

Challenging the regime: neo-rural farmers as agents of change in food systems

A case study of Cabranes, Asturias | Thesis

Abstract

Neo-rural farmers, urban-origin individuals who move to rural areas to start small-scale farms, are increasingly recognised as potential agents of change within European food systems. While their motivations and the challenges they encounter are well documented, little is known about *how* they manage this transition. This thesis explores the strategies that enable neo-rural farmers to establish themselves in Asturias, Spain. Through Schlossberg's (1981) model for analysing human adaptation to transition, nine semi-structured interviews are analysed to shed light on the *situation, self, support, and strategy* that describe their transitions. Neo-rural farmers are positioned as niches in Geels' (2002) Multi-Level Perspective where they are seen as potential actors of change. Findings show that transitions are shaped by yearly cycles and interconnected challenges concerning economic viability, knowledge gaps, social integration, bureaucratic barriers, and access to land. Successful strategies combine adaptive learning through DIY and trial and error, with diverse business models of trust-based markets and collaborative labour. The individual learning processes of neo-rural farmers illustrate how micro-adaptations can contribute to broader sociotechnical experimentation and innovation in food systems. This study highlights the importance of supporting neo-rural farmers' transitions to advance their long-term contributions to global food systems.

Key words:

Neo-ruralism, neo-farmers, adaptation to transition, food systems, multi-level perspective, sociotechnical transitions, Spain

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Prologue

First and foremost, I want to thank you for taking the time to read the research that I have produced in the last ten months. I wrote this report to fulfil the graduation requirements of my master's degree Metropolitan Analysis, Design & Engineering at Delft University of Technology and Wageningen University & Research. From February until November 2025 I have worked on this research.

Before starting this thesis, our study advisor asked us to write down something that would help us in the more difficult times of our theses. I wrote down "Just keep trying.", and I think it accurately describes my process of doing this research, as well as what I have learned from the research.

This research is, in many ways, an attempt to understand a life I hope to live one day. Studying neo-rural farmers allowed me to explore their transitions, as well as my own assumptions, aspirations, and questions about what it means to become a farmer. The research allowed me to go to Spain and get to know some very interesting people from whom I learned a lot. During this period, I challenged myself with previously untried research directions and to open my technical mindset to more abstract ways of thinking. This thesis report is the result of a process that has allowed me to learn many scientific things, but also how to build a campervan, speak better Spanish, and what it is like to become a farmer.

To close off, I would like to thank my two supervisors, Bettina Bock and Willem Korthals Altes for their time and efforts of teaching me how to do this master's thesis. Your feedback during our meetings has opened my eyes to all the truths that exist in the world. I also would like to thank the host I stayed with in Spain and the research participants who have welcomed me into their homes and taught me about their life journeys. Finally, I would like to thank my girlfriend and study friends for bearing with me during this thesis. Thank you for your advice, our discussions, and the good times during the last two years.

Amsterdam
18-11-2025

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1 Introduction

Neo-rural farmer Maria left her life in the city around the age of 25 years old to start a farming life in Asturias, Spain. In her rural life Maria and her partner renovated their house, raised a kid, and started a permaculture farm. She took this leap in search of autonomy and as a process of self-enablement due to the social and environmental crises she experienced in cities. Like many newcomers in Asturias, she moved primarily for a socially just lifestyle and for ecological reasons, rather than for policy incentives. Individual journeys like Maria's matter; together they form a growing movement of urban-origin actors who are re-embedding food production in rural landscapes. The purpose of this thesis is to study these journeys to discover how these neo-rural individuals go through this life transition and explore their potential to contribute to changes in food systems.

Neo-ruralists

In the Spanish countryside, a movement of neo-rural individuals has seen significant growth in the last decade (Vizuet et al., 2024). It has been described in literature with many definitions but can be summarised as “the displacement of people from urban to rural areas in search of life projects” (Vizuet et al., 2024, p. 1289). The phenomenon is found predominantly in Europe, but also in Asia, Africa, and America. This group includes individuals who move to rural areas while maintaining urban ties, such as work or leisure, and others who find their occupation and the majority of leisure activities within their rural surroundings (Moss, 2011). They are sometimes called ‘amenity migrants’ because their motives to migrate are based on desires rather than necessity. These include environmental values, closeness to nature, and a higher quality of life (Vizuet et al., 2024). The first group distinguished by Moss (2011) can be seen as a movement that is trying to escape the negative aspects (e.g. crowdedness or air quality) of the city while still making use of the positive sides (e.g. higher wages or diverse leisure activities). The second group can be seen as a movement of repeasantisation as described by Van der Ploeg (2008) which returns to the peasant ethos of ecological balance and manual labour. The neo-rural phenomenon dates back to the mid-20th century when people started returning to the countryside for reasons beyond nostalgia, aiming to challenge industrial agriculture through autonomy (Van der Ploeg, 2008).

Newcomers to farming

Complementary to neo-ruralists, there is a group of people who began undertaking agri-food initiatives called newcomers to farming (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016). Newcomers to farming create farms without having previous farming experience and can have both rural and urban backgrounds. This group characterises itself by its active engagement in agricultural production, leveraging skills and networks in their pursuit of starting a farm (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016). They usually have higher education and apply diverse and multifunctional business models in which they often use urban skills to face their specific challenges. A European Focus Group hosted by Monllor i Rico and Fuller (2016) identified lifestyle aspirations, work ambitions, market opportunities, urban stress, and health aspirations as the five drivers for people to become newcomers to farming. Additional motives identified by Monllor i Rico and Fuller (2016) include the connection with people, their food origin, and being part of local, sustainable, and ecological food systems. These motivations reflect a dissatisfaction with the food system they are part of in urban life. However, newcomers to farming also face specific challenges, including access to land, capital, and markets (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016).

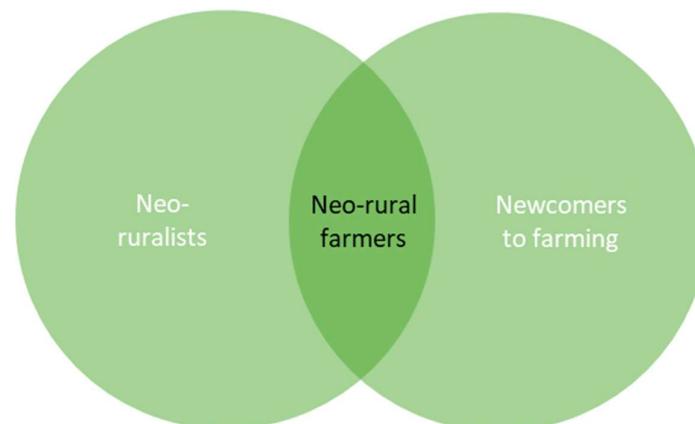
These farmers go through a personal transition in which they change the way they produce and consume food. Their personal changes can be seen as part of a larger systemic transition towards a new agrosocial paradigm as described by Monllor i Rico and Fuller (2016, p. 546): “The activities undertaken by newcomers to farming in an agrosocial context create strong social capital, further the connections between rural and urban spheres, aim for optimal food quality and better health, re-inhabit abandoned areas, create new social relations, propose alternative ways of organizing and

collaborating, bear in mind future generations, and strive to maintain a rich, diverse and economically dynamic agricultural area". Additionally, Dolci and Perrin (2018) define newcomers to farming as drivers of innovation in, and participants of the agro-ecological transition. In the current globalised food system, newcomers to farming look for ways that deviate from the conventional farming model, search for safe food, healthy lifestyles, and environmentally sustainable choices (Dolci & Perrin, 2018). These desires reflect their interest in small-scale, diversified farming practices and a more peasant lifestyle while sometimes being classified as utopian (Van der Ploeg, 2008).

Neo-rural farmers and their challenges

This research defines **neo-rural farmers** as the overlap between neo-ruralists and newcomers to farming, as shown in Figure 1. As the target group of this research, neo-rural farmers are **people of urban origin** who move to **rural areas** to **produce food**. The combination of characteristics of neo-ruralists and newcomers to farming suggests their ability to address local food systems. The changes that neo-rural farmers have to go through, such as moving to a different area or country, new work environments, and financial struggles, can be considered life events of significant gravity (Wallace et al., 2023). As newcomers in rural areas, they encounter many additional challenges after deciding to live in rural areas, including limited access to housing, lack of institutional support, lack of understanding from locals, and poor infrastructure (Vizuete et al., 2024). Their efforts to start a farm bring more difficulties, such as their economic profitability and access to the market, to their transitions from urban life to rural life as farmers. Adding these up, neo-rural farmers take on a substantial number of challenges that complicate their transition to life as neo-rural farmers. Their transitions can be difficult and are not always viewed positively. In his work, González (2017) found that gentrification can be triggered by newcomers, with negative effects such as marginalisation of locals and degradation of heritage. Scholars also caution that neo-rural influx can create local tensions, uneven benefits, and uncertain scalability. Therefore, empirical study of the transition process is needed to evaluate whether and how these newcomers can sustain farms and contribute positively to territorial vitality (Esparcia, 2015; Hummel & Escribano, 2021).

Figure 1 shows how neo-rural farmers comprise the overlap of neo-ruralists and newcomers to farming.



Asturias as breeding ground

Spain provides a particularly interesting context for studying neo-rural farmers as actors of change in food systems due to its demographic challenges, biophysical characteristics, and decentralised governance (MacDonald et al., 2000). Large parts of rural Spain show an ageing population, service withdrawal, and shrinking local economies, which are driving forces behind depopulation and rural decline (Garcia de Oteyza et al., 2023; Vicente Pinilla & Luis Antonio Sáez, 2017). Specifically in Asturias, 90% of municipalities experienced a decline in their rural population between 1996 and 2021 (Garcia de Oteyza et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Spain's regionalised policy structure and international supports

such as LEADER¹ (locally coordinated in Asturias by READER) provide financial and network opportunities but also require large commitments and efforts for neo-rural farmers (Esparcia, 2015).

Additionally, Asturias' mountainous landscape characteristics, such as steep and fragmented parcels, limit the ability to apply mechanised practices and require labour-intensive manual practices (MacDonald et al., 2000). Launched in 1962, the European Union started supporting farmers through Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), to improve their productivity with the aim of ensuring a stable supply of affordable food, leading to more mechanised agriculture (European Commission of Agriculture and rural development, 2025). As a result, many mountainous regions have been abandoned by farmers looking for more suitable land promoted by CAP (MacDonald et al., 2000). These biophysical characteristics, in combination with the demographic and policy conditions, make Asturias a compelling case. It is a place that both facilitates and complicates neo-rural farmers through the availability of mountainous land, available policy, and demographic challenges. Therefore, it is a productive site to study neo-rural farmers' individual journeys in which urban actors transform into embedded producers of food.

Problem statement and research questions

Neo-ruralism has been extensively studied from different perspectives (Vizueté et al., 2024). The influx of neo-rural farmers can be seen as a driver of change in global food systems and Spain specifically, Still, neo-rural farmers need to be able to sustain their rural livelihoods first. Their motives for moving to rural areas and the challenges they face are well-researched and understood; they include access to land, capital, the market, social integration, and poor infrastructure (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Vizueté et al., 2024). Neo-rural farmers are described as well-equipped to tackle the challenges of starting their own farm, but little is known about **how** these farmers go through the process of doing so. Spain and Asturias are particularly interesting because of a combination of demographic, biophysical, and policy factors. In order to research this transition, Geels' (2002) framing of innovation in sociotechnical systems is used, where neo-rural farmers play a role as a niche in the food system and are analysed as such. In addition, the work of Schlossberg (1981) proposes a framework for analysing human adaptation to transition, helping to understand how these people transition. This thesis aims to use this framework as a lens to investigate neo-rural farmers' transitions to promote changes in food systems. In this way, this thesis investigates the unknowns of realizing this transition and thereby contributes to furthering the understanding of why and how people can transition to life as a farmer. Furthermore, this thesis intends to identify strategies that can lead towards a better understanding of the needs of neo-rural farmers by exploring the process through which they **become** able to sustain themselves by answering the following main research question and sub research questions:

What strategies enable neo-rural farmers to transition to life as a farmer in Asturias?

1. How do neo-rural farmers perceive their transition to the neo-rural lifestyle?
2. What situations do neo-rural farmers experience?
3. What strategies do neo-rural farmers compose to address a situation?
4. What situations, personal characteristics (self), and supports are decisive for a neo-rural farmer's transition?

