

Malta Youth in Agriculture Foundation: connecting young farmers and taking a stand for a sustainable future

Jeanette Borg

Would you mind starting by presenting yourself, your academic background and specialty? Why did you choose the career path of an advocate for youth and a specialty in agro-ecosystems management?

I have always worked in the local agricultural sector and still feel passionate about it. I studied agriculture and agroecosystem management at the University of Malta. This gave me a good foundation to develop new competencies and skills.

At the age of 26 I co-founded a social enterprise which gave me a different insight about how local agriculture can be further diversified to become more sustainable. The Merrill Rural Network evolved through the years and now brings together several growers, breeders and artisans who provide rural experiences in the Maltese Islands. Investing time and money into a start-up has taught me resilience and firsthand experience in entrepreneurship.

Working as a Lecturer at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) has also been a positive experience, giving me the opportunity to work with youth interested in learning and working in agriculture. Apart from technical subjects related to production, the Rural Development Policy of the European Union and entrepreneurship are my main fields.

Inspired by a press trip in Estonia in 2013, I founded the Malta Youth in Agriculture (MaYA) Foundation, together with two young farmers. The organization aims to give a voice to local young farmers. Working as a volunteer within MaYA gave me the opportunity to actively contribute to the rural community.

Recently, I completed my Master's degree where I researched young farmers in Malta. These young people are the future of agriculture, and due to the lack of generation renewal in Malta I decided to focus on this area of study. Information obtained from the National Statistics Office (Tanti, 2020) revealed that the population size of young farmers having a managerial role who were 40 years old or younger stood at 1239 at the time of research.

The most important question posed in Malta is: **“are there any young farmers left in Malta?”** We know how many young people are registered through the National Statistics Office, other than that we knew very little.

Over the past three years you have worked on a research project as part of your Masters for the University of Malta, would you mind telling us more about the subject and your main findings?

The scope of the study was to investigate trends and characteristics of young farmers in Malta. This study was carried out under the tutorship of Professor Everaldo Attard who is heading the Rural Sciences and Food Systems Division, within the Institute of Earth Systems, at the University of Malta.

Local agricultural production keeps dwindling and there are fewer young farmers in Malta compared to the European average. Data about a variety of themes was collected from a representative sample. I visited more than a hundred and twenty farms during 2020 and the pandemic made this situation even more logistically challenging.

Focus was given to areas which had not been studied before, such as education and training background, trading and marketing practices, EU funding, organisational affiliation and social life. Strong statistical correlations emerged with regard to job status; that is whether young farmers are registered as full-time farmers, or part-time, or unregistered. It also transpired that the “job status” criteria is highly correlated to the age, gender, and number of working hours per week, amongst other factors.

Respondents were also asked about the challenges and opportunities they are facing. Improved marketing and an increase in the demand for local products are the two most important opportunities identified. Many other opportunities have been mentioned by the young farmers, shedding more light on what can improve the current situation. On the other hand, harsh competition and an increase in the costs of production were the two most mentioned challenges. Young farmers seem to have a very clear idea about what is hindering progress and actions that can make their farming activity more sustainable.

Considering the fact that you met a lot of young farmers and stakeholders, if you had to name 3 principal challenges they face to engage in sustainable food systems, what would they be?

Unfair competition: Competition will always keep businesses on tiptoes, however what is really hindering a fair playing field to our local farmers is the lack of enforcement at the sales point. Farmers are producing within a highly regulated framework in spite of the fact that we have farms that are way smaller than the European average. Once the product has reached the sales point, it may lack labeling and packaging, so it is easy to mix the local produce with imported products. The demand for local products is present much more so than a decade ago, however consumers may be buying a product which is disguised as

local. Other countries produce at cheaper prices due to economies of scale, so vendors make more profits when selling products that cost less. It is only fair that vendors choose to sell whatever yields more profits, but not to the detriment of local farmers and consumers. Food fraud is a very complicated issue. Farmers have been alleging these issues for many years and yet not enough research and enforcement has been carried out at a local level.

Climate Crisis: Our summers are becoming increasingly harsh with prolonged high temperatures. By the end-of-century, up to 3.7°C mean annual temperature rise and a decrease of 25% of precipitation are projected - 80% of days could be ‘hot days’. We are also experiencing extreme events such as strong winds and torrential rains which were less frequent. Being a group of small islands makes our fields more exposed to possible damages. Farmers have suffered considerable losses over the years due to damages on green houses and other structures. Mitigating climate change is an issue high on the EU agenda and certainly a priority to be tackled in Malta due to our vulnerability.

Bureaucracy: Through experience I have assisted many farmers who were struggling with paperwork and permitting issues. Although we are living in the digital age, there are still processes and procedures related to authorities that need to be better facilitated. Farmers often deal with numerous departments and entities to carry out their jobs. People working in agriculture are committed to long hours, so leaving their farms to attend meetings and procure necessary documents can be stressful, if not impossible. Making processes more efficient and improving synergy across government entities will surely help farmers to focus on their duties.

