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Valuing Family Farming in Portugal through the Family Farming Statute

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ABSTRACT: Many family farmers depend on public support to maintain their activity, which highlights the need to review the challenges associated with their farming system and marketing. The importance of family farming reinforces the need to include this sector in agricultural, environmental, and social policies, identifying opportunities and promoting the necessary changes to ensure more equitable and balanced development. In Portugal, in 2018, the Family Farming Statute was established to distinguish, recognise, and value family farming through specific local support measures. In this study, farmers with the Family Farming Statute in the North of Portugal were characterised. Interviews were conducted using questionnaires, and the indicators/requirements currently provided in the statute were analysed. Based on the literature review, new indicators have been suggested to help increase the number of family farmers included in the Statute. Despite being a good policy to support family farming, the Family Farming Statute needs revision to ensure wider inclusion. Support should be more attractive and comprehensive, including economic support, technical assistance, training programmes, local marketing channels, valorisation of traditional products, and short supply chains.

Keywords: Family farmers; Functions of family farming; Traditional production systems; Agricultural policies

1. Introduction

Family farming is the predominant agricultural system worldwide and plays a critical role in food security and nutrition, sustainable management of natural resources, rural community cohesion, and the preservation of cultural heritage [1,2]. Beyond its contribution to food systems, family farms are essential for maintaining rural populations by generating job opportunities and ensuring stable household incomes. Yet, despite its importance, the number of small farms continues to decline in the European Union (EU): in 2020, there were 9.1 million farms, down from 12.2 million in 2010 [3,4]. At the same time, many EU

agricultural producers increasingly depend on public support to remain economically viable, underscoring the need to reassess farmers' concerns and the structural challenges they face.

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), established in 1962, represents a long-standing partnership between the EU, society, and the agricultural sector. Its main objectives are to support farmers, improve agricultural productivity while ensuring an affordable food supply, secure a fair standard of living for farmers, mitigate climate change, and promote sustainable natural resource management. The CAP also seeks to preserve rural landscapes and boost rural economies by creating employment opportunities within agriculture, the agri-food sector, and related industries [5].

For the 2021–2027 period, the CAP budget amounts to €386.6 billion, comprising the European Agricultural Guarantee Fund (€291.1 billion) and the European Agricultural Fund of Rural Development (€95.5 billion). The latter includes €8 billion from the Next Generation EU stimulus package to support structural transitions aligned with the European Green Deal and digitalisation goals [6,7]. Importantly, this framework provides specific measures to support smaller farms and grants EU Member States greater flexibility to tailor interventions to specific regional and local conditions [7]. However, their effectiveness depends on whether national strategies adequately prioritise the needs of family farmers and translate them into operational support, ensuring their continuity and sustainability, and overcoming the environmental consequences of rural abandonment [8–10].

In Portugal, Order No. 7423/2017 identified approximately 284,000 farms as family-owned, representing 93% of all holdings and 49% of the Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA). The 2019 Agricultural Census [10] reported 290,000 farms in mainland Portugal—15,500 fewer than in the 2009 census. Despite this reduction, the UAA increased by 7% compared to 2009, reaching 3.9 million hectares (43% of the national territory). This expansion is primarily due to an increase in the average holding size, which currently stands at 13.6 hectares (+1.6 hectares compared to 2009).

Despite the central role of family farming in ensuring food security, territorial cohesion, and environmental sustainability, existing agricultural support frameworks—both at the EU and national level—often fail to account for the sector's multifunctionality. As a result, many family farmers remain under-recognised in policy design, and existing measures such as the Family Farming Statute (FFS) have shown limited uptake and political visibility.

Among EU Member States, Portugal stands out in having developed a dedicated FFS, intended to formally recognize and value this form of agriculture [11,12]. Established in 2018 through Decree-Law No. 64/2018 [13] and later amended by Decree-Law No. 81/2021 [14], the FFS aims to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of family farming and to provide a framework for more targeted support (Table 1).

Table 1. Main benefits associated with the Family Farming Statute under Decree-Law No. 81/2021 [14].

