through this approach, farmers seek to minimize the risk of their children being excluded from the labor market and to provide them with a stable economic foundation in their home regions.

5. Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence on the determinants of succession in a specific and hitherto under-researched segment – small family organic farms. The hypotheses formulated were confirmed: H1 demonstrated that the absence of an identified successor significantly limits a growth-oriented outlook (58% vs. 43.8% for the full sample); H1a revealed a gap between the declared willingness to transfer the farm (79%) and the actual identification of a successor (only 34%); and H1b confirmed a positive relationship between the presence of a successor and the propensity to invest. A contribution relative to existing literature is the demonstration of these mechanisms specifically within the organic sector, which – contrary to intuition – does not act as a protective barrier against the succession crisis. The low share of young farmers in the sample (6% in the 25–35 age group) corresponds to data indicating that in the EU there are on average three farmers above 65 years of age for every one farmer below 40 (European Parliament, 2023). Dudek (2023) showed that in Poland one in three small farms reported having no successor – the present study suggests this tendency is even more pronounced within the organic sub-segment.

The low share of young farmers observed in the study sample (6% aged 25-35) is broadly consistent with the national demographic structure of Polish agriculture. According to data from the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS, 2023), farmers aged 25-34 account for approximately 10% of all individual farm holders employed on their own holdings, while those aged 35-44 represent around 22%. By contrast, the dominant age cohorts nationally are 45-54 and 55-64, together comprising over 55% of the farming population. The slight underrepresentation of the youngest cohort in the present sample relative to national averages may reflect the specific characteristics of the organic sub-sector and the geographic scope of the study, but the overall pattern — a strong concentration of farm holders in the 45-64 age range and a marginal presence of farmers under 35 — mirrors the broader national trend.

The relationship identified between successor identification and a development-oriented attitude is consistent with the findings of Bertolozzi-Caredio (2024), who, using a sample of 768 farms from nine European countries, found that successor identification leads to the adoption of on average two additional management strategies, while Borychowski, Grzelak and Stępień (2023) confirmed this mechanism using data from the Wielkopolska region. A degree

of divergence emerges, however, with regard to the short-term economic effects of succession. Dudek and Pawłowska (2022), analysing Polish FADN panel data, found no evidence that the mere transfer of a farm to a successor improves its economic situation in the short term, attributing this to the successor's prior influence on the farm's trajectory before the formal transfer takes place. The present study focuses precisely on this pre-transfer phase – the observed higher investment activity among farm owners who have identified a successor is therefore a manifestation of that earlier motivational effect, complementing the findings of Dudek and Pawłowska with an intentional and decision-making dimension.

An original and non-obvious finding is the absence of any protective 'organic effect' in the succession process. The literature indicates that newcomers to agriculture – people entering from outside farming families – are more inclined to adopt organic production models and innovative practices (Zagata and Sutherland, 2015). One might therefore expect the organic sector to attract the younger generation of environmentally conscious potential successors more strongly. Yet the results of this study – consistent with Borychowski et al. (2023) – point to the opposite relationship: the degree of ecological orientation in production is negatively correlated with the probability of finding a successor. This likely reflects the fundamentally different nature of the two groups: newcomers enter the organic sector driven by values, whereas farmers' children evaluate the inheritance through the lens of profitability and labour intensity. This is a key contribution of the article: the mechanisms of intra-family succession differ fundamentally from the patterns of entry into farming from outside the sector.

The dominance of sons as designated successors is fully consistent with the literature – Liu et al. (2023) demonstrated a sevenfold higher probability of a son being selected in US studies, while Sutherland (2023) described the cultural mechanisms that perpetuate the masculine succession pathway. The original contribution of the present work lies in situating this phenomenon within the organic sector context and capturing the subjective rationalisation offered by respondents, who cite the physical nature of farm work as a key argument – despite the fact that ongoing mechanisation renders this justification increasingly untenable. Rodriguez-Lizano et al. (2020), in their review of the determinants of succession, do not identify the specificity of the organic sector as a separate moderating variable, meaning that the present study fills this empirical gap.

The evolution of small farms towards a pluriactivity model is consistent with the observations of Chmielewska and Zegar (2022) and with the European trend of the most rapid liquidation occurring among precisely the smallest farm units (European Parliament, 2023). These findings have concrete practical implications: CAP 2023-2027 instruments – such as young farmer start-up grants – should be directed towards stimulating genuine succession planning rather than merely formal ownership transfer, since the observed fictitious succession (Wojewodzic, 2013) remains a structural phenomenon. Answering the question of the effectiveness of such interventions requires longitudinal studies tracking the same farms over time. Future research should also incorporate the perspective of potential successors – not only

farm owners – and verify whether the results obtained for central Poland are representative of regions with different agrarian structures.

Not all findings of this study, however, are consistent with the existing literature. First, the results suggest a dominant role of economic factors in succession decisions—the lack of profitability of small organic farms is identified as the main barrier to intergenerational transfer. Meanwhile, Czyżewski et al. (2024), examining small farms in Central and Eastern Europe (Romania, Moldova, Serbia), demonstrated that social embeddedness is a more important predictor of succession pathways than economic factors. This finding suggests that policies focused solely on improving profitability may not be sufficient to resolve the succession crisis, and that strengthening local support networks may be equally important.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted confirms that succession in small family organic farms constitutes a significant structural problem, the scale of which may be underestimated in the existing literature. The findings indicate that despite a high level of declared readiness to transfer the farm, the actual preparation of the succession process remains low, revealing a substantial gap between intentions and actions. At the same time, the study demonstrates that the presence of an identified successor acts as a key activating factor — reinforcing a growth -oriented outlook and the propensity to invest.

Against the backdrop of existing research, a particularly significant contribution of this article is the demonstration that the organic farming sector — despite its developmental character and institutional support — does not eliminate succession barriers. This implies that economic and demographic factors carry greater weight than the specific nature of the production model.

The findings have important implications for the development of agricultural management practice. They suggest the need to reorient agricultural policy instruments — in particular the Common Agricultural Policy — away from a focus on formal ownership transfer and towards support for genuine succession planning, encompassing the competency development of successors and the gradual handover of managerial responsibility.

The results obtained may serve as a starting point for further research, in particular of a longitudinal nature, which would allow for the analysis of changes occurring over time and the evaluation of the effectiveness of public interventions. It is also advisable to broaden the research perspective to include the viewpoint of potential successors and to account for regional variation in agrarian structure. In-depth analyses in this area may contribute to better design of tools supporting the sustainability and competitiveness of small family farms under conditions of advancing demographic and economic change.

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