Relevance to the MADE program

The Metropolitan Analysis, Design & Engineering (MADE) programme centres actors and practices that promote food as a social connection, reduce waste, improve healthy food, shorten supply chains, promote entrepreneurship, and increase circularity and animal welfare (AMS Institute, n.d.). Through these six steps, MADE reconfigures the metropolitan food system. Neo-rural farmers are an interesting

¹ LEADER stands for "Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale" and translates to "Links between activities (or actions) for the development of rural economy"

phenomenon in this food system; many leave cities because they are dissatisfied with the current food system and search for autonomy, healthier food, and different ways of living (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Vizuite et al., 2024). Upon arrival, neo-rural farmers apply alternative food practices such as small-scale production, agroecological methods, DIY processing, and direct sales through which they reconnect (potentially urban) consumers with their food producers and create trust-based markets. While these initiatives cannot immediately substitute large-scale agriculture, they function as learning grounds testing practices such as agroecological production methods, marketing models, and governance routines that may be adopted over time (Geels, 2002; Grewal & Grewal, 2012). Studying the individual journeys through which urban consumers become rural producers is central to understanding how changes in metropolitan food systems can grow from individual experimentation to broader system transformations. The following chapter elaborates further on how this research frames neo-rural farmers as actors of change in food systems and how it applies the model of adaptation to transition. It further argues how their transitions are part of a change in the food system.

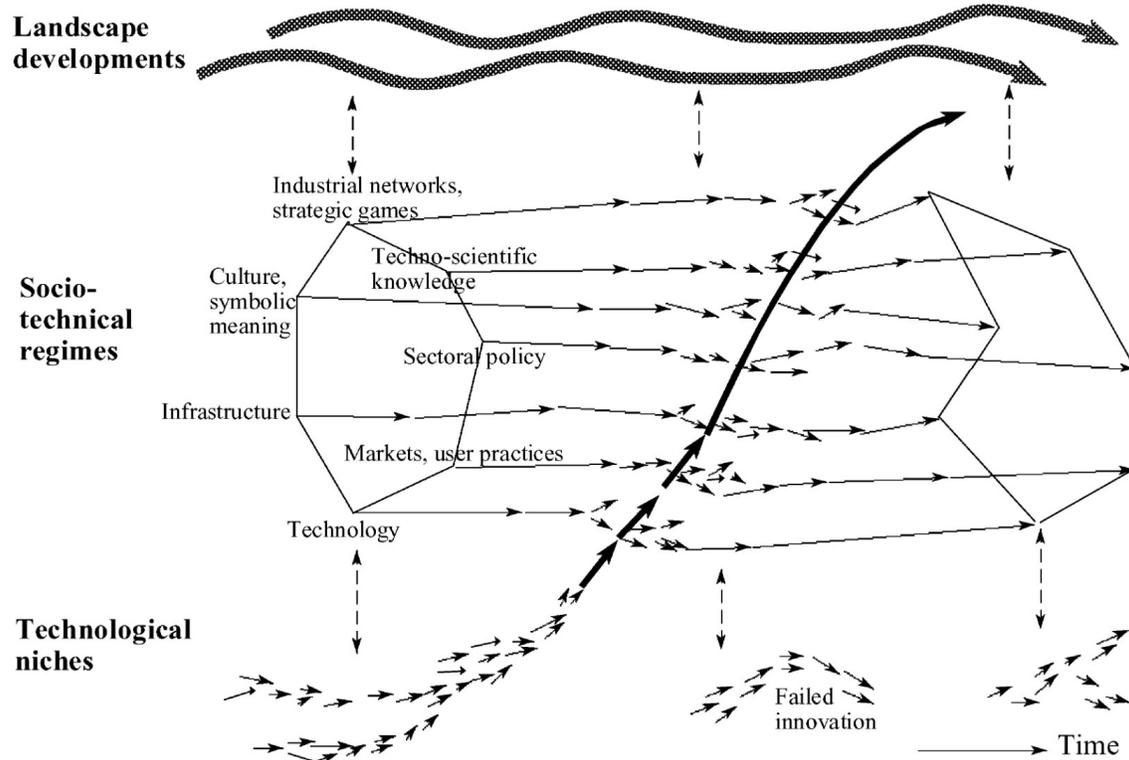
2 Theoretical framework

This research aims to understand the requirements for a successful transition by placing the practices and experiences of neo-rural farmers in Geels' (2002) Multi-Level Perspective (MLP). The difficulties that emerge during a farmer's personal transition require individual analysis. In this chapter, neo-rural farmers are framed as actors of change in the current food system using the MLP (Geels, 2002). Within this perspective, the focus is brought to the development of neo-rural farmers and they are analysed through an altered version of the model for analysing human adaptation to transition by Schlossberg (1981). The next sections will firstly dive deeper into the MLP, applying it to the food system and positioning neo-rural farmers in it. Next the model for analysing human adaptation to transition is altered to fit the personal and organisational factors influencing one's transition.

2.1 The food system as a sociotechnical system

Geels (2002) describes sociotechnical systems as comprising three levels: the landscape, the sociotechnical regime, and niches (see Figure 2). The landscape consists of large-scale and slow trends that influence sociotechnical regimes; examples of this landscape include climate change, rural depopulation, and globalisation of commodity markets (Fresco, 2009). The sociotechnical regime constitutes the current ways and workings of the food system and is generally stable (Geels, 2002). Think of processing and logistics infrastructure, dominant consumer expectations and customs, subsidies, and certifications. Niches are the spaces where innovation or changes develop, such as new crop varieties, new ways of packaging food, or changing consumer preferences. Seen through the MLP, the food system entails everything related to food production, processing, and consumption. This includes consumer wishes, scientific knowledge, new plant varieties, and the political debates that influence those. In his work, Geels (2002) argues that change in the sociotechnical regime originates from niches that, under the right pressure from the landscape, can make use of windows opportunity and cause changes in the regime. The following paragraphs explain the food system through Geels' (2002) MLP as a sociotechnical system in which neo-rural farmers present themselves as niches with the potential to change the food system.

Figure 2 depicts the multi-level perspective on technological transitions by Geels (2002).



Current sociotechnical regimes

Neo-rural farmers aim to escape from globalised and capitalist-driven regimes in which efficiency and productivity are prioritised over health and sustainability (Fresco, 2009). With global goals of eliminating hunger, our food system is aimed at, and increasingly succeeding in, feeding everyone nutritious and healthy diets (United Nations, n.d.). Through intensification, agriculture has become able to produce ever-increasing amounts of food to feed the growing world population. Van der Ploeg (2008) labels this dominant pattern in the food system 'Empire', a term demonstrating power, scale, and contestability. The Empire, or regime, has become so efficient that "soon we will live in a world where never before in human history the responsibility for the food of so many has been borne by a small minority of farmers, food processors, and retailers." (Fresco, 2009, p. 384). However, they are "a minority that is barely recognised by an increasingly dominant urban population, and often blamed for many of the ills of environmental damage and globalisation" (Fresco, 2009, p. 384). The decline in the number of people producing food in Europe as a result of industrialised agriculture has resulted in rural exodus and the depopulation of various rural areas (Francis et al., 2005). In this current system, "the production and consumption of food are increasingly disconnected from each other, both in time and in space." (Van der Ploeg, 2008, p. 4). The centralisation and intensification of agriculture have historically been reinforced by subsidies, regulations, standards imposed through national and international policies such as CAP, and consumers' expectations and customs surrounding their food practices (Nifatova & Danko, 2024). However, because of those reinforcing policies, the regime has become rigid and vulnerable to shocks such as climate-induced weather events. In their work, Rotz and Fraser (2015) argue that the conventional high-input (e.g. fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, or water) agrarian system is maintained by engineering, infrastructure, and policy to achieve efficiency and productivity. Food producers make use of these inputs to maintain their economically competitive position, but are therefore also dependent on them for their financial viability. Rotz and Fraser (2015)

argue that this system is focused on short-term resilience, relying on inputs to maintain productivity in the event of short-term disturbances such as seasonal drought or lack of nutrients in soil. However, by increasingly depending on stabilising inputs, the current food system has grown vulnerable to climate variability, extreme weather events, and unexpected ecological consequences of high agricultural inputs (Rotz & Fraser, 2015). Our ability to maintain the food system in cases of prolonged distress as a result of climate change (e.g., biodiversity loss or desertification) is uncertain (Rotz & Fraser, 2015). These examples can be seen as the 'lock-ins' from which it is hard to diverge in the rigid regime. For example, farmers cannot expect to be financially competitive if they decide to reduce these inputs and are therefore locked in the current regime. In response, Spain's "reformed European agricultural policy is undoubtedly aimed at developing agroecological and sustainable systems, yet it still lacks effective mechanisms to support small-scale farming, which may pose risks to food security in the future." (Nifatova & Danko, 2024, p. 52). However, with this focus Spanish policy aims to redirect the food system to become more resilient and sustainable. This change in policy direction can be deemed as a window of opportunity for neo-rural farmers, which is a result of environmental landscape developments. The next paragraph elaborates further on how the food system's landscape can influence the regime and provide windows of opportunity.

Influences of the landscape

Landscape developments can cause the regime to open up windows of opportunity that niches can take advantage of (Geels, 2002). These opportunities presented in the regime can be seen as the loosening of the lock-ins that the regime has constructed. According to some scholars, the speed at which the landscape of our food system changes is increasing (Fresco, 2009; Rotz & Fraser, 2015). "The current high food prices, the increasing awareness of climate and deforestation issues, and the concern about unhealthy diets provide fertile ground for new awareness among urban decision makers and consumers" (Fresco, 2009, p. 384). This growing awareness is a result of changes in the landscape that affect the food system and can potentially lead to changes in the regime that allow for the adoption of niches. One example, food security, including supply and self-sufficiency, has gained increasing interest in the Global North (Zasada et al., 2019). Geopolitical changes, such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplify the dependencies of global markets and have put agriculture and food security on the agenda of European Union policy makers (Vigani et al., 2024). This growing willingness to produce food more locally provides possibilities for more easily adoption of neo-rural farmers by the regime. Another example of a change in landscape is the growing population that increases competition for resources as water, energy, and land. In European cities, land-use demands such as residential, commercial, and industrial uses, as well as for infrastructure, leisure green spaces, reforestation, food production, and nature conservation, compete for the same areas under societal pressure (Zasada et al., 2019). These land-use demands are expected to claim parts of agricultural areas, further promoting higher efficiency and productivity on smaller amounts of agricultural land (Zasada et al., 2019). The effects on agriculture include that it will be increasingly interesting to make use of marginalised farmland that has so far been decreasingly utilised as a result of mechanisation in agriculture (MacDonald et al., 2000). While the landscape affects the regime, the regime also has effects on the landscape. For example, the global food supply chain accounts for 26% of human greenhouse gas emissions, changing the climate conditions in which food is produced (Poore & Nemecek, 2018).

Neo-rural farmers as niche developments

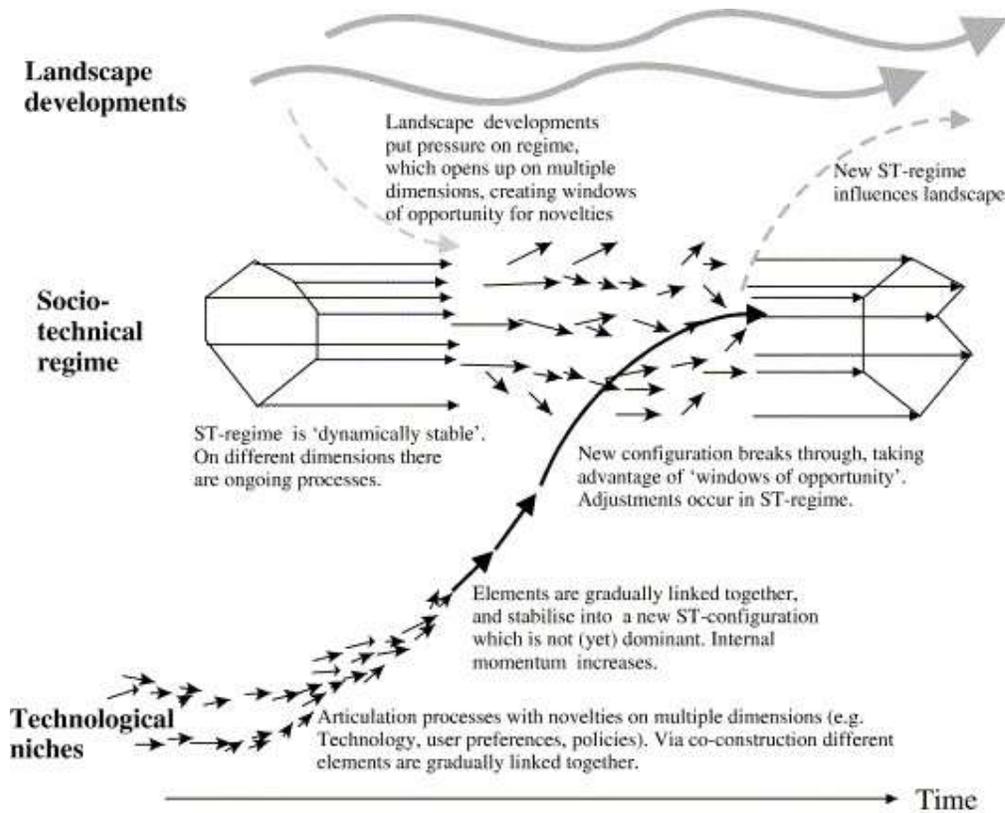
In the MLP, a niche is a protected space in which new practices, technologies, and social relations can be tested, learned from, and stabilised before potentially changing the regime (Geels, 2002). Neo-rural farmers display the characteristics of such niches. Since their emergence in the mid-20th century their alternative farming practices and recoupling of food production and consumption counter the direction of the globalising and centralising regime of food systems (Van der Ploeg, 2008). They provide and promote different forms of agriculture that address some of the landscape developments faced by the

regime with their alternative ways of running a farm including agro-ecological practices, local markets, and community ties (Dolci & Perrin, 2018; Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Vizuete et al., 2024). These farmers often intentionally operate in isolation from the regime, which creates the 'protected' space that the MPL identifies as nursery for niche development. Considering this, neo-rural farmers should be seen as an agricultural niche whose practices have the potential to change the food regime.