Benefit Category	Description
Targeted policy measures	Access to public policies specifically supporting agricultural and forestry activities.
Market access	Support for the creation, revitalisation, and operation of local markets and short supply chains, facilitating direct sales to consumers.
Tailored credit lines	Eligibility for credit instruments adapted to the needs and scale of family farming.
Priority access to land	Priority rights to lease or purchase land from the State's private domain.
Training and advisory services	Access to specialised training, information, and technical advisory services in agriculture and forestry.
Fiscal and insurance benefits	Eligibility for benefits related to marked (agricultural) diesel, agricultural insurance schemes, and other cost-reducing mechanisms.
Specific tax and social security regime	Access to a tax and social security framework adapted to the characteristics of family farming.

In the Northern Region of Portugal, the UAA totals 663,340 ha—around 17% of the mainland's UAA (Table 2)—and comprises 109,771 farms, 1070 fewer than in 2009. This region alone accounts for 38% of all Portuguese farm holdings [10].

Table 2. Number of agricultural holdings and UAA in the Northern Region in 2009 and 2019 [10].

Year	Number of Agricultural Holdings	UAA
2009	110,841	644,027
2019	109,771	663,340

In terms of the economic size (Table 3), the vast majority of farms are classified as 'very small' (74.4%), followed by 17.2% "small" farms, 6.5% "medium", and only 1.8% "large" [15].

Table 3. Typology of agricultural holdings in the north [15].

Economic Size	Classification	Number of Farms	%
<8000 euros/ano	very small	81.676	74.4
≥8000 a <25,000 euros	small	18.922	17.2
≥25,000 a <100,000 euros	medium-small/medium-large	7.173	6.5
≥100,000 euros	large/very large	2.000	1.8

However, after seven years of implementation, the FFS has not achieved the expected level of farmer participation. This limited adhesion is largely attributable to the restrictive eligibility requirements and the limited attractiveness of the associated benefits. As of 30 June 2023, only 1148 farmers had been granted FFS recognition out of 2907 applications, despite an estimated universe of more than 270,000 potential beneficiaries [16]. One year later, the number of recognized FFS holders had increased to just 2961 [11]. These figures suggest that current agricultural support measures continue to undervalue the existence and role of family farming. This lack of recognition is both a cause and a consequence of the sector's marginality, stemming not only from insufficient public support but also due to negative appreciation of family farming within broader society [17].

The narrow focus of existing FFS eligibility criteria—particularly income limits and economic thresholds—may exclude a substantial share of legitimate family farmers. This reinforces the need for a broader, multidimensional indicator framework that captures the social, cultural, environmental, and economic functions of family farming.

Given this context, the present study employs a set of social, physical, cultural, economic, and environmental indicators to describe and understand the contribution of the family farming sector in the north of Portugal, and to identify the gap between the current application of the FFS and its potential. To further explore family farmers' perceptions, constraints, and satisfaction with the FFS, a qualitative analysis based on semi-structured interviews was also undertaken. Together, these two methodologies aim to inform a more effective FFS by identifying additional indicators or requirements that could make the process fairer, more inclusive, and more attractive to family farmers.

In light of these challenges, and given the growing relevance of family farming for territorial cohesion, environmental sustainability and food security, this article aims (1) to critically analyse the current indicators and requirements of the FFS, identifying conceptual and operational gaps and proposing additional indicators to strengthen its application, (2) to characterise farmers holding the FFS in the Northern region of Portugal, and (3) to examine farmers' perceptions, constraints and motivations regarding the FFS, proposing evidence-based improvements that could enhance its inclusiveness, effectiveness and policy relevance. By consolidating these aims, the article seeks to contribute to an updated and more representative model for recognising family farming in Portugal.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Analysis of Indicators and Methodological Basis

The challenges of FF in each region differ greatly depending on the context, structure, and socioeconomic development. Thus, it is essential to understand the functions and importance of family farming in each region to organize effective programs/policies to support the sector [18]. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [19], an indicator is a measure or parameter used to represent or identify a situation, simplify the communication process, and support the development of policies and programs to support the situation in question.

In this way, the required indicators in the context of Decree-Law No. 64/2018 [13] and Ordinance No. 73/2019 [20], later updated by the Decree-Law No. 81/2021 [14] and Ordinance No. 228/2021 [21], for the attribution of the FFS have been analysed, as well as, other indicators were studied, for a better characterization and inclusion of the activity, role and involvement of family farming in the North of Portugal. A descriptive and explanatory method was used, supported by the literature, and the indicators were allocated to the following dimensions: physical, social, economic, environmental, and cultural, facilitating analysis.