You founded MaYA, would you mind telling us about the conception of your

organization? What challenges did you face and what positive impact did you manage to have on a short and long term?

It started in 2013 when Malta lacked an organization representing young farmers compared to other countries. At the time, there were only sectoral organizations with cooperatives dedicated to specific areas of production, such as dairy producers. Young farmers represent the long-term solution as they are the future of agriculture.

However, raising awareness was not a common occurrence and therefore more pressure and a stronger representation were necessary. Hotel owners and restaurateurs, for instance, have strong lobby groups, but in farming it is not the case. Having a representation to speak out in the media and the press and giving an element of awareness to the general public was a challenge, but surely contributed to an improved sensitivity towards food producers in Malta. No farming means no local food. It's drastic but it's true.

Another challenge we encountered over the years is that young farmers are sometimes too busy to get involved in a youth organisation, or they do not see the scope of working within a group. Unfortunately, the “divide and rule” mentality still prevails in the local agriculture sector, so as MaYA, we needed to push our collaborative ideals to the rural community. We might not have succeeded in full, but we can feel a difference in attitude when young farmers contact us to acquire information, or to share experiences, or to be represented when an issue arises. We are proud to have provided support to many young farmers and the rural community in general over the years.

This improved awareness is just one of the goals achieved. Also, we strived to cooperate with other organisations which have experience in other fields, but are equally aligned to our principles. Our projects and actions harness

cooperation and transparency which to young farmers are important. We learnt a great deal from collaborations while working closely with other NGOs advocating for the environment, land use issues, good governance and civil society. Creating synergy with such organisations widened the scope of the Foundation and helped us reach our objectives.



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You have been working with young farmers in Malta through your work within MaYA so you must have come across many stakeholders. Among the youth, are there differences in agricultural production? Do they produce the same things or are there a variety of crops, livestock etc.?

In Malta, agricultural production is varied. The production of fruits, vegetables and milk from dairy cattle are the largest segments. We also produce eggs, poultry, pig and rabbit meat and cheese from sheep, goats and cows. Young farmers always bring fresh ideas and new energy to their families in agriculture. They are willing to try different things, challenge the status quo with new practices but there hasn't been a drastic change in the food chain. There are various limitations, however one major challenge is that young farmers are often not the decision makers of the family farm. Other young farmers who have taken over farms or started a new business from scratch have a totally different mindset.

Social media is one phenomenon that helped to change the social landscape over the past few years. The fact that farmers are now connected to the internet, whatever the age, has been a tangible improvement. They look up information online and discover innovative things. For example, someone producing herbs can find information about other countries, what's trending on the market and how to present products to be more valuable in the food chain. It opens a window to new opportunities since Malta is a closed community so the possibility of networking leads to innovation. Being exposed to more information gradually changes the mentality of farmers. Several young farmers are definitely trying new approaches and finding possible solutions which take up fewer resources.

What kind of consumers and where do the youth usually sell their produce? What is their target market and main competitors?

Local farmers have a variety of sales channels; through the local markets, or selling directly to consumers but they still rely a lot on middle men ; even with livestock. The population grew a lot over the past 10 years and the demand for food has obviously increased.

Tough competition is being faced due to flooding of the market with foreign produce. Since we're part of the European Union the existing free trade is not helping in this regard. Consumers are price sensitive so the availability of imported products sometimes hinders local farmers from accessing a fair market. The smallness and traditionality of our production make it difficult to compete with larger countries.

Price is a very good indicator when it comes to what consumers choose. Local people might prefer locally produced food, because it's seasonal and fresh, however retail outlets might sell local produce at a higher price because of the margins they make. Some supermarkets offer a larger range of non-local products since the

demand for cheaper products is high. Costs of production are high in Malta with costly inputs such as imported fertilizers and pesticides. The cost of livestock feed stepped up by more than 30% over the past year. The majority of the farmers produce agricultural products because it is their livelihood so they have to be financially sustainable too.

Did you notice changes in the way youth work on farms and in agriculture in general; compared to older generations? Is there a new way of doing things emerging from their exploitations?

Land use issues are one of the main issues that have been discussed at a local level for the past two years. But I think young farmers have a different outlook on production and marketing which has created a generational change.

Education and vision for product development is different between young people and the older generations. For older farmers, selling produce meant taking the produce to the local market and that's where the story ends. Younger farmers now know that depending entirely on the middlemen also means accepting the price which is offered. Young producers who have created their own sales channel are faring much better than the rest, even though they realize that there is a further investment to be made.

How is agriculture, food security and youth taken into account by public policies and decision-makers in Malta? Considering that Malta joined the EU in 2004, did it imply changes?