While governments seek more sustainable ways of agriculture and food system practices, neo-rural farmers are a niche that is still not sufficiently recognised nor supported politically (Dolci & Perrin, 2018). As the regime facilitates the dominant model of food provision, it disfavours those who embark on other paths of food production and consumption (Geels & Schot, 2007). While neo-rural farmers deviate from the regime, they find themselves fighting its lock-ins, such as legislation and global market prices. Aiming to supply people in Europe with healthy food, legislation has been formulated to ensure the quality and hygiene throughout the food chain (Hummel & Escribano, 2022). However, these legal requirements, informed by CAP, exclude the peasant model of agriculture often applied by neo-rural farmers through, for example, the requirement of minimum farm size or financial investment in facilities (Hummel & Escribano, 2022). The regime adds an extra layer of unfavourable conditions, such as the previous example, to the previously mentioned challenges faced by neo-rural farmers. These conditions often withhold niches from scaling if they are not changed by landscape pressures or regime innovations, detaining them in the niche space where they stay small (Geels, 2011).

While regimes are rigid and usually hard to infiltrate, there are different ways in which niches can break through and disrupt the regime, or become a reinforcing part of it (Geels, 2005). Geels (2005) specifies three requirements for niches to influence regimes. Firstly, niches need to accumulate momentum through, for example, network building, learning, and growth in numbers. Secondly, they need to create interactions with regime actors in forms of alliances, market interactions, or through demonstration. Thirdly, they must take advantage of landscape pressures such as economic, ecological, or political shocks. If these processes align, neo-rural farmers practices can potentially move from niche applications towards broader applications in the food regime (Geels, 2005; Geels & Schot, 2007). In further development of the MLP, Geels and Schot (2007) identify four typologies of transition pathways that can change a regime: transformation, substitution, reconfiguration, and de- and re-alignment. Transformation is a transition induced by outsiders who criticise the regime, resulting in adjustments within the regime. Substitution happens when niches grow and develop to compete with regime actors, eventually replacing some of them. Reconfiguration is when regime actors adopt innovations (developed by niches) and create new competition within the regime. De-alignment and re-alignment happen when the landscape poses great changes that the regime cannot withstand, leading to erosion and collapse of the regime. Multiple novelties compete in the void left behind, leading to new winners that restabilise the regime. Figure 3 shows the factors that affect transitions in a socio-technical system and how niches can break through to change the regime.

Figure 3 shows how a niche can influence the regime and subsequently the landscape (Geels, 2002).



To summarise, the MLP provides a way to analyse neo-rural farmers as niches with the potential to bring change to the regime of food systems. The current food regime has developed to become increasingly efficient and able to feed the world population, but has become rigid and vulnerable. Current landscape developments, such as climate change, have increased awareness of the need for alternative ways of food provision. Neo-rural farmers constitute a movement that carries some of the characteristics of more sustainable and resilient production methods. They can be considered a niche that has the potential to positively influence the food system. However, seeing their divergence from the regime and the challenges they must overcome, their ability to fully transition cannot be assumed. Even though Geels (2002) describes this as a protected space where they safely wait for windows of opportunity, this waiting process for neo-rural farmers is a process of becoming economically viable in a new context with many challenges that include regime lock-ins. Before even being able to interact with the regime and push change through windows of opportunity, neo-rural farmers as niches must maintain themselves at a level where they are able to survive. The MLP by Geels (2002) is useful for explaining transitions, linking macro (landscape) changes to opportunities for niches and analysing how the regime affects, and is affected by, those. However, it lacks a comprehensive perspective on the complex interactions between the regime and niches that obstruct or facilitate the adoption of niches (Genus & Coles, 2008). To complement the MLP, the model for analysing human adaptation to transition by Schlossberg (1981) is applied to shed more light on this process of becoming able to sustain oneself and how these niches interact with the regime. The next section explains further how this research applies Schlossberg's model.

2.2 Personal transitions as a dimension of systemic change

This research foregrounds how neo-rural farmers' transitions are both potential systemic changes, but also highly personal transitions. In this transition, they challenge the regime to bring change to the food system, while also becoming organisationally stable and economically viable themselves. Neo-rural

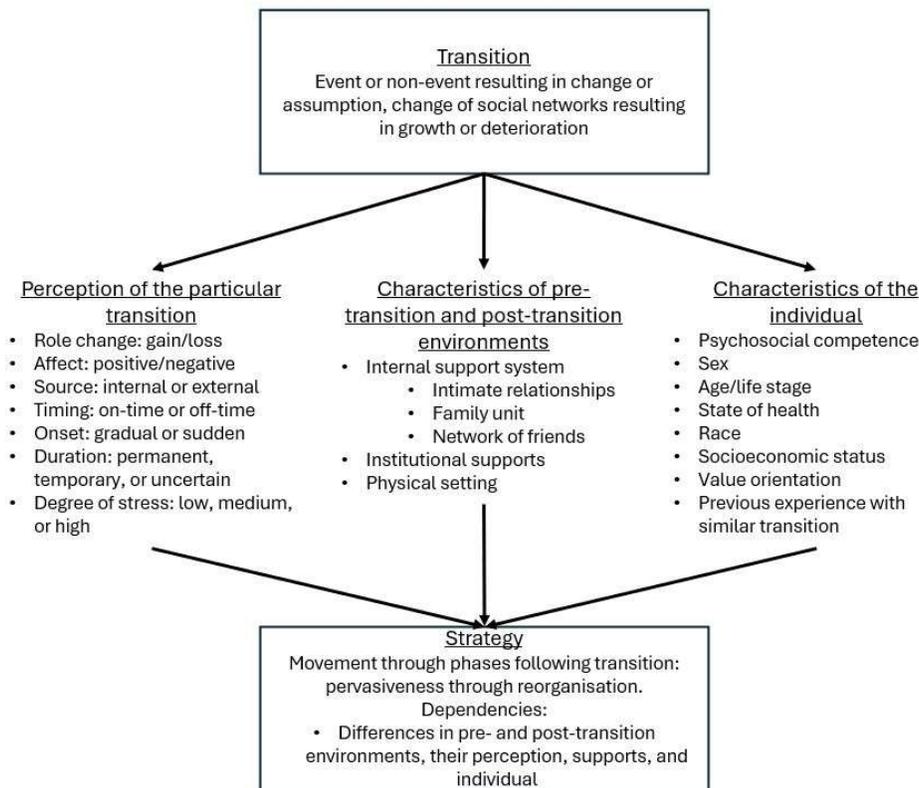
farmers' transitions are processes in which they aim to settle and establish themselves. Meaning that they adopt their farming lifestyle, with which they can sustain themselves financially, produce food, and embed themselves socially. After settling in, these farmers exist in niches next to the regime because of their alternative practices surrounding food production and consumption, 'waiting' for adaptation by the regime. However, their alternative practices can be conflicting with the regime, potentially leading to regime lock-ins caused by policy or the market, for example.

While Geels (2002) describes niches as potential changes that are waiting for a window of opportunity in the regime, for neo-rural farmers, this waiting can be seen as their personal transition towards their rural livelihood. Their transition from life in cities to life as a farmer in the countryside affects multiple changes in life, including material, monetary, and organisational changes (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Vizquete et al., 2024). Additionally, one's ability to transition to a new way of living is highly dependent on their ability to cope with those changes.

The work of Schlossberg (1981) proposes a framework for analysing human adaptation to transitions, shown in Figure 4. Using an altered version of the model for human adaptation to transition, this research explores how the four S's (situation, supports, self, and strategy) interact to facilitate successful adaptation. The altered model includes the broader contextual elements of neo-rural farmers' transitions. The process of adaptation to a neo-rural farmer's lifestyle is not only psychological, but also material, monetary, and organisational (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016; Vizquete et al., 2024). By supplementing the model with more contextual elements of transitioning to life as a farmer, it enables the inclusion of the practicalities of establishing a farm, such as resource availability and economic viability.

Originally composed for use in psychology, the framework captures one's perception of situations in their transition and their experience when tackling those. Previous applications include the transitions of student veterans in the United States (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) and transitions of young children who enter state care in the United States (Winter, 2014). These examples take lessons from individual transitions to improve support for those people. These examples show how understanding one's transition and their perception thereof is useful for providing transitioners with better assistance. It provides a basis for understanding how neo-rural farmers experience the way they transition to find out what common characteristics enable them to establish themselves and how they interact with the regime. In this framework, Schlossberg differentiates four key aspects that define an individual's transition, also known as the four S's. Firstly, the 'perception of the particular transition' describes characteristics of the **situations** that a transitioner experiences and how they influence the transitioner. Secondly, the 'characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments' shed light on the types of **support** that are available and used by the transitioner. The third S specifies the 'characteristics of the individual' and sheds light on the **self**; in other words, it defines the transitioner's personal characteristics that influence their capacity to cope with the changes that the transition entails. The fourth and final S stands for **strategy**, which views the way the transitioner addresses a situation. The previous three S's define the strategy, which is a combination of those that the transitioner uses to proceed in their transition.

Figure 4 shows the model of human adaptation to transition by Schlossberg (1981).



Situation

Schlossberg's (1981) model describes the transition as a change in situations. During their transition, neo-rural farmers face situations in which they challenge the regime or are restricted by it. The situations are either a challenge (e.g., acquiring land, accessing the market, or a bad harvest) or an opportunity (e.g., sudden availability of land, partnerships, or inheritance) that arises while starting a farm. These situations define the transition one goes through. A common set of variables describes the different situations a transitioner experiences: role changes, affect, source, timing, onset, duration, and degree of stress. Additionally, the transition as a whole is analysed using the same set of variables to identify general alignment with the transitioner's life.

Support

Originally, the supports constitute the environment that supports the neo-rural farmer. For example, friends or neighbours might support with physical labour or mental support, and the rural area might support with favourable soil health, access to water, or climate conditions. Schlossberg differentiates three types of support: interpersonal support systems, institutional supports, and physical setting.

By moving from the city to the countryside, neo-rural farmers change the physical distance to certain types of support, which influences the accessibility of those supports. Their intimate relationships normally transition with them, thus staying close. However, their families often live in the city they move from, making it harder to access their physical support. Similarly, they leave their networks of friends built in their urban life behind, but during the transition, they make new friends on whom they can rely for support. Even though these people are now further away, that does not completely exclude them from being able to support a transitioner. Because psychological support can exist through communication, physical presence is dispensable in one's ability to support.

Institutional supports are formal organisations such as governments, community support groups, and other agencies that neo-rural transitioners can turn to for help. Schlossberg mentions supports such as counsellors aiming to psychologically aid the transitioner. In this research, supports are like the ones in the original model but complemented with supports that apply to starting a business and running a farm. Additions include financial support (e.g. subsidies or (inter)national funding) and intellectual support (e.g. knowledge provision by NGO's).

Support from the physical setting is the last, but broad group of supports. It includes climate, neighbourhood, and workplace. As a support, Schlossberg suggests that the most important dimensions of the physical setting are the comfort, privacy, and aesthetics it provides. These dimensions set the stage for the experience of a situation and influence a transitioner by changing their experience of stress, well-being, and general outlook. In this research, support specifically includes factors that relate to farming, such as wildlife (e.g., pollinators) and soil health.

Self

According to Schlossberg, there are many characteristics that influence an individual's ability to adapt, and the relevance of each characteristic is specific to the situation. In Schlossberg's model, these characteristics reflect how a transitioner's background and demographic characteristics enable them to mentally adapt to their transition. Taking the self in a broader sense than this internal process, it includes matters related to the operations of a farm, such as knowledge, skills, resources, and attitudes. In this case, the farm and everything it contains (e.g., machinery, harvest, or land) are part of the resources. The attitudes contain a neo-rural farmer's motivations for starting the farm, vision of how to run a farm, and values embodied in the farm.

Strategy

The strategy is the way in which the person (**self**) uses their knowledge, resources, and skills in combination with, or without **support**, to address a **situation**. The strategies are highly dependent on each of these three and are therefore expected to be different for each case. The word strategy implies a rational process in which neo-rural farmers actively make decisions to address situations. However, in practice, the assembly of strategies may not happen so rationally but rather occur through subconscious decision-making. Therefore, transitioners do not specifically design strategies; they can come naturally or happen without active composition.