Several complementary indicators are also suggested within these dimensions, providing additional insights into Family Farming. Their interaction enhances the agricultural context and contributes to its valorisation. Table 4 presents both the indicators/requirements that currently determine access to the FFS and new possible indicators that may, in the future, allow a larger number of family farmers to be included. This analysis, in addition to systematising the indicators/requirements for access to the FFS, seeks to highlight other indicators related to traditional farming, which remain significant in current family farming and are supported by several authors.

Table 4. Indicators that currently determine the access to the Family Farming Statute in Portugal (I) and possible new indicators referred in the sources of information related with family farming (N).

Dimension	Indicators	FFS Indicators	Possible New Indicators	References
Social	Responsible for a farm	I		[13,22–25]
	Household farm management and labour	I		[1,13,24,26,27]
	Short supply chain		N	[23,28–31]
Physical	Utilised agricultural area (UAA)		N	[15,24]
Economic	Partial or full agricultural labour		N	[15,22,32–36]
	Farms classification		N	[1,2,15]
	Taxable income of the holder	I		[13,24,37]
Environmental	Predominantly extensive production system		N	[15,38–41]
	Traditional production systems, with preference for local/native breeds, species and cultivars		N	[1,42–44]
	Polyculture/diverse land occupation		N	[31,36,38,45,46]
	Sustainability		N	[2,44,47,48]
Cultural	Cultural diversity		N	[1,45]

2.2. Perceptions, Constrains, and Satisfaction with the FFS Interviews

In 2023, the former Regional Directorate of Agriculture and Fisheries of the North (DRAPN), currently integrated into the Northern Regional Coordination and Development Commission (CCDRN), requested from the Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DGADR) the collection, editing, and analysis of information on farmers holding the Family Farming Status (FFS) in the Northern region of

Portugal. This information, made available through the CCDRN GeoPortal, was used in the present article. The data refer to June 2022 and indicate the existence of 620 farmers in the Northern region of Portugal with Family Farming Status.

To understand farmers' perceptions, constrains, and satisfaction with the FFs, a semi-structured interview survey was carried out among farmers with FFs in the northern region of Portugal. This study was exploratory and qualitative in nature, relying on interviews as a means to identify how new candidates could be motivated to apply. The content analysis of the interviews with farmers also followed a qualitative approach [49], with the aim of assessing the facilitators and barriers they face in transitioning to more sustainable practices and understanding the concerns that affect their daily lives.

In this context, the Alto Minho subregion of northern Portugal was selected as the area, given its high density of family farmers. A total of 85 farmers were identified, 62 men and 23 women. From this group, eight farmers with FFS were interviewed, five men and three women, reflecting the broader gender distribution, in which women represent only 27% of FFS holders in the region. Of the interviewees, four were primarily engaged in crop production and four in animal husbandry, offering a balanced perspective on different farming systems. In addition, the selection of the interviewees was carried out by age group, in order to include two producers for each of the four age groups (18–40, 41–55, 56–64, ≥65), one with plant production and the other with animal production as the main activities.

The survey questions are available in the Appendix A (Table A1). A face-to-face interview was conducted, with a duration of 25 to 40 min each.

The survey and interview guide were submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu.

At the first contact, farmers were informed that participation was voluntary, responses would remain confidential, and the results would be processed in a way that would not identify the study participants. At the time of the interview, this information was reinforced, and participants were asked to sign the informed consent form. Authorization to record the interview was also requested and accepted by the interviewees without objection. After the interviews were completed, the responses were listened to and transcribed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Existing and Proposed Family Farming Indicators

The main indicators/requirements that currently determine access to the FFS in Portugal are presented in Table 4, as well as the proposed new indicators that, in the future, could contribute to include a greater number of family farmers (FF's), as discussed hereby. The new indicators are proposed on the basis of existing literature and analysis of the interviews.

3.1.1. Social Dimension Indicators

Responsible for a Farm

In the Decree-Law No. 64/2018 [13] and 81/2021 [14], it is well defined that the person responsible must be the owner of a family farm, as owner, renter, borrower, or other right, and only from the age of 18. Although Garner and Campos [24] states that a family farm considers the land as an asset of the family that owns the land it cultivates, Bélière et al. [22] stated that it is also possible to be a "producer" without owning land, by renting land to cultivate, which confirms the definition that family farmers may not be the owners of the farm. Also, the holder can increase the area through leasing or other ways [25].