Over the past few years, prioritizing the local economy has been given high importance and rightly so. The pandemic has taught us many lessons, and ensuring food security in an insular country is one of them. Agriculture is a minor economic sector in Malta but has value in other aspects related to social and environmental

fronts. Land use issues, especially urban sprawl, are pressing on our farmers. The more land we take up, the less land we can have available to produce food, which is a message that still has to get through to politicians.

Local research is also alerting us on other issues such as climate change. It's not a perception but again I think there has to be more planning, education and climatic mitigation to avoid having farmers lose their products. There are ways that can help tackle the climate crisis but we need to know these methods to reach the final stakeholders. We need more synergies between research, policy makers and farmers. The New Water Project implemented in Malta for instance is providing a sustainable source of irrigation water to growers. Farmers are now hoping that this pilot project will be accessible across the islands. Such measures protecting our limited resources ensure long-term sustainability.

As Members of the European Union the agriculture sector in Malta has been given a considerable push in terms of funding aimed at restructuring, investment and environmental conservation. The absorption of rural development funding has resulted in many positive outcomes.

How does MaYA and your other activities bring solutions to these various challenges? Since 2012, what path have you paved with the help of young farmers and positive stakeholders?

Creating networking opportunities and facilitating the flow of information between stakeholders was catalytic. This approach helped us to keep young farmers updated with policy changes, funding, regulations and issues happening locally; before these issues were not getting to the farmers and vice-versa to policy makers.



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Farmers do not always have the time to attend meetings and to monitor the news so we started acting as a bridge that helps young farmers, policy-makers and the general public to gain more knowledge leaving no room for misinformation to get across. Having a healthy discussion and establishing a communication platform was essential.

We provide feedback on policies, we attend meetings, there is a flow of information and without communication you cannot expect the stakeholders to be on the same page. We're also very vocal and bring awareness in the press with many articles every year. We manage to get the issues of young farmers and make sure the government takes them up. What happens in the local media affects the sensitivity and initiative of the general public and politicians themselves.

Another initiative we are implementing is [“Rural CSR”](#). In collaboration with the Merill Rural Network which aims to bridge commercial entities to the local community in order to invest in and support green sustainable projects. Our collective years of experience working with rural stakeholders have proven that there is a great need for green investment, and we also know that companies are willing to support similar initiatives. However, these businesses often do not seem to know where and how to invest, and would be undoubtedly and understandably

hesitant to support projects which are not adequately planned out. This budding database sets to make this match-making process feasible and achievable. We hope that our research, planning and outreach will entice local companies to invest in such green CSR projects. Needless to say, we offer such companies well-deserved exposure together with other benefits, when supporting any of our activities.



Photo credits : MaYA

I think young farmers now feel that they are part of a system. They are more visible and represented as a group, and acknowledged to be the future farmers. Farmers contact us to ask questions and reach out with various needs and requests, which I think is a positive change. They are finally reaching out and they know someone cares for issues that are common for all farmers.

How did you build the ecosystem?

In order to fully comprehend MaYA's standing, one needs to understand the local situation prior to 2012. At that time, the term "young farmer" was barely ever mentioned locally. Awareness and communication efforts started to change that status quo and created a positive snowball effect. Today we are moving onto new challenges. Back then we started to communicate with young farmers both in remote settings through social media and even with

physical events, and the community started to portray itself in a different light.

Throughout the years we kept this approach; we post links from newspapers, create discussions, allow feedback to come in, and ask our supporters to point out issues. The repercussions of better communication were very positive and even if there is still a lot to do, and our budget is always limited, support from the press and other entities helped us create an audience that goes beyond the rural community.

Having a website is the most basic form of online communication, and being present on social media helps people to reach out. Providing factual information helped MaYA gain a reputation of integrity and transparency. Respect is earned and not taken for granted. There have been many issues tackled by MaYA over these past years including land use issues, food chain management, and the covid situation. Being present in the media worked both ways. Having the farmers' position made known publicly was important to have the general public supporting local producers.

Because we want to paint a complete picture of the situation in Malta, what would you say about the strengths and opportunities of young people engaged in agriculture and rural development?

They can reach consumers better than before and products are already being marketed much better. The public opinion is more positive towards local produce and local farming because Malta's becoming increasingly urbanized so the farmers are the guardians of the land and without them it's more concrete, roads and buildings. It's a strength for farmers, they're there to protect agricultural land and to produce food.

Can you share a few success stories about young Maltese working in agriculture?

The pandemic has been a catalyst for change. Many young farmers started building a new network of collaborators while making local produce more accessible to consumers. Technology and social media facilitated this. In fact most of these new businesses make use of Facebook to showcase their weekly produce and communicate directly with their clients. This is a huge change when considering that the vast majority of the farmers took their produce to middlemen until a couple of years ago. The change in mentality of young people will continue to drive local products to a whole new level where accessibility can improve the demand.