Application

As mentioned before, the transition of a neo-rural farmer in Northern Spain is expected to be challenging. The challenges of depopulated areas, together with the challenges of newcomers to farming and neo-ruralists, coincide for neo-rural farmers in Spain. This research uses the model for analysing human adaptation to transition to explore the diverse ways through which neo-rural farmers adjust to life as farmers in rural areas. Exploring how these people can transition (or not) helps understand how people moving to rural areas can be part of systemic change in our food system, and how they can be assisted in their transitions.

The following chapter describes how this research adopts and integrates the framework of human adaptation to transition into the research questions. It explains the methods applied to answer those research questions and discusses the researcher's positionality.

3 Methodology

This research aims to explore neo-rural farmers' experiences of their transitions and shed light on how they, as a niche, interact with the regime. Research of a case study in Asturias, Spain, aims to find out what contributes to the success of neo-rural farmers' transitions. The case study researches multiple

neo-rural farmers in Cabranes, a council in Asturias with about 1100 inhabitants (*Ayuntamiento de Cabranes*, n.d.). The following section presents the research objective and elaborates on how the research questions are answered. Subsequent section explains the data management, including collection, processing, analysis, and ethics. The last section discusses the influence of the researcher's positionality and describes mitigating measures.

3.1 Objective and research questions

The objective of this research is to explore how neo-rural farmers transition to their new lifestyle as farmers. Neo-rural farmers can be seen as actors of change in food systems that overcome the challenges and make use of opportunities in their transitions. Analysis of the strategies applied by neo-rural farmers and their experiences of the process will help understand what characteristics and supports enable neo-rural farmers to adequately address occurring situations and survive as a niche. Answering the following research question aims to reach this objective:

What strategies enable neo-rural farmers to transition to life as a farmer in Asturias?

Sub-questions are based on the model of human adaptation to transition, diving into the four S's and exploring their transition. The four research sub-questions are:

1. How do neo-rural farmers perceive their transition to the neo-rural lifestyle?
2. What situations do neo-rural farmers experience?
3. What strategies do neo-rural farmers compose to address a situation?
4. What situations, personal characteristics (self), and supports are decisive for a neo-rural farmer's transition?

Each of the research questions is aimed at shedding light on one of the four S's from Schlossberg's (1981) model. The first question analyses how neo-rural farmers perceive their overall transition. Exploring the overarching sentiment that underlies the transition for each neo-rural farmer helps understand the **self** and what motivates them to pursue and push through their transition. The second research question takes inventory of the **situations** that neo-rural farmers experience during their transition. These situations consist of the previously described challenges, such as access to land and access to the market. The lock-ins of the regime as described by Geels (2002), can also be seen as challenges, provided that they systematically disfavour niches. The situations also include the opportunities that one might encounter during their transition. Similarly to the challenges, some opportunities could come from windows of opportunity in the regime. The third research question dives into how neo-rural farmers' resources and supports shape the composition of a **strategy** to address situations they encounter. In this part, additional focus is on the **supports** and how they acquire and apply those in these strategies. The fourth research question analyses the strategies applied throughout the transitions of individual farmers to find decisive combinations in the four S's. Through cross-case comparison of each transitioner, combinations of personal characteristics, situations, and supports are found in strategies that have decisive outcomes. These four research questions together supply the components necessary to answer the main research question in the conclusion.

3.2 Data management

This exploratory research gathers qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. The researcher visited Cabranes (the case study) for four months in the Springtime of 2025, firstly to get acquainted with the local host and the area while finishing the research proposal. While still in the preparatory phase, the researcher was able to immerse himself in the local context and get to know potential interviewees. After finishing the research proposal, data were collected through interviews.

Data collection

Through a local host, guidance was found to help connect with local rural networks. For four months, the researcher stayed with a host who has been living in a rural village in Cabranes for 25 years. The host aided in connecting with local communities and getting to know/finding the nine research participants. The researcher approached interviewees through the network of the local host and through the snowball method to avoid bias in sampling only those within the network of the host. During the data gathering period of 2,5 months, semi-structured interviews were held with nine neo-rural farmers. Including interviewees that once had transitioned but now do not have a farm anymore addressed survivorship bias. Table 1 shows an overview of the performed interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews using a recorder application on the researcher's phone. Interviews were held in the participants' preferred language and in their homes for their comfort. However, the researcher experienced that some participants, especially those with financial or personal struggles, were still reluctant to talk about some sensitive details. Eight out of nine interviews were conducted in Spanish, the remaining one in Dutch. Interview questions (found in Appendix I) aim to collectively answer the research questions. During the interviews, the researcher led with the question: "What was it like for you to transition to life as a farmer?". Afterwards, input from interviewees guided the topics of conversation. The remaining interview questions were used as more steering questions to guide the interviewee to go through the different parts of the altered version of Schlossberg's (1981) model of human adaptation to transition. The first interview took place on the 17th of April 2025, and the last interview on the 27th of June 2025. After this date, the approached potential participants were more reluctant to participate for two reasons. The first one being the start of the summer holiday for schools, making the participants occupied with childcare. This coincides with the second reason, the increasing amount of work on their farms during the summer, which made scheduling interviews inconvenient for them.

Table 1 lists anonymised data of the study's interviewees.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Interview length (h:mm:ss)	Language	Date dd:mm:yyyy
Juan	Male	30's	0:55:44	Dutch	17-04-2025
Francisca	Female	40's	1:01:30	Spanish	08-05-2025
Maria	Female	40's	1:08:32	Spanish	12-05-2025
Carmen	Female	60's	1:18:41	Spanish	14-05-2025
Manuel	Male	40's	1:03:03	Spanish	22-05-2025
Francisco	Male	50's	1:03:31 28:46+15:31+19:14	Spanish	24-05-2025
David	Male	60's	1:01:30	Spanish	11-06-2025
Cristina	Female	50's	0:58:39	Spanish	25-06-2025
Rafael	Male	40's	0:59:31	Spanish	27-06-2025

Data processing

The interviews are transcribed using the online transcription software Turboscribe, which does not use interview data to train AI and does not use third-party services for these transcriptions. Interviews were anonymised using pseudonyms and placenames are redacted to ensure privacy. Quotes included in this thesis have been translated into English by the author (with the help of the online translator tool DeepL) to enhance readability and coherence.

Data analysis

Both deductive and inductive coding of interviews in Atlas.ti facilitated thematic analysis. Schlossberg's (1981) model for analysing human adaptation to transition describes four S's (self, situation, support, and strategy) which form the deductive code groups. The addition of the code group Perception/experience differentiates personal experiences from personal characteristics. Within those code groups, inductive codes are distilled from the interviews to explore what topics are relevant to the four S's of neo-rural farmers' transitions. Some examples of the codes include:

Perception/experience	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Difficult- Good- Uncertain- Outsider- Slow	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Farming – Community- Housing – Personal network
Situation	Self
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Challenge – Accessibility of resources- Challenge – Economic viability- Challenge – Farming and environment- Challenge – Time and workload- Opportunity – Business and economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Character and disposition- Knowledge and skills- Motivation and goals
	Strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Farming – Adaptive farming practices- Financial – Diverse income sources- Knowledge – Immersion

To introduce each neo-rural farmer, the researcher wrote a summary of their transition process based on code-document analysis to provide significant waypoints in their transition. Re-reading of transcripts complemented to fill in missing parts. The first research question, analysed the frequency of Perception/experience codes using code-document analysis. Additionally, their co-occurrence with Situation codes provided the context that described the seven parameters of perception as described by Schlossberg (1981). Code-document analysis of Situation codes answered the second research question to find the situations that most farmers experience. Analysis for the third research question was based on co-occurrence with on one axis the Strategy codes, and on the other axis the codes for Support, Self, and Situation. This uncovered combinations that form the strategies and identified the situations they address. For the last research question, code-document analysis found differences between farmers in the way they manage similar situations based on Situation codes. Assessment of those differences and the differences in co-occurrence of Support, Self, and Strategy codes identified decisive factors of handling situations.

Ethics

The personal nature of this research requires cautious handling of the gathered data. To ensure this, all participants are consensually informed that the research is being conducted, and their willingness to participate is voluntarily confirmed. Informed consent is acquired through a signed consent form (see Appendix II) stating the voluntary participation (including awareness of the possibility to withdraw), data collection, and analysis thereof. During the research, all gathered data is anonymised and stored locally and password-protected on the researcher's device. Data is not shared with any institutions other than the educational institutions (Wageningen University & Research, Delft University of Technology, and AMS Institute). After finalising the research, Wageningen University's secure database will store (raw anonymised) data for 10 years in accordance with legal requirements for ethical research. Details about data handling is found in the data management plan in Appendix III.

3.3 Positionality

As a Dutch white male aspiring neo-rural farmer and currently a student, it is important to reflect on the researcher's positionality and propose measures to mitigate its effects.

Education

Firstly, the researcher recognises that his technical background in civil engineering and his current master's studies in Metropolitan Analysis, Design, and Engineering fundamentally shape the approach to this research. The researcher's education instilled a pragmatic, solution-oriented mindset, which proves advantageous for dissecting operational challenges but also predisposes the researcher to focus more on the tangible than on personal perceptions and experiences. This limitation was addressed through the application of a framework with a psychological focus, forcing the researcher to take those into account. By doing so, the research expands from 'just' the process through which neo-rural farmers overcome challenges, to include how their perceptions of these challenges have shaped their experiences.

Dutch appearance

Additionally, as a Dutch native speaker conducting research in Spain with Spanish as a non-native language, the researcher acknowledges that both cultural background (Dutch and university education), appearance (white, 1,85m tall, and blonde), and male gender might have influenced participants' willingness to participate. To mitigate this, the researcher leveraged local networks and host connections, though there is an awareness that relying on these may introduce their own biases. Especially given that the local host is also a Dutch white male with a long-term presence in the area. The researcher's appearance may have also influenced participants' responses during interviews based on their perceptions.

Aspiring farmer

In contrast to his appearance, the researcher's personal interest in starting a farm may have lowered interviewees' barriers to speaking openly about their transitions. Moreover, the personal aspiration to become a neo-rural farmer in Asturias drives the researcher's interest in understanding the real-world difficulties experienced by these farmers. However, the researcher remains cautious of allowing the underlying attitudes and convictions of these ambitions to bias the analysis toward an idealized outcome. Additionally, the researcher was careful not to let his own perspective overshadow the perspectives of participants with different worldviews and/or convictions. The analysis considers these limitations and restricts them through careful reflection. In contrast, the interviewees' awareness of the researcher's aspirations may have influenced their answers, for example, by warning the researcher of potential risks, or encouraging the researcher by discussing those less.

Language proficiency

As described above, the researcher is a non-native Spanish speaker with around three years of experience in the Spanish language. Though the researcher has sufficient command of the language to conduct interviews, his ability to ask follow-up questions based on the nuanced details of interviewees' responses is less efficient than in his first language. Additionally, the time required to understand and process answers may have hampered the fluency of the interview. The researcher's language proficiency may have also influenced the interpretation of interview data during the analysis thereof. Nevertheless, interviews were held in participants' preferred language because of occasional lack of proficiency in other languages the researcher is more fluent in. This also helped provide a comfortable space in which participants are not hindered in their expression because of language proficiency. Recordings were taken of interviews to ensure that the researcher could still fully process participants' responses and adequately analyse them. Additionally, quotes were backtranslated to ensure consistency with the original language.

The next chapter presents the findings from the interviews, diving into neo-rural farmers' perceptions of their transition, the situations they encounter, the strategies they compose to address those, and the decisive factors for a successful transition.

4 Results

During the research period, nine neo-rural farmers were interviewed that are in different phases of their transition. The sample of interviewees represents a diverse group of farmers within the case study of Asturias. Firstly, the interviewed neo-rural farmers are shortly introduced, in the same order as interviews were held, before diving deeper into their transitions.

Juan is a Dutch man in his 30's that started his transition by moving to Spain about five years before the interview. In the Netherlands, he worked as a teacher and owned a house in a big city. Now he lives together with his partner and can be considered a peasant-style farmer. Their farm consists of a small-scale vegetable garden and a small apple orchard on which they currently produce for their own consumption. Juan and his partner are still in the process of transitioning as they are slowly expanding their vegetable garden. Juan's partner maintains an online job to sustain themselves financially while Juan spends most of his time and financial resources from selling his house on fixing up their new house and working on the farm.

Francisca is a Spanish woman in her 40's that started her transition roughly 15 years before the interview. She is mother of a teenage kid whom she lives with. Francisca started her path towards being a farmer after having studied forestry engineering. During her study's final project, she gave birth to her kid. After her studies, she worked for a couple of years before she moved to Asturias on recommendation of a friend there. She started her transition with courses and internships she started learning about agriculture in Asturias. Through these internships she has been able to find work on farms that she could combine with raising her kid by herself but which paid poorly. She ended up being able to take over one of the farms she was working on, until a hailstorm destroyed the crops and her investments of efforts, time, and resources. Now she continues to farm avocados on another one's farm where she hopes to start a company of female farmers.