In addition, the farm uses the labour and capital of the entrepreneur/head of the farm and the family, provided they are beneficiaries of the economic activity (Regulation (EU) No. 1320/2013) [23].

Household Farm Management and Labour

It is defined in the Portuguese Decree-Law that the manager of the FF belongs to the family, and the farm must use family labour in an equal percentage or greater than 50% of the total human resources. This i in agreement with the statement presented in the International Year of Family Farming [14], as family farming: "is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, reproductive, social, and cultural functions".

In addition, nowadays, more than the traditional mutual aid between neighbouring farms, the arrival of family and friends from the city, during a weekend or a short vacation is usual to help in periods of greatest need for labour [27], along with the acceptable labour hiring for those periods (Scoville, 1947, as cited in Garner & Campos [24]).

In addition to the relationship between FF with land property and labour, it is common to consider the transfer (succession) of the farm within the family and housing in the same location as important characteristics of family farming [24,26].

Short Supply Chain

The European Union, within the scope of rural development policies (Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013) [5], states that the short supply chain involves a limited number of economic operators, committed to co-operation, local economic development, as well as geographic and social relations between producers, processors, and consumers.

In these commercialization models, family farms continue to play an important role in adding value to agricultural production and transforming it into products and services that circulate at the local level [28]. Food production from family farms drives local food trade and motivates demand based on local relationships and trust [31]. Tibério et al. [29] pointed out the need for a collaborative effort to build self-sustaining, place-based food economies in which production, processing, distribution, and consumption are integrated in ways that improve the economy, environment, and social health of a specific place. These may contribute to the revitalization of rural areas, requiring recognition, promoting available local agents and resources, and facilitating the integration of small farmers into the market [30].

3.1.2. Physical Dimension Indicator

The evolution of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) is often used as an indicator of resilience in the agricultural sector, as changes mirror farmers' responses to external and internal pressures to which the sector has been subjected [15]. Therefore, the decrease in total UAA is a reality in Portugal, particularly in regions where small family farms predominate.

The appropriate size for a family farm should ensure the maintenance of traditional polycultural systems (where agricultural crops, animal production, forestry, *etc*., are combined), simultaneously with the use of equipment for labour savings and an adequate economic return to maintain a socially acceptable standard of living (Scoville, 1947, as cited in Garner & Campos [24]).

3.1.3. Economic Dimension Indicators

Partial or Full Agricultural Labour

Bélières et al. [22] highlight that family farming is characterized by a link between economic activity and the family structure. This relationship influences the choice of activities, the organization of family work, the management of production factors, and the transfer of property.

In Portugal, self-employment on small farms does not necessarily represent the main activity of the farmer, and agriculture may not be the main source of income [33,34]. The accumulation of agricultural activity with other paid activities and part-time activities continues to be of great importance, and contributes to the diversification of the income of farmers' households [15]. In fact, Moreno et al. [36] reported that family farms' income in Portugal depends mainly on external resources. The farm constitutes a complement to household income, which comes from other sources such as pensions, salaries, or other businesses [35].

Also, in the USA, many small farms also have a substantial off-farm income [37]. Most off-farm income is from a wage, salary job or self-employment or from social security, pensions, dividends, interest, and rent, especially among older farmers who are often retired from other activities [32].

Farms Classification

The size of the farm, both in terms of area and production, may be a less important indicator to define the family farm. The size is difficult to contextualize, given the diversified agricultural activities from crop production to livestock, fishing, forestry, *etc*. Farm sizes vary according to region, production systems, or other historical factors. According to GPP [15], in 2019 in Portugal, family farming tends to be carried out on properties of small and medium physical size and small and very small economic size, little specialized or non-specialized, with frequent use of multi-income and pluriactivity.

Taxable Income of the Holder

Among the indicators currently registered for FFS attribution, 'Income from Agricultural Activity' is one of the main reasons why family farmers do not obtain the statute. It is defined in Decree-Law nº 81/2021 [14] that the household, per taxpayer, cannot have a taxable income higher than the fourth bracket of personal income tax, meaning that, in 2023, it could not exceed €20,700. With this restriction, all farmers with higher incomes, earned in another activity outside the farm, which is very common in this context, are not considered family farmers under the scope of the law. This situation is problematic and disconnected from the reality of rural families, as many of them are, in fact, family farmers, considering other indicators arising from their multiple functions.