Collaborations emerged between young farmers and with other stakeholders. Chefs for instance capitalize on their knowledge to use local products to offer traditional dishes in their restaurants.

Other success stories entail processing, so as to add value to raw products. The production of local cheeses such as ġbejniet, pickles, marmalade and other conserves are a way to preserve and increase the potential of local products. Efforts made to brand and package products have changed the landscape of how locally produced food is marketed. When farmers embrace diversification, the better are the chances to succeed.

Several projects have been implemented by young farmers through EU funding measures. The local community will surely benefit from the setting up of newly established farms producing food in a sustainable manner.

Food quality labels, either national, European or international are an effective tool to protect traditional know-how and local products. What is the situation in Malta right now? Do farmers make use of these quality labels to protect and grow their activities?

The potential of UNESCO trade mark and EU quality labels still needs to be explored. I am sure that local producers would benefit if they unite and protect their unique products with a quality label. So far, we had indigenous grape varieties and wine varieties being recognised at a National and EU level. The “ftira”, which is a local type of bread, has also been recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage in Malta. These are positive steps.

Your opinion about cooperatives?

I strongly believe in the synergy that can be created when a group of individuals willingly work together to achieve a common goal. Throughout my career I have been able to be part of various fruitful collaborations, including coops. The lack of an organisation’s own resources and its willingness to strive, make collaboration a logical solution.

We need more proactive entrepreneurs willing to work with each other. Unless young people are encouraged, through education and a bottom-up approach, we will keep on saying that there are plenty of opportunities without anyone ready to take them up.

If you had 3 urgent recommendations for the Maltese government and other decision-making spheres of the Mediterranean region on how to optimize the accompaniment of young people interested in/working in agriculture and the structures helping them out... What would you ask for ?

- **Involve more farmers and organisations in decision making spheres.** We are influenced by what happens in the EU. When you see youth at the center of discussions you feel like things are moving forward; however, in Malta we need to make more efforts to have young farmers voice their opinion.

- **Putting enough resources in the civil service so as to strengthen government departments:** Investing in government bodies will help the sector; for example, food fraud needs testing and an efficient system to safeguard the interest of farmers. Having proper resources at the disposal of food fraud related entities can greatly improve the local farming situation.
- **Enhance synergies and encourage authorities to collaborate:** agronomics, policy makers, researchers, veterinarians, environmentalists are amongst the professionals that can be part of a consolidated entity to assist farmers. Unfortunately, farmers are often victims of bureaucracy and fragmented services.

Considering the evolutions of the Mediterranean and its never-ending challenges, how would you imagine the situation of the Maltese agricultural sector and its youth in 2030?

Given the land use challenges that were never so drastic and imposing as they are now, it all depends on how the government tackles the issues. There are things that can be done to achieve sustainable production but some farmers are being threatened to be evicted from their land by the landlord. Land has to be valued for what it is and how it is contributing to the nation, rather than a recreational treasure. We hope that solutions are found to maintain our sector alive. As a Foundation we have been raising our concerns over the last few years as we believe that our country should embrace Sustainable Development Goals, in particular those related to health, wellbeing, economic growth, responsible production and consumption.

When the local population was smaller, we were already dependent on imports, but now with

more than half a million citizens, it is difficult to ensure food security. Some farmers struggle to sell their produce because they can't make it to the high value chains. Our efforts need to be diverted on how to market and sell our produce better. Focusing on local production and consumption would also help in reducing the carbon emissions resulting from the importation of food.

SDGs to embrace as we fight challenges related to the local agricultural sector:

- #3 Good Health and Wellbeing
- #8 Decent work and economic growth
- #12 Responsible production and consumption
- #13 Climate Action
- #17 Partnership for the goals

Concluding remarks

Throughout my years working with youth in agriculture I have been able to really understand both the needs and strengths of the sector. Despite the enormous challenges faced by young farmers in the Maltese Islands I have faith in the fact that we are already witnessing positive change. You only need a few leaders with entrepreneurial skills to change the whole perspective of the rest, so it is our duty to nurture these individuals so that they thrive and motivate others.

[Interview by Lana Khouildi]

Jeanette Borg graduated in rural sciences and gained experience while serving various posts within the public and private sectors. Co-founder of the Merill Rural Network, a social enterprise specialised in sustainable rural tourism, where she also led an EAFRD-funded project. She founded the Malta Youth in Agriculture Foundation (MaYA) in 2013 to create bridges and opportunities for youth in Malta, especially farmers, and by carrying their voices and opinions into decision-making spheres. She is now a Senior

Lecturer at MCAST where she lectures about the European Rural Development Policy, entrepreneurship, and marketing amongst other subjects.

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