Maria is another Spanish woman in her 40's that started transitioning to life as a farmer in search of autonomy because of her experiences of social and environmental crises. Together with her partner they started their transition by following a permaculture course in their 30's. With the goal of facing a financially easier transition, they travelled to South-America in search of a place to start their farm. However, feeling seen as outsiders, they returned to Spain to find a suitable place to start farming. After trying two other places they settled in Asturias and started renovating their house and planting their permaculture farm. While renovating their house, they had a kid together. Since their move from the city, they still incidentally perform jobs related to their education to sustain themselves while they further develop their permaculture farm.

Carmen was in her 20's when she decided to move away from the city with her former partner whilst pregnant of her first child. She is a Spanish woman, now in her 60's and living by herself. Before starting her transition, she had an interest for the countryside which she explored with her first former partner. They got to know a community of likeminded people through a magazine targeted towards young people that were looking beyond the city for a life returning to the countryside. At first, she got into artisanal crafts before starting farming with her second former partner. Their farm can be considered an organic peasant-style mixed farm including animals for self-consumption of which they sold surplus and additional decorative plants on local markets. After separating from her second former partner, she had to relocate to her current house where she now keeps a small-scale vegetable garden including a small apple orchard for self-consumption.

Manuel started his transition when he was in his 30's about 10 years ago. He is a Spanish national and father of one child he had with a former partner. He is still in starting phases of his transition, which is motivated by dissatisfaction with urban life. After leaving the city, he lived with his former partner in a farming community where they were self-sufficient. Then, after separating, he found his current house where he keeps a small organic vegetable garden. He recently acquired a separate field that he is transforming into a permaculture-style food forest and where he intends to build a greenhouse. He

currently financially maintains himself with income from renting out an apartment in a big city in Spain which also allows him to further develop his farm.

Francisco is a man in his 50's that started his transition in his 20's. Ever since he was a child, he knew he wanted to live in the countryside because of positive experiences during his rural stays with his grandparents. After completing his studies in veterinary medicine, he decided to move to his current place with his former partner and two children to take on a herd of one hundred goats and later a flock of one hundred sheep. They milked the animals and made cheese from it, which did not turn out to be financially viable, so they expanded the farm with about one thousand organically maintained fruit trees. They started a cooperative in which they processed produce into conservatives, but the 2008 crisis wiped it out. Now, after separating from his partner, Francisco continues alone, selling through markets to individuals and consumer groups.

David is a Spanish man in his 60's that started his transition to rural farming life in his 20's. He and his former partner, who had two children, left the city because they could not stand the city anymore. In the city he had a job as gardener which he substituted with jobs in cooperatives, picking apples or working in the fields. They started farming ornamental plants in a greenhouse they set up at home, which was able to become profitable, until they got in a feud with their neighbours. They decided to move to a new place to start over but were unable to become profitable with the ornamental plants again. They separated and had to sell their house and farm on which David now works for the new owner as salaried farmer and gardener.

Cristina is a Spanish woman that was in her 30's when she started transitioning to life as a farmer about 20 years before the interview. Because of the 2008 crisis, she, her partner and their two children were being evicted and had to find a new place to live. Because she already had a strong connection to the land through a small vegetable garden she had in the city, she knew she wanted to move to the countryside. She found a place in Asturias where she could rent a plot of about 3000 m² to farm on. Her partner maintains a non-agricultural job but helps with the heavy labour in the organic vegetable garden. The food she grows, she mostly processes into preserves and sells to consumer groups and local customers, the remainder she sells in food baskets as subscriptions. After health issues with her physical condition, she had to let go of the farm and the preserving business. Now in her 50's, she is slowly picking up the farming activities and preserving business on a new farm plot where she has an apple orchard and small vegetable garden.

Rafael, a Belgian man, was in his 20's when he found out that life in cities where one lives to work to pay off a mortgage does not satisfy him. Through many travels he discovered that there are other ways of living and that one can sustain oneself differently. Through his journeys while hiking the Camino de Santiago trails, he searched for a place with his new partner he met on the way. After trying to start a hostel along the hiking trail, they found out that they wanted to redirect towards more permaculture-style self-sustenance farming. Now in his 40's, Rafael and his partner have one kid and own a business in which they sell courses and education about natural building methods, permaculture, and self-sustenance. In this place they themselves also farm a small-scale mixed organic farm with a small mixed orchard, a greenhouse, some vegetable fields, and they keep ducks.

The interviewees' stories show diverse pathways of transitions but have a couple of things in common. All transitioners were in their 20's or 30's when starting their transition and all of them sell to local markets. Everyone except Juan already had or got children at some point in their transition, four already had them before, and the other four got them during their transition. Separation has occurred during the transition of four interviewees, for Carmen even twice. Some are able, or have been able, to sustain themselves from farming alone, but most need secondary income to be economically viable. Seven out of nine interviewees were Spanish, the other two are Dutch and Belgian. These summaries give some insights into what the individual transitions have looked like. The following sections dive deeper into the details of their transitions and present the results along the research questions that follow Schlossberg's (1981) model for analysing one's adaptation to transition. This framework examines and

analyses their personal characteristics, situations, supports, and strategies that shape their transition. Interviewees are quoted using pseudonyms and placenames are redacted for privacy reasons. The researcher translated quotes to English (with help of DeepL).

4.1 How do neo-rural farmers perceive their transition to the neo-rural lifestyle?

Neo-rural farmers go through a transition in which they exchange their urban living environments for rural ones and get to experience the social, economic, and physical changes that accompany those surroundings. They get to know new neighbours and immerse themselves in new social circles. It is a process in which they often leave their city jobs behind and must find other ways of sustaining themselves. Their physical environment becomes more natural and distances to resources, services, and amenities increase. These changes can be described using Schlossberg's (1981) theory of human adaptation to transition. A set of seven parameters analyse the neo-rural farmers' perceptions of their transition: onset, source, timing, affect, role change, duration, and degree of stress. Table 2 shows a summary of those parameters for each of the interviewees. The following paragraphs further elaborate these parameters in chronological order of occurrence to answer the question: How do neo-rural farmers perceive their transition to the neo-rural lifestyle?

Table 2 summarises the seven parameters of perception of one's transition for each research participant.

Name	Onset	Source	Timing	Affect	Role changes (Main role gained)	Duration	Degree of stress
Juan	Gradual	Internal	On-time	Positive	Social relations manager	Forever	Low
Francisca	Sudden	External	Off-time	Mixed	Single rural mother	Forever	High
Maria	Gradual	Internal	On-time	Mixed	Rural mother	Forever	Medium
Carmen	Sudden	External	On-time	Positive	Young rural mother	Forever	Low
Manuel	Gradual	Internal	On-time	Positive	Learner	Forever	Low
Francisco	Gradual	Internal	On-time	Positive	Rural team-player	Forever	Medium
David	Gradual	Internal	Off-time	Mixed	Young rural father	Forever	High
Cristina	Sudden	External	On-time	Positive	Learner	Forever	Low
Rafael	Gradual	Internal	On-time	Positive	Learner	Forever	Low

Onset

The onset of the transition towards the neo-rural farming life can either be sudden or gradual and is related to one's psychological preparedness for the transition. Farmers can be divided based on their level of preparation. External factors that provide opportunities, mostly the availability of housing, induce the exact moment of the decision to start farming for most farmers. According to Schlossberg, the type of transition (anticipated or unanticipated) is central in understanding one's adjustment to the transition. The first group of aspiring neo-rural farmers characterises itself by their low level of preparation (i.e. unanticipated). They are either seeking adventure or looking to flee/escape the city without a set strategy to do so. They suddenly leave because of a trigger event such as an invitation of a friend or encouragement from their partner. The ones that started their transition with this approach do not spend much time or energy exploring what it means to start farming because their motivation is to not be in cities. Even though all interviewees actively decided to transition to the new lifestyle, the less-prepared group did it more impulsively as demonstrated by Francisca.

I was in [city] for about three or four years. I also started working, but I did not really like it very much. And I had a friend from university here. She said, "If you're just doing anything, why don't you come here? [...]" So, with my four-and-a-half-year-old son, I came to Asturias. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

Francisca demonstrates here that, even though she makes the decision, it was made sudden and unanticipated. In this case, she faces a more unknown path than the group of more prepared transitioners. Carmen had a similar experience where she, quite suddenly, encountered a housing opportunity that made her start the transition.

It was a magazine for young people like us, who were looking beyond the city. And that is how we got in touch with a guy who lived in [city], on the outskirts of [city], and we went to meet him. [...] So we went there, left our jobs and started learning crafts, he made sandals and bags, that's how we started. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

These quotes illustrate that the exact decision moment is like a dive into the deep end, facing the unknown but with one certainty: a place to stay. For both Carmen and Francisca, the opportunity of housing presented itself unexpectedly through their social networks. For Francisco, support from his romantic partner was decisive in starting a farm. "[...] what made up my mind and helped me take the plunge at that moment was finding a partner who was also in the same situation." (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). What differs for Francisco compared to Carmen and Francisca is that he was already internally debating whether to 'take the plunge' or not. The encouragement from his partner was merely the final push that made him decide. For Carmen and Francisca, the help from social networks came blindly and sudden. However, in these situations they had some time to decide whether to advance on the opportunity. Nevertheless, as Schlossberg describes the onset as the extent to which one expects the transition, in these examples the exact moment is unexpected. However, the knowledge that one does not want to live in the city, together with their values and attitudes towards sustainability and alternative lifestyles prepare them in the broader context for the transition and enable them to 'rehearse' the situation.

The second group constitutes a more gradual and thought-through preparation of becoming a farmer. They have prepared during their urban life by having a vegetable garden (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025), or immersing themselves in other rural places where they learned about farming, local traditions, and got into local social circles (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025; Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025). Six out of nine interviewees stated to have worked on community farms that applied alternative business models. Living in farming communities or working paid labour on another person's farm can be seen as a gateway step to gradually get into the farming world as demonstrated by Manuel.

And in all the houses I have rented, I have always tried to have a vegetable garden. And when I bought this house, I wanted to have a vegetable garden no matter what. [...] There was a community living in yurts in the forest. [...] And then I started working in a huge vegetable garden. (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025)

This demonstrates how his introduction to farming on a larger scale helped him gain knowledge about farming through learning by doing. Subsequently, because neo-rural farmers make connections with other communities and farms, they can rely on this network. It is through these networks that opportunities for starting one's own farm arise, further preparing them for their transition.

Source

The source of the transition can be allocated to an internal or external instigator and effectively describes one's perception of control over their transition. Transitions with internal instigators are chosen by the transitioners themselves, indicating the control they exert over their life direction.

Externally sourced transitions imply that control over the transitioners life and their choices lie in other's hands.

All participants made the choice to start their neo-rural farming transition themselves, making it an internally sourced transition. Participants assign their values and attitudes towards the way they want to live their life as the source of their motivation to transition towards a neo-rural farming life. The way they intend to live their life and its desired location instigate those motivations. The motivations include both aversion from urban life, as well as attraction of rural life. This attraction of rural areas has for three out of nine always been there because of experiences visiting rural areas or family that lives there (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025; David, personal communication, 11 June 2025; Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). For the other six, this attraction has grown with the aversion that they gained for the city. This gradual buildup of dissatisfaction eventually motivates the person to transition. However, some neo-rural farmers receive some form of support or nudge from their social network, such as a housing opportunity, that helped them make the decision (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025; Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025). This external factor may seem to be the source of motivation for the transition but can be better classified as a catalyst that activates one's already existent motivations.

Timing

Next, there is a temporal factor weighing in the probability of one's ability to successfully transition to a new life. All interviewees were in their twenties or thirties when starting their transition. Connections can be drawn with their start in 'grown-up life' where they get their first jobs, work those for a couple of years, and then find out that this type of life is not for them (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). The exact moment that neo-rural farmers effectively start farming is dependent on the moment they buy a house with land. Even though this is a hard break, neo-rural farmers also already prepare for their transition through immersion in other farms and doing courses beforehand (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025; Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025; Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025; Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). The more preparation time someone has for their transition increases their perception of being on-time.

Schlossberg (1981) describes the timing of the transition as a factor that is comparative with societal norms and timelines. Whether a person is on-time or off-time (of which off-time can be both early and late) influences the social and psychological conformity. Radically changing the course of one's life does not follow a societally normalised timeline or age. The transition towards a neo-rural farming life can be seen as a disruptive event that is inherently non-normative and can therefore entirely be considered socially off-time. However, both on-time and off-time classifications apply when considering the personal and psychological readiness of the person to start their transition. Because most neo-rural farmers prepare in some way for their transition, they decide at which moment they start their transition. But as explained under the paragraph about onset, not all neo-rural farmers get to prepare for their transition equally.