In addition, the attribution of the statute depends on a minimum of 20% of family income from agricultural activity, compared to taxable income. However, several factors, including the irregularity of agricultural years resulting from climatic conditions, market fluctuations, and informal commercialization, among other conditions, contribute to the fact that many family farmers, unfortunately, are unable to meet this indicator every year.

Another constraint is the requirement that the holder of FFS have a CAP support (Base Payment Scheme and/or Small Agriculture Regime) of less than 5000.00 € per year. Although this amount is defined based on eligibility criteria related to the family farm, it usually represents only a very small percentage of the costs required to maintain the activity (e.g., production factors, infrastructure maintenance, and equipment).

3.1.4. Environmental Dimension Indicators

Predominantly Extensive Production System

The extensive systems may include the production of animals exclusively in the field, the use of natural resources, and the minimum use of agricultural equipment, facilities, and labour [40]. The ruminants' extensive grazing based on permanent pastures is essential for several ecosystem services, as carbon sequestration, erosion control, water quality improvement, biodiversity preservation, maintenance of natural habitats, regulation of floods, and fire control [41]. Ragkos et al. [39] emphasized that family-based

extensive systems have the ability to survive more easily during periods of adverse external conditions due to low capital endowments and the use of family labour.

In Portugal, part of the area occupied by arable land was converted into permanent pastures, meaning a significant change in the UAA use, including a reduction of the cultivated surface, as these pastures are largely natural, not sown [15]. However, for example, in Brazil, family farming is the target of incentives for the production of organic food or food obtained through agroecology, which provides a competitive advantage in the search for quality and socio-environmental responsibility [38].

Traditional Production Systems, with Preference for Local/Native Breeds, Species, and Cultivars

Over the centuries, traditional agricultural production has shaped landscapes and contributed to the preservation of biodiversity by using land in ways suited to natural conditions [43]. It is recognized that family farming guarantees the preservation of local/native breeds, species, and cultivars, as well as, the preservation and development of traditional production systems, with practices that are more respectful with the environment, also important for tourism, as seen in several Portuguese regions [1,16,44].

Polyculture/Diverse Land Occupation

Polyculture is a practice in which farmers produce a variety of products from agricultural activities and livestock production. The total yield per hectare is often higher in polycultural systems than in monocultures, even when the production of each of the individual components is lower [45]. The characteristics of small-sized family farms, including the diversification of crops and productions, generate less use of external production factors, especially fertilizers and pesticides, which ensure greater sustainability and environmental quality [31,38]. As a result, they contribute to better soil preservation and increased people's quality of life, namely through working with lower risks and healthier eating [31] . However, due to the reduction of agricultural activity, family farms currently tend to move towards specialization and no longer traditional polyculture [46].

Nevertheless, family farming is predominantly based on polyculture and close to the consumer, which makes it less prone to external influences on price formation, leading to greater price stability [38]. In addition, family farming characteristics include the family vegetable garden and animal production for self-consumption, important for the family economy and, frequently, benefiting other people in the community [36].

Sustainability

Sustainable production in an agroecosystem derives from the balance between plants, soil, nutrients, sunlight, water, and other coexisting organisms. The agroecosystem is productive and healthy when these growing conditions prevail, and when plants remain resilient to tolerate stress and adversity [45].

Ensuring sustainable agricultural production constitutes one of the main solutions for conserving regional biodiversity and economic development [48]. The International Institute for Environment and Development [47] suggests that the sustainability of family farms depends on several factors, including markets for inputs and outputs of agricultural products, land use legislation, population pressures, as well as other economic, social, and cultural factors. Also, it is recognized that family farms have advantages in terms of environmental sustainability and the possibility of responding to increasing climate change [2]. In part, this is because of their greater attachment to local communities and landscapes, and a higher level of interest and care for the natural environment. In addition, family farms tend to be more receptive to adopting sustainable approaches that rely upon intricate knowledge of family labour on farmland and local ecosystems based on agroecological principles.