Affect

The parameter affect describes how the transition affects the transitioner, meaning whether this transition generates feelings of pleasure, or painful ones. A neo-rural farmer's transition spans multiple years and therefore undoubtedly includes both positive and negative feelings. Because the transition to the neo-rural farmer's life is one that all interviewees deliberately chose, it overall positively affects them. Some move out of interest in the countryside, others are motivated by situations such as the multiple (social, environmental, and housing) crises they encounter in their urban life which they do not want to live in or raise their kids in (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025; Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025; Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). Their situation of living in the city becomes intolerable for seven out of nine interviewees, exemplified by Manuel. "There came a point when I knew it was too much for me, you know? Too much stimulation, too fast,

too much of everything.” (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025). What he says shows how the city negatively affects him, making him flee the negative affect in search of positive affect in the countryside. Others mention how the balance between working-to-live and living-to-work in the city just does not appeal.

[...] you don't have to pay the bank, the mortgage, every month, which in a way forces you to work to pay back this money, if you can also find a way to work occasionally at something that doesn't make you rich, that gives you enough, the minimum to be able to live, and you live simply [...] (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025)

What Rafael says demonstrates how the ‘conventional’ urban way of living is something that does not facilitate his desired freedom in life. Taking back the freedom that the urban society does not facilitate is part of the positive affect he searches. Additionally, it suggests that a more minimalistic approach to life gives more satisfaction, i.e. positive affect, than the urban lifestyle. Not being dependent on jobs to pay for a house seems to be essential in a neo-rural farmer’s valuation of freedom. The change in life can be seen as one of self-empowerment which, in general, positively affects the transitioner.

Nevertheless, during their transition five out of nine interviewees mentioned to endure stress for reasons including financial or family related ones. “The beginning was very tough. It was very tough going without food, finding work in the fields, picking apples or working in a cooperative or whatever.” (David, personal communication, 11 June 2025) As David shows, the initial phase of the transition is characterised by arranging the personal economy in which he can sustain himself while also working towards the start of his farm. Francisca mentions how her personal situation put her in a vulnerable position.

It was difficult because I think I was vulnerable at the time. With a son who was maybe five years old. Alone. I mean, no husband and no family here. And struggling financially, right? With very little money. So I worked a lot and was paid very poorly. Very poorly, very poorly. They took advantage of me a lot. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

Concluding from these quotes, the financial disposition of those with little financial freedom affects the person negatively in a way that can leave them vulnerable to high workloads and possibly exploitation. Overall, the wide range of motivations for leaving the city are based on values and attitudes (self) of neo-rural farmers that feel negatively affected by the urban lifestyle. The transition towards neo-rural farming life appears to be a search for alignment between their living situation and their intrinsic values and motivations. Neo-rural farmers escape the city with all the ways it negatively affects them in search of life in the countryside where their daily activities affect them more positively.

Role change

During one’s transition, their daily activities and responsibilities change. Their new surroundings require them to fulfil different roles which Schlossberg (1981) describes as either a gain or a loss of a role. The role change suggests a change from one role to another, meaning that one had certain roles in their urban life that they exchange for roles in their new life as a farmer. The transition is one in which transitioners leave a full set of roles from urban life behind and replace it with a set of new rural farmer’s roles. Therefore, neo-rural farmers both gain and lose numerous roles. Juan describes it as a complete shift of roles and mentions that nothing stayed the same.

Well, instinctively I think the change is almost just 100%. I could not necessarily name one thing that I feel is still the same. Actually, everything has changed. From the feeling that here, for example, you are discussing and arranging things much more among your neighbours. (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025)

Juan elaborates how he gained the role of social relations manager in which he actively communicates and discusses with his neighbours to maintain positive relationships. Within this role he, as well as five

other interviewees (six out of nine in total), pursues social integration and notices how he is starting to become part of a 'rural team'. Through social integration neo-rural farmers can obtain the role of team player and vice versa. Francisco confirms the rural team spirit by sharing his experience of the shared feeling of responsibility for the team's success when locals helped him on his farm without requesting it.

But the day we were planting the potatoes, starting to plant the potatoes, in the afternoon [...] Women started arriving with hoes and buckets to plant, to help plant. [...] And they didn't know, they knew we were preparing the land, but they didn't know beforehand. (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025)

This shows how in rural areas, people fulfil a role of team player which motivates them to help each other out. In turn, neo-rural farmers gain, and are expected to fulfil, this role of team player. Juan also mentions the role of team player as a fundamental part of the relationship with his partner. All interviewees with (ex-)partners mentioned in some way that the management of romantic relationships is especially important. The romantic partner is a determining factor in the success of a neo-rural farmer's project and therefore needs careful management.

But I do think in the long run you have to realise that even more like in a regular relationship, you are doing it as a team. Yes, and so that you also have a kind of team meeting from time to time. [...] Because [...] you are both colleagues and partners of each other. [...] It's an extra dynamic. (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025)

Juan demonstrates how the transition puts pressure on his romantic relationship because of the extra roles that get allocated to each other. This indicates that the changes in roles require careful evaluation and management to ensure that personal and romantic relationships are not stressed and that both partners remain satisfied with those changes.

Additionally, there is a change in the role of those who have young children or expect to have children in the early phase of their transition. Seven out of nine interviewees had young children during their transition. The change in role can be described as a shift from 'urban parent' to 'rural parent'. In this shift, the role of raising kids itself does not change so much, but rather the circumstances in which they must perform this role. The decrease in stability, because of moving to the countryside aiming to start farming, requires different efforts from the parent as described by Francisca:

Then I worked in a garden outside the village. It was different, but it allowed me to balance it very well with motherhood, with my son. Because I was alone with him. So, I did not have anyone to look after him. So, I worked a few hours here, a few hours there. I also did clean sometimes. But I was already focused on agriculture. And only agriculture. Because I love pruning. I love cutting trees. So, I was very clear that I wanted to be there. Yes. It wasn't easy! (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

While the role of parent raising kids does not change, the efforts required to fulfil the role increase. While raising kids in the city is unthinkable for them, raising them in the countryside increases the complexity of this task (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025). Carmen mentioned how in the change from urban parent to rural parent, parents have to look after her kid full-time while in the city she had family and other acquaintances that could look after their children from time to time. The extra time parents must spend on their children limits their ability to work manual labour on the farm or additional side-jobs. Rafael explains another change in roles. He mentions how in urban life, as a university educated employee, his job entailed managing teams in large projects. His role was to execute construction projects with a large team of colleagues. That role reduced in size for him to do something he had never done before: starting life as a neo-rural farmer.

In the end, one of the secrets is scale: find a project that is tiny but allows you to learn or develop the skills you need, and if in the future you need or want something bigger, you will have already found your thing. (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025)

His quote shows how he discovered that his role was not the one of project executer, as was his role in his former job, but rather that his role is a learning one. Manuel confirms this by saying that his life as neo-rural farmer is “a never-ending learning process, because there's so much to know.” (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025). Rafael describes how the urge to take on a large-scale farming operation originates from managerial roles fulfilled in prior urban jobs. ‘Starting small’ is seen as a role loss because of the sentiment that one is downgrading from his or her abilities. However, taking apprenticeship as an active role through learning by doing later enabled him to re-gain his role as team manager.

That was a radical change for me because before I had someone next to me helping me set things up and do things, and suddenly I had ten people I had to manage, and I wasn't doing it myself anymore. (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025)

Additionally, as five out of nine interviewees mention, they gain the role of construction worker when referring to the renovation of their house. This is another positively viewed role gain which is in line with the aspired lifestyle and results in more responsibility. These quotes demonstrate that the role changes in the neo-rural farmer's transition are plural and iterative. Perceptions of most role changes are positive because they construct the rural livelihoods that neo-rural farmers pursue and actively choose for.

Duration

The expected duration of the new life situation influences the ability to adapt to the transition. It is related to the affect that the transition has on the person. If the affect is negative, but the expected duration is temporary, one might be willing to bear the discomfort because there is perspective of an end date. Contrarily, if the transition positively affects the transitioner, a permanent outlook will aid the adaptation to the transition.

Because neo-rural farmers intend to live life in a way that aligns with their motivations and values, the intended duration of this lifestyle is permanent for most transitioners. Most neo-rural farmers have faith in their ability to succeed. However, the uncertainties that come during the transition to become a neo-rural farmer exclude complete certainty of this permanent duration as shown in the case of Maria. “Even though there have been very hard times, because we have been through very difficult times, we did not know where to go. We couldn't leave this.” (Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025). What Maria shows here is two-fold, on the one hand, she shows certainty that she did not want to abandon her farm, and on the other hand she shows that this certainty is challenged by harsh times she encountered along the way. The eagerness and intensity of the desires to transition increase stress levels accompanying the uncertain times during the transition. Two of the interviewees perceived this differently, Carmen explained how she felt less urgency during her start of the transition and was barely affected by the perceived duration of the transition.

For me, at least, the transition was easy. One, because I had a desire inside me that didn't cost me anything, it wasn't a decision, [...] no, I was very young, very much like, well, let's give it a try, and we went for it, and then, look, there's a guy in [city], let's go and meet him. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

This shows how Carmen did not have a long-term perspective, and the start of her transition was part of a process of trial and error in which she was trying out a different lifestyle. For her and Francisca, the lack of expectations for duration shows open-mindedness towards what the neo-rural farmer's transition has to offer. Additionally, the volatile attitude of trial-and-error shows signs of flexibility and the willingness to change direction if this transition does not satisfy.

Degree of stress

As mentioned before, Wallace et al. (2023) argue that life changes such as: changes in financial state and change in residence are highly impactful. As Schlossberg (1981) describes, stress is dependent on the individual's perception of, and preoccupation with, stress. What this means for neo-rural farmers is that the level of stress about the transition as a whole is substantiated by the presence or absence of worries about stressful situations encountered in the transition. In this case, the distinction between the 'well-prepared' and the 'adventure seekers' mentioned in the previous paragraph determines how they manage stress. The participants mentioned that stressors mainly originate from the uncertainty that characterises the transition. However, the number of worries about these stressors highly depends on the individual's attitude and character. As shown in Carmen's example before, the adventure seekers manage stressors by embracing them and continuing with their transition. On the contrary, the well-prepared ones have addressed the uncertainties in advance through their preparation. To a certain extent, these two ways of addressing uncertainty directly answer Schlossberg's (1981) description of preoccupation with stress. The prepared ones preoccupy themselves with the stress that awaits them, prior to experiencing the stressor. As a result, the stress shifts from during the stressors presence, to the preparatory phase. The adventure seekers face the transition more unpreparedly, resulting in potentially higher stress levels during the transition.

Conclusion

This section set out to explore how neo-rural farmers perceive their transitions as a whole, providing insights into their position while starting the transition. Neo-rural farmers' transitions can be seen as an unavoidable desired life path constructed by their motivations and attitudes towards the way they intend to live life. The onset of one's transition and the degree of anticipation determine how well someone has prepared. In the case of neo-rural farmers, both sudden and gradual starts of the transition exist. Neo-rural farmers source their transition internally, but external factors such as friends or relatives, can suddenly instigate the start of the transition, hindering preparation and timing. However, their ability to choose the transition moderates the psychological effects of sudden onsets. While there is no socially accepted time for a neo-rural farmer's transition, it can be viewed as on-time or off-time based on one's level of preparation. Transitioners aim to change their life permanently, so it matches better with their values. To do so, they are willing to put significant efforts into their transition. In this transition their personal function shifts from a set of urban roles towards rural roles of food producer and helpful neighbour. Transitioners gain, lose, and transform roles, most of which is desired and therefore positively influences their chances of successful transition. As neo-rural farmers are intrinsically motivated to transition, the changes in roles affect them mostly positively. However, stressors that accompany the transition burden transitioners and their relationships. To conclude, a certain degree of stress accompanies all of the described parameters. The stress comes from the uncertainties that the transition holds and is influenced by a transitioner's preparations. In sum, the transition to a rural farming livelihood is often perceived as hard and demanding in terms of physical and mental stress. Still, it is a gratifying process through which neo-rural farmers get to live in accordance with their values and beliefs. The following section elaborates further on the situations that neo-rural farmers encounter to provide insights into how these specific experiences affect their transition.

4.2 What situations do neo-rural farmers encounter?

During their transition, neo-rural farmers start getting acquainted with the land, the natural environment, and the social environment. They start to form social networks, test farming practices, and gain knowledge of the land. While doing so, neo-rural farmers adapt to the rural pace of life and a new cultural setting. They put their values and attitudes into practice and figure out if that works for them. There are many situations that they encounter during their transition which are unique for each farmer but can be grouped based on their characteristics. As described earlier, the situations comprise

of challenges and opportunities. These challenges and opportunities consist of personal and organisational situations, but can also be the lock-ins and windows of opportunity as described by Geels (2002). Worthwhile to mention is that these can be both events and non-events. The situations encountered by the interviewees are grouped under the topics: access to housing and land; economic viability; time and workload management; personal and family circumstances; bureaucratic hurdles; social and cultural integration; and farming, environment, and external forces. The following paragraphs elaborate on the challenges and opportunities that these situations entail without any specific order, contextualising them for neo-rural farmers.

Access to housing and land

First, neo-rural farmers face the challenge of obtaining access to housing and land. The situation they encounter is a housing market in which there are many empty houses, often in poor condition, which are not always listed for sale. The amount of vacated and neglected houses are a result of landscape developments including prolonged rural-urban migration and rural depopulation. Manuel's experience displays how inaccessible housing can be.

And so the previous owner had this house as a place to come to work and do things little by little and so on. And then I showed up, you know? He had never considered selling or renting or anything. So I was talking to his wife and she said, well, maybe I will sell it to you. And in the end, he sold it to me [...] (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025)

As Manuel demonstrates here, it is common for people to own multiple houses without feeling the need to sell them. Additionally, many of those neglected houses have deteriorated severely. This makes them more affordable but also requires investments for its renovation as demonstrated by Rafael and David. "[...] the hardest part was when we got to the other project, like when we bought a ruin and you walk into the house and say, "What did I get myself into? What mess? Where do I start?" (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). "Well, we had to fix up the whole house because it was... the house was in terrible condition. I spent nine months on the building work [...]" (David, personal communication, 11 June 2025). The fact that neo-rural farmers opt for these types of houses shows how their availability of time and money steers their decision-making. The balance of available time and money shapes the situation of finding suitable housing. As they buy houses in poor conditions and even ruins, it requires them to renovate these houses.

Economic viability

Neo-rural farmers are characterised by two different financial statuses. Most people earlier described as 'adventure seekers' endure more financial struggles than those that prepared more elaborately. They have to bridge the gap between their first sowing and harvesting season in a way that allows them to invest in the farm until they sell their first produce. The latter group is less financially burdened, allowing them to dive right into the project without having the need to find an income straight away. They take time to buy and renovate a house meanwhile slowly starting up their farming practices (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025; Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025). For this group, the transition is more gradual and gives them time to adjust to their new surroundings before becoming (financially) dependent on those.

Four out of nine interviewees stated the need to find secondary incomes in their start-up phase of the farm. For them, everything appears a trade-off between investing time and efforts into the farm or earning money from secondary jobs to ensure their livelihood. The trade-off between working a job or working on the farm exemplifies the financial stress that these farmers endure as shown by Francisca.

That was partly my choice and partly, I think, out of necessity. Because I did not have much money. So it was difficult to go out and earn money, come here, have to farm, look after the chickens, look after my son, try to clean the house. There were many times when I didn't eat,

for example. Because it was like... You have to work. You have to work. Or I have to be with my son. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

Francisca demonstrates how her economic viability is dependent on her ability to balance outside jobs, her household farm, and her personal life. This applies especially to those that have children to take care of. In this starting phase, the farm requires significant investments in (often) renovating a house, starting up the farm, and processing facilities. These costs are further increased by the legal requirements for each of those (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025; Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025). The coincidence of these large investments and the scarcity of available time and money complicates the start-up phase for the farmers with limited financial resources.

After this initial phase, neo-rural farmers in Asturias continue to find themselves in economically tough situations. The globalisation of markets forces them to deal with a global market prices which they cannot compete with because of landscape characteristics. The physical landscape inhibits mechanised farming strategies for neo-rural farmers in Cabranes and therefore excludes them from reaching the efficiency of large-scale farms. In Asturias, farmers maintain “a more or less traditional way means more labour, which means higher costs. And for that you have to pay more.” (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). This is a financial challenge for neo-rural farmers because wholesale for global market prices is not profitable, so different sales strategies must be applied.

Well, it was very difficult to get into the market to sell, because we sold at markets, right? Of course, it's direct sales, so the profit is direct. There were no middlemen. And we saw that it wasn't working. We started selling to flower and plant shops. What happened? The profit margin was low. And in the end, I had to get into construction. (David, personal communication, 11 June 2025)

David's example shows how even after overcoming the initial phase of significant investments, the market constrains his financial feasibility. They are even so demanding that farming as a whole is not profitable for him and he requires secondary jobs to make ends meet. These examples together demonstrate an interaction with the regime because neo-rural farmers are 'locked out' of the market and unable to compete. Through highly efficient and productive farms, neo-rural farmers are financially outcompeted by other ways of food production.

Time and workload management

Seven out of nine interviewees stated that their transition requires a lot of work. The high workload is unavoidable for those leaving the city to start farming in the countryside from scratch. Additionally, the choices that neo-rural farmers make for economic reasons have implications for the workload that accompanies starting a farm and vice versa. The lack of money often weighs the decision between spending either time or money on the farm and results in spending more time on labour, as demonstrated in the examples given by David and Rafael when they chose the houses they bought. The workload generally includes, but is not limited to, renovation of the house, manual farming practices, working a job, and raising children. Francisca's experience of her financial situation in the previous section demonstrates the struggles that come with managing all this work. In rural Asturias, local traditions like the *andecha* and *sextaferia* still remain. These forms of collaboration indicate the high workloads that come with traditional-style farming but also show an opportunity that is present in the Asturian countryside.

Andecha (pl.: andeches)

That's when a neighbour goes to another neighbour's house to help out. Because later they go and help him too. With the sheep shearing, with the pig slaughter, with the corn husking, with all those kind of things. (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025)

Presence during two different andeches, as well as multiple anecdotes of those, demonstrate that “the only solution is if we are able to collaborate and work as a team.” (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). This illustrates the economic pressure on farmers in Asturias, where the terrain inhibits mechanised farming practices. As a result, traditional methods persist due to necessity even more so than ideology. Similarly to the way neo-rural farmers are ‘locked out’ of the regime through global market prices, they are also financially and biophysically locked out of being able to apply mechanised farming methods to reduce manual workloads.

Traditionally, without teamwork, the great amount of manual labour could not have been executed within the time constraints that farming activities such as harvesting, sowing, and butchering encompass. Despite the high workloads, neo-rural farmers end up in a place where local traditions such as the andecha exist and provide opportunities for sharing those workloads. Additionally, Rafael mentions how the scale at which one starts their transition is essential as it fundamentally dictates the workload, meaning that starting with a small house with one hectare is much less work than renovating a big house and starting a farm of many hectares (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025).

The perception of the high workload differs within the group of interviewed neo-rural farmers. The distinction can again be made based on financial necessity. The farmers that struggle financially view the high workload as inevitable part of their personal process and a requirement for their success. This necessity to work hard is the result of trying to get by, while also managing a farm (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025). Meanwhile, those who are financially better off see the high workload as something they need to protect themselves from as demonstrated by Juan.

You do have to be careful because you [...] don't finish it that day anyway. So that you keep working normal, regular working hours. And it's just pretty physical what you're doing. So you have to give your body a rest as well. (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025)

The difference between those highlights how different neo-rural farmers can protect themselves from burn-out or over-working. It also shows how priorities are weighed only after financial viability, further underscoring the financial stressors mentioned in previous paragraphs.

Additionally, neo-rural farmers decision for manual and/or traditional farming practices resulting in high workloads which are often physical of character. As told by Francisco, traditionally in Asturias there have been solutions for prevention of overcharging oneself. Francisco and Rafael mention how teamwork between families and communities have traditionally been the safety nets of rural communities.

Today, nowadays, families aren't like they used to be. Because before, it wasn't just the couple and the children. Before, there were... There were neighbours and family, right? Uncles, grandparents, and everything. It was a group that helped each other. (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025)

This shows how the demanding workload was traditionally shared within families, substantiating how “[...] doing it with just one person, it's very ambitious and very demanding for that person.” (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025). In sum, there is variation in the height of the workloads that neo-rural farmers encounter, and the distinction lies in their financial disposition. The choice for manual labour practices makes the work physically demanding but has financial and ideological motivations. Additionally, as most farmers operate only with their partner, they share a workload that was

traditionally shared by many more. Struggles from those with less financial room exert extra pressure to work hard because of necessary side-jobs.

Personal and family circumstances

The personal and family circumstances are conditions that are both a result of the neo-rural farmer's transition as well as a shaping element of it. These circumstances can be an encountered situation (e.g. separation), but, as they are (semi-)internal characteristics, they also effectively shape the way neo-rural farmers perceive, and act upon, other situations. The previous paragraphs already mentioned some of the personal and family circumstances such as being single and having young children. This paragraph elaborates upon those and supplements them with others.

Four out of nine interviewees mentioned how raising children impacted their transition, one of which did so as a single parent. For them, the transition "also includes the challenges of being a young mother." (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025). Having a baby or young child can significantly increase the stress experienced for getting by financially whilst working on the neo-rural farmer's transition. Meanwhile it also limits the transitioner by burdening them with childcare which can be time-consuming but especially inflexible for those that maintain secondary jobs to make ends meet.

Furthermore, neo-rural farmers mentioned being healthy as a critical factor in the life of a neo-rural farmer. The loss of one's health, and thus their ability to perform manual labour has, for some, had catastrophic effects for the continuity of the farm. "[...] I had a health problem with my back, and I said, well, maybe now is not the time for this, and I stopped everything, the preserves, the vegetable garden [...]" (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025). For Carmen, an injury of her former partner resulted in a realisation that their dependency on their health had become too great.

It's true that when I was alone with [Ramon], when he fell, it was like, 'Damn, [Ramon], we have to... We have to take things down, we have to move things'. And then we separated and we didn't make that change. Because I was kind of demanding that [Ramon] found a way. We have to find another way, another formula, because this isn't viable, it's not viable. I mean, let's lower our standards a little. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

This exposes neo-rural farmers' large dependency on their physical health, which is constantly contested by the manual labour they perform. The economic and labour challenges mentioned in the previous paragraphs mentally and physically strain neo-rural farmers. Adding to those, all the ideological goals with which neo-rural farmers come from the city, results in a certain degree of unrealistic expectations. Becoming aware of these and being able to set realistic expectations and incorporating those into a strategy is key for maintaining mental and physical health (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). An essential challenge is managing expectations and being realistic in one's abilities as mentioned in, among others, the interview with Carmen.

There came a point when I think I even had anxiety attacks, like I can't do this, it's unthinkable for two people to do this alone, and on top of that you have to make ends meet, I mean, it seemed crazy to me. Well, I think that was part of what led to the separation. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

This shows that the goals with which one leaves the city might not be realistic and how they have serious implications, on not just physical, but also on mental health and relationships. For those that have a partner, the management of these expectations is not just an individual task. As Carmen demonstrates, the inability to agree with her former partner on manageable goals and not expecting more can be detrimental to the relationship. For David, the situation of separation from his partner resulted in having to sell the farm and find other work. The financial burdens of requiring an income were too high and withheld him from continuing his own farm. The same happened to Francisco, but he continues his farming activities on a smaller scale still, focusing on collaboration with neighbours to

be able to cover the workload. These experiences indicate that within a relationship, struggles will most likely arise. It is a situation that puts the relationship under pressure because of different attitudes, high workloads, financial insecurity, and other uncertainties.

But, having a partner is not solely a risk of losing them, four out of nine interviewees stated that their romantic partner encouraged and enabled them to advance in their transition. Francisco dared to take the plunge because of support from his partner at the time (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). What this demonstrates is that the romantic partnership can enable people in their transition through sharing workload and motivating one another. However, the separation of one's partner has adverse effect and can lead to having to stop farming.

Bureaucratic hurdles

During their transitions, neo-rural farmers encounter many legal hurdles such as costly and time-consuming legal processes for building permits and organic certifications. The bureaucracy that neo-rural farmers indulge in has been mentioned to result in problematic situations by six out of nine interviewees. For example, applying for a permit to renovate requires an architect's expensive and elaborate project plans. Neo-rural farmers choose to renovate their house themselves as autonomous action and to save costs but encounter these bureaucratic obstacles with financial consequences as stated by Juan.

[...] even if you are going to do maintenance on your house here or you want to do things, you basically have to get a permit for everything. Theoretically, if you are going to paint your house inside, you have to apply for a permit for that. But anyway, even the people who work at the permit office, they will kind of steer you. Oh well, you don't need a permit for everything, if you do this and not this. It all feels much more flexible in a way. That can work to your advantage, that can also work to your disadvantage. But that gives a certain freedom. Because if you get on well with your neighbours, you can arrange all sorts of things to each other's advantage. But if you get on badly with your neighbours, that's actually a kind of bigger obstacle. (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025)

The lengthy and financially straining procedures needed to do things legally are too demanding for Juan, stressing his available time and money. Juan shows how excessive requirements hinder operating completely legal but also provide a space for a-legality. He further elaborates how the a-legal crack in the Spanish bureaucracy makes one dependent on their relationship within their village neighbours. Operating within the a-legal spheres enables neo-rural farmers to save money on costly architectural plans and permits but makes them subject to the risk of denunciation by their neighbours.

The scale at which neo-rural farmers decide to start farming is often smaller than those of conventional farms. Their reasons are strongly linked to the ecological values with which they manage the farm. Starting small also has financial motivations, for example saving funds on investment in land, material, and labour. Additionally, subsidies for farmers that plan to farm unconventionally are hard to obtain because of bureaucratic hurdles and the requirements designed for conventional production methods. Requirements such as productivity measured in yields and processing facilities designed by hygiene standards are barely attainable.