3.1.5. Cultural Dimension Indicator

The sustainability of family farming depends on several factors, as already discussed, but also on the intergenerational transfer of local knowledge and traditional practices, resources, and social identity [1]. Altieri [45] emphasized that family farming is firmly linked to sustainability, both for the territory and for the people who are part of the communities. Thus, sustainability is not possible without preserving the inherent heritage of each region, which is essential for the preservation and transmission of local agricultural practices, particularly those related with more sustainable agricultural systems.

3.2. Characterization of Family Farmers with the Family Farming Status in the Northern Region of Portugal

In the studied area, there were 100,598 potential family farmers, and only 620 hold the FFS, in June 2022. From these, 82% were dedicated to crop production and 18% to animal production, representing approximately the type of family farming in the region [10,11,50].

Family farmers with FFS are predominantly men (68%), about half are over 56 years old (20% 56–64 years and 30% over 65 years), 36% aged 41 to 55, and only 14% are between 18–40 years old. The average farm size for producers with FFS in the North is 11.1 ha.

Farmers with FFS in the North exhibit considerable agricultural diversification. The main crops include fruit trees (e.g., chestnut, almond, hazelnut, pome and stone fruits, small fruits), vineyards, permanent pastures, temporary crops (arable and vegetable crops), and olive groves.

In 2022, cattle were the predominant livestock species (40%) on farms with FFS, followed by sheep (21%), horses and donkeys (13%), goats and pigs (8% each), poultry (6%), rabbits (3%), and beekeeping (2%).

3.3. Perceptions, Constraints, and Motivations of Family Farmers towards the FFS in Alto Minho

Analysis of the interviews revealed the main indicators/requirements that currently determine access to the FFS. At the same time, it contributed to a better understanding of the new indicators that could be suggested to represent and include a greater number of family farmers as they are.

3.3.1. Sociodemographic Issues

The ages of the interviewees ranged from 31 to 66 years, with educational attainment varying from primary school (4th grade) to higher education. All households varied from two to six members. Net monthly income (NMI) ranged between €500 to about €3000, depending on the household size and the degree of involvement in on and off-farm activities. Production was primarily for self-consumption, with surpluses sold locally, including to wineries, butchers, and small retailers. In most cases, agricultural activity was complemented by other sources of income related to the farm, such as agricultural services, rural tourism, or on-farm restaurants using self-produced ingredients.

The motivations expressed for continuing agricultural activity were mostly affective and identity-based, including family legacy, passion for farming, and the desire to provide healthy food for the household. Labour shortages were commonly reported during periods of high demand (e.g., harvest), prompting reliance on relatives, neighbours, and friends. The prevalence of smallholdings and the fragmented land structure typical of the Alto Minho subregion pose significant challenges, making farm work more labour-intensive and reducing economic profitability.

3.3.2. Agricultural Practices

All interviewees practiced traditional farming, cultivating vegetables for household consumption, thereby reducing food expenditure and improving food diversity and quality. Crop rotation was widely practiced, except when land availability was limited. Intercropping, notably maize with beans, remains in

use. For fertilization, farmers reported the use of synthetic chemical fertilizers, which they considered essential for commercial productivity. Nevertheless, they also applied organic amendments such as green manure, animal manure, and compost. As for plant protection, most farmers use synthetic pesticides, but some interviewees adopted biopesticides, biological control (particularly in olive groves), and insect traps. When producing for self-consumption, most farmers actively avoid using pesticides to protect their family's health. All respondents expressed awareness of the environmental negative impacts of their agricultural practices, mainly on biodiversity.

When questioned about organic production, several constraints were identified, including the high cost and limited availability of certified production factors, limited area for crop rotation, greater difficulties in controlling weeds, pests and diseases, difficulty in selling animals at fair prices, cost of certification and excessive bureaucracy, and also productivity losses during the conversion period.

In terms of irrigation, all farmers had access to water sources (e.g., wells, boreholes). Drip irrigation was the most common system (used by five farmers), while furrow and sprinkler irrigation were also reported. Several farmers used multiple irrigation systems, adapting them to crop requirements.

3.3.3. Land Tenure and Access

All interviewees belong to farming families and inherited farmland, and most also acquired additional plots over time. In general, farmers owned the land they cultivated. However, they reported significant difficulties in accessing new land, citing a lack of interest in land leasing or sales by other owners, which constrained their ability to expand.

3.3.4. Animal Production

In all cases, herd sizes were small, with fewer than 30 animals per species. The most common livestock were cattle, sheep, and poultry, with one farmer raising goats and pigs. Animals were reared in semi-intensive systems, with daytime grazing and night-time sheltering. Farmers purchased feed, hay, and veterinary medicines, including antibiotics, as needed.

3.3.5. Farmers' Recommendations

Interviewed farmers proposed several policy and support measures to strengthen family farming in Alto Minho, such as, possibility and support for access/acquisition to adjacent lands to increase the area of agricultural plots; improvements of irrigation systems and paths to crop fields; incentives for crop diversification and introduction of new products; facilitation of credit access, technical assistance and training programmes; support for local marketing channels, valorisation of traditional products, and promotion of short supply chains.

4. Conclusions

In rural territories, family farms are essential for sustaining local populations by generating employment, ensuring fair incomes, and maintaining social, environmental, and cultural functions. The FFS was designed as a national complement to the CAP, enabling EU support measures to be more effectively targeted toward family farmers. Although the statute does not introduce new support mechanisms, it has the potential to ensure a fairer and more context-appropriate application of existing policies.

Despite the high prevalence of family farms in Portugal, this study reveals a strikingly low adherence to the FFS in the North of Portugal. This weak uptake raises concerns about whether the current access requirements adequately reflect the realities of family farming. The existing indicators and requirements remain restrictive, favouring a narrow subset of farmers with very low taxable income and overlooking the broader social, cultural, and environmental dimensions that characterise family farming. Moreover,

although the FFS occasionally provides additional points in small investment programmes, no dedicated or substantial support measures have been implemented to date, further limiting its attractiveness.

Proposed in this study encompasses multiple dimensions—social, physical, economic, cultural, and environmental—and better captures the multifunctionality of family farming. Insights from the interviews reinforce that the current criteria fail to correspond to farmers' lived conditions and needs, underscoring the importance of adopting broader and more inclusive eligibility frameworks.

Overall, the FFS must evolve beyond a mechanism for allocating CAP support, incorporating additional forms of assistance such as training, technical support, or measures foreseen in national legislation. Strengthening the recognition of family farming is essential to preventing agricultural abandonment, maintaining rural landscapes and biodiversity, and supporting resilient local food systems.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need to revise the FFS so that it fully acknowledges the diverse contributions of family farming. Expanding and refining its indicators would better align public support with the sector's real value, enhancing both its effectiveness and political relevance. In particular, future policies should explicitly recognise the ecosystem services generated by family farming—such as soil conservation, biodiversity protection, carbon sequestration, fire prevention through mosaic landscapes and sustainable grazing regimes, and the preservation of agrobiodiversity through traditional crop varieties and native breeds. At the same time, the statute should incorporate the social functions of family farming, including its role in combating rural depopulation, maintaining cultural heritage, sustaining intergenerational knowledge transmission, and strengthening local food systems and community cohesion.

To operationalise this broader perspective, policy instruments could include payments for ecosystem services, incentives for maintaining diversified production systems, support for community-based short supply chains, programmes addressing gender equity and youth engagement, and territorial approaches linking family farming to education, tourism and public procurement. Integrating financial support, advisory services, capacity-building and regional development strategies would ensure that the FFS becomes a robust and transformative tool—one capable of strengthening family farmers' livelihoods while contributing to the long-term sustainability, resilience, and vitality of rural territories.

Appendix A

Table A1. Semi-structured interview survey guide.

A—Socio-demographic
1. Sex: Female___Male___
2. Age___
3. Place of residence and location of the agricultural holding___
4. Marital status
Single___Married or Civil Union___Separated or Divorced___Widowed___
5. Household age distribution (including yourself)
Number of persons aged 3–18___
Number of persons aged 19–64___
Number of persons aged ≥ 65___
6. Monthly net household income
No income___
500–1000 euros___
1001–2000 euros___
2001–3000 euros___
≥3001___
Source of income___
7. Educational attainment
No schooling___
Up to 4th grade___
Up to 6th grade___

Up to 9th grade___
Up to 12th grade___
Bachelor's degree___
Master's degree___
Doctorate___
8. Employment status
(*Tick all that apply*)
Employed full-time___
Employed part-time___
Unemployed___
Student___
Retired___
Other___
9. What reasons led you to become a farmer?
Profession___
Unemployment___
Followed family path and had no alternative/studies___
Additional household income___
Interest in the activity/healthier food___
Other (please specify)___
10. Do you receive help with the various tasks on the farm? From whom?___
11. Do you want your children to continue working on the farm?___

B—Agricultural holding

Total área___Nº. of plots___ Other areas (e.g., forest)___
Other activities (e.g., honey, mushrooms, cheese, firewood, *etc*.) ___
1. Crop production
Horticultural/Arable crops Area___
Fruit crops Area___
Vineyard Area___
Olive grove Area___
Permanent pasture Area___
Others. Which___Area___
2. Animal production
Cattle Nº ___
Sheep Nº___
Goats Nº___
Pigs Nº___
Poultry Nº___
Others—Which? Nº___
3. What agricultural equipment/machinery do you use?
(*e.g., Tractor, Motor hoe, Sprayer—type, Implements—type, annual ploughing, etc*.)
Do you own or rent them?
4. What agricultural facilities does your holding have?___
5. Do you own all the agricultural plots or do you use other forms of tenure?___
6. What is the destination of what you produce on your holding?___

C—Agricultural practices

1. Agricultural techniques (No/Yes)
Crop rotation
Intercropping
Winter cover crops
Others. Which? ___
2. Soil tillage (No/Yes**)**
Ploughing
Harrowing
Rototilling
Others. Which?___
3. Crop fertilisation (No/Yes)
Mineral fertilisers
Green manuring
Manure
Compost (composting)

Other organic fertilisers/soil amendments
Others. Which? ___
4. Pest and disease control in crops (No/Yes)
Synthetic pesticides
Biopesticides
Biological control
Traps (mass capture)
Cultural practices (weeding, defoliation, *etc*.)
I do not apply anything___
Others. Which? ___
5. Weed control (No/Yes)
Herbicides
Mulching films
Grass cover
Mulching (organic cover)
With implements
Manual
Allelopathic species/crops (e.g., rye)
Others. Which? ___
6. Irrigation and fertigation (No/Yes)
Furrow irrigation
Sprinkler irrigation
Drip irrigation
No irrigation system
Fertigation
Own water source (borehole, well)
Water abstraction from watercourse
Others. Which? ___
7. Animal production (No/Yes)
Purchase of animal feed (concentrates, hay, *etc*.)
Use of antibiotics in animals
Other veterinary medicines
Permanent housing
Semi-housing (specify)
Grazing (specify)

D—Transition

1. Do you consider that the agricultural practices you use have any negative effects on the environment?
(*soil, water, climate change, and biodiversity*)
Tillage No___Yes___Why?___
Fertilisation No___Yes___Why?___
Pest, disease, and weed control No___Yes___Why?___
Antibiotics for animals No___Yes___Why?___
Permanent housing of animals No___Yes___Why?___
2. Do you know what organic farming is?
Yes___No___Somewhat___
3. Considering that some practices usually applied in conventional farming may have disadvantages, would you be willing to change them for more sustainable agricultural practices, such as crop rotation, use of compost, biopesticides, cover crops, *etc*.?
No___ (go to questions 4, 5 and 8)
Yes___ (go to question 6)
4. If NO, why?___
5. If NO, under what circumstances could you adopt more sustainable agricultural practices?
(a) In case of increased fertiliser and pesticide prices, evidence that certain chemicals cause human diseases, loss of beneficial insects such as pollinators or natural enemies of pests and diseases, soil contamination or reduced productivity, *etc*.
(b) In case of animal diseases in confined housing, or resistance of animals to medicines.
6. If YES, what are the main reasons for this change?
(*Rank from 1 to 3 in order of importance*)
Environmental reasons (soil, water, climate change, biodiversity)
Human health reasons (chemical residues in food)
Economic reasons (e.g., increase in fertiliser prices, lack of pesticide effectiveness, *etc*.)
Others. Which? ___

7. If YES, what obstacles do you foresee for this change?___
8. Is there any technical support in your area of residence where you can acquire/deepen knowledge about more sustainable practices to implement on your farm?___
9. What are currently the main difficulties you face in carrying out your activity?___
10. Do you have any recommendations to improve living and working conditions in rural areas?___

Statement of the Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT in order to support language editing. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Author Contributions

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Ethics Statement

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu (protocol code 23/SUB/2022 and date of approval 15 June 2022).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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