The problem with subsidies, with this type of subsidy, is that they are designed so that you have to demonstrate economic profitability, and you have to produce, you have to say that you are going to produce a certain amount, and that what you are doing is sustainable. So you look at [our farm], and it needs more time, and at the same time we also need more time to learn, because it's like another process. We're not farmers who are changing the way we produce something we already know and are familiar with, we're learning everything, and that's the context for most neo-rural people. (Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025).

[...] they ask for a lot of paperwork. It's like you'd need someone to help with the admin to keep all the records of planting, irrigation, fertilisers. It's too much for one person. I mean, if you're thinking of doing it with just one person, it's very ambitious and very demanding for that person. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025).

These quotes demonstrate how interviewees perceive the application process for subsidies and management thereof. It shows how the mismatch of scale prevents the interviewed neo-rural farmers from receiving governmental, or other financial support for their farming-related ventures. To receive funds or assistance from governmental institutions, they require substantial amounts of bureaucratic paperwork and processes to prove one's sustainability and producing capabilities. The investment of time and energy to fulfil these requirements make neo-rural farmers decide that their time is better spent working on their farm.

I think the biggest challenge now is that there are people who are willing to live in the countryside, to dedicate themselves to farming and to want to make a living from the land, but I think that at the government level, too many things are being asked of them. I mean, if you want to live within the legal framework, it's difficult to get started. I don't know, it's like asking a small child to run the day they stand up, you ask them to run, it's not possible, they need to gain confidence, fall a couple of times to say, OK, now I can run. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025)

Cristina's metaphor precisely captures the struggle that neo-rural farmers encounter when seeking governmental help in their transition in general. The bureaucratic hurdles that Cristina encountered are designed for conventional (large-scale and mechanised) farming and do not tailor neo-rural farmers, a clear sign of how the regime lock-out through legislation and legality.

Social and cultural integration

Neo-rural farmers launch themselves into a new surrounding where they encounter new people, cultures, and traditions. In the process of integrating, neo-rural farmers get to know those and get to decide how they interact with them. From a cultural perspective, neo-rural farmers encounter both challenges and opportunities. Starting with an opportunity, it seems that in Spanish rural areas, people feel a shared responsibility for the well-being of one's neighbours. As mentioned earlier by Juan, the relationship with his neighbours is one that enables him to overcome bureaucratic hurdles. He further illustrates how the relationship with his neighbours is one that provides opportunities for various situations.

So at one point we also brought a caravan from the Netherlands. And the neighbours themselves came and offered to bring that to the site by tractor. That was kind of nice, because that really hadn't gone well with the van. [...] And that's also kind of nice, because it works the same way the other way round. One of the neighbours keeps cows, so if one of those cows escapes, we do take action too. (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025)

This type of cooperation goes both ways and puts some responsibility at the transitioner. Knowing that someday, one might need help from their neighbours inspires, but also requires, to invest in relationships with them. This results in situations that require mutual trust and respect because if you cannot trust your neighbours, are they going to be of value when you need their help? While trust must be built and respect must be earned to completely integrate into the countryside in Spain, it unlocks the ability to collaborate and make use of community capital.

Contrary to the opportunities that the trust-based traditions and relationships present, there are also challenges related to the trust required for those relationships. Suspicion arises among people in rural areas when contacted or visited by unknown people. Throughout the research period this was perceived in multiple ways. For example, Manuel and Carmen have specifically mentioned the fear of change brought by neo-rural farmers.

So, I think I've realised that it's time for people to get to know you. I'm telling you, when you first came to [the village], people [frowned] at you like that, didn't they? There's always someone who stares at you. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

Additionally, the earlier mentioned challenge of accessing housing can partially be allocated to people not putting their vacated houses for sale, which results in a shortage of housing in places where many houses are uninhabited. The fact that some owners do not list their houses for sale but are willing to sell them, insinuates the need to know people and them needing to know that one is looking to buy. But getting to know these people is not enough, Manuel tells how his experience made him realise how trust is highly valued and even essential for one's transition.

There are also a lot of houses here, mate, that are empty or just waiting because... It's also true that the people here are local, right? Some of them are suspicious [...] towards foreigners, people who aren't from here. [...] It's a way of protecting the place. (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025)

This exemplifies how social networks can function as barriers for starting neo-rural farmers, especially those that do not know anyone in the area. However, once breaking through these barriers, social and cultural integration provides opportunities to address several of the challenges described before.

Farming, environment, and external forces

To start, neo-rural farmers, by definition, have no agricultural background and are therefore inclined to lack farming knowledge, something mentioned by eight out of nine farmers. The interviewees describe their transition as a learning process through which they slowly become more knowledgeable and able as a farmer. They start their transition with a steep, but long, learning curve that consists of long cycles as mentioned by Cristina.

You can't just say, 'OK, I want to be a farmer now, I'll buy three hectares and live off it', But in order to be able to live off it, I might need a year to be here and observe what plants grow, because they are indicators. They will tell me what I need, what nutrients I need, and that year of observation, financially speaking, when you start any project, you already have financial demands. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025)

Cristina mentions how the farming cycles, usually a year because of all the seasons the plant goes through, make learning about farming a slow process. She shows how this learning process is highly personal and contextual to one's own farm and its characteristics. Carmen reinforces this by saying "I did not have all my family's knowledge of the countryside. I had to start from scratch. Maybe I had some knowledge here and there, but I don't know." (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025). Juan further underscores this lack of knowledge about things that one does for the first time and how it hinders his ability to plan certain activities. "But it also has to do with the fact that a lot of these things we are doing now for the first time. How on earth can you plan something you're doing for the first time?" (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025). These examples show how farming-related struggles such as the lack of knowledge and early time investments can put more financial pressure on neo-rural farmers.

In addition, there are various macro-level movements that impact a neo-rural farmer's transition. These are landscape-level factors that are out of one's control but affect the well-being and viability of the farmer. One of those is nature, farming is reliant on the conditions that nature provides. Neo-rural farmers mainly perform organic and ecological farming practices and with those aim to benefit nature locally. If nature cooperates, it rewards farmers for their efforts with produce, but if nature obstructs, it leaves a farmer with nothing as demonstrated by Francisca.

I was there for a year and a half. Working all the time, doing everything myself. The thing is, there was a hailstorm, and ice fell on the plants. And I lost everything. Everything, everything,

everything. More than five tonnes, five thousand kilos on the ground. And I cried and cried and cried. Because I only made money once a year. When I sold the fruit. All year long I'm putting money in, I'm working. It's a big investment, and I lost everything. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

The hailstorm destroyed her crops, diminishing the extensive investment of time, money, and efforts. Francisca was powerless to the situation and could not prepare for the catastrophic weather event. Expecting a later payout of her labour she invested many hours into the farm, making the financial suffering twofold. The psychological stress that accompanies it further strains her as shown by her emotional reaction. Cristina underscores that “in Asturias, it's very difficult to organise your work in the garden because the weather is very unpredictable.” (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025). Another way in which nature influences neo-rural farmers' farms is through pests. On the one hand, biodiversity in one's farm has resulted in slugs or wild boar eating considerable parts of the harvest (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025; David, personal communication, 11 June 2025; Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025). On the other hand, the decreased presence of pollinators mentioned by Francisco results in less pollination of his fruit trees and therefore causes lower yields. These quotes collectively show how neo-rural farmers stick to their values regarding nature friendly farming practices to not contribute to negative landscape developments. On the other hand, it subjects them to all the uncertainties that nature and climate change can bring. These examples portray part of the aggravating landscape developments that are a result of changes in the natural environment. While conventional agriculture has developed technologies to protect itself from the natural environment, neo-rural farmers have not and remain susceptible to it.

The COVID pandemic exposed weaknesses in the business models of neo-rural farmers. During the pandemic, social activities were tied down and contacts restrained. For the socially oriented business of Cristina, this meant a sharp decline in demand.

It was in 2020 that the pandemic hit and we kind of lost momentum. Then having online meetings was the last straw, and we couldn't get our energy back. [...] Well, I stopped, I was at home, I didn't have any demands. So you stop and that's it. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025)

The fact that Cristina had to stop all business activities despite having a diverse and seemingly robust business model shows how a farmer's livelihood is still fragile in the case of severe societal changes. While Cristina's business faced different challenges during the COVID pandemic than conventional businesses of the regime, it impacted her no less than others.

Conclusion

This section started with the goal of finding out what situations neo-rural farmers encounter in their transition. The situations that neo-rural farmers have to address during their transition are diverse and interdependent, they include foggy access to housing, economic uncertainty, high workload, personal and family contingencies, administrative and bureaucratic burdens, social circles to integrate, and external/environmental forces. The situations they encounter are often a result of their disposition and attitudes towards their transition and comprise of both challenges and opportunities. Some of these challenges can be considered as regime lock-ins, or lock-outs, which hinder their progress. On some of the situations they can exert influence, with others they can only cope. Even though the previous paragraphs grouped situations by themes, they are interrelated and form reinforcing chains. For example: limited funds → choosing a ruin → more renovation work → higher workload → increased stress → risk for personal health and relationship → reduced farm viability. Even though neo-rural farmers broadly experience these situations, variety exists in their timing, sequencing, and intensity. The next section dives deeper into the strategies that neo-rural farmers apply to address these situations.

4.3 What strategies do neo-rural farmers compose to address a situation?

Neo-rural farmers employ a range of practices to overcome challenges and make use of opportunities that they encounter during their transition. The composition of a strategy to manage a situation is dependent on the resources, including supports, that neo-rural farmers have at their disposal. In addition, the transitioner's values fundamentally shape their attitudes, which influences how they manage situations. It determines whether they will successfully handle situations throughout their transition. The following paragraphs explain the strategies that neo-rural farmers implement in no specific order, emphasising how they address the situations described in the previous section.

Immersion

Most neo-rural farmers (seven out of nine) mentioned to have prepared for their transition through immersion. They mention visits to potential locations or staying with acquaintances that live close to it as an exploratory part of their transition. Through immersion, they get to know the land, the market, and the local communities. Immersion is a strategy applied to address various situations including finding land and housing, gathering farming knowledge, and social integration.

The main strategies given for finding and acquiring land and housing are immersion in the local context and building social networks and relationships. These strategies aid the search in two ways. Firstly, through building social connections, neo-rural farmers can make their search known to the local population. Through the network they build, communal knowledge spreads of their house search, further increasing chances of finding a house as experienced by Manuel.

But anyway, the first house I rented in [village] was thanks to talking to [barmaid], the girl at the bar... I was talking to her and I said, hey, I want to come and live here, [...] Then one day she said, "Well, there are some guys who are leaving a house... Why don't you ask them?" (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025)

Secondly, the transitioner's presence enables to physically find houses that are for sale. The previous section described the situation of finding accessible housing as a foggy process in which it is not always clear whether houses are for sale or not. Another one of Manuel's experiences shows precisely how investing in social connections can contribute to a solution for this challenge.

By chance, because the man had been building the house to live in himself. But his mother died, and he was living here. And then his wife said, well, I don't want to live there anymore, it's too far away. And so he had this house as a place to come to work and do things little by little and so on. And when I showed up, you know? He had never considered selling or renting or anything. So I was talking to his wife and she said, well, maybe I'll sell it to you. And in the end, he sold it to me [...] (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025)

These quotes show how immersion in the local context enables the transitioner to find houses that are hard to access, but also how it activates the local community as an agent in their house search. Additionally, through getting to know the people, they build trust. The suspicion of locals described in the previous section slowly decreases as they build relationships. But as Carmen demonstrates, trust comes with time, therefore it can take some time before people trust you enough to sell a house to. "It's about letting time pass, letting them see that you're not a threat." (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025). For Carmen, using her social network to find temporary housing helped her to immerse herself. She mentions that in her escape from the city, she first left to the countryside to live on someone's farm before she had decided that she wanted to start farming.

For me, at least, the transition was easy. One, because I had a desire inside me that didn't cost me anything, it wasn't a decision [...] I was very young, very much like, well, let's give it a try, and we went for it, and then, look, there's a guy in [village], let's go and meet him. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

This shows how a strategy of taking a leap of faith towards life as a neo-rural farmer can start the process of immersion. It also shows how a small nudge can facilitate that decision to move to the countryside. Through this form of immersion, neo-rural farmers simultaneously start learning about the farm they stay at. This way they gain knowledge about farming practices and local climate and landscape characteristics. Five out of nine interviewees mentioned to already embark on some sort of farming endeavour before actively becoming a farmer. Two of them first travelled elsewhere to start their farm but found out that the location was not desirable.

We were living in [big city], but we needed to get away from the city to start using our hands and learn in a different context, because otherwise we wouldn't be able to get away from making money to support ourselves in a city. It was like a vicious circle, where you couldn't learn other things because you didn't have time for them. So we went to [South-America]. [...] but we also realised there [...] that it wasn't our place. (Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025)

What Maria shows here is that the immersion in rural contexts is a strategy to break the urban cycles in which she was stuck in the city. Additionally, it is a way to learn about alternative farming practices and the location itself. The strategy facilitates learning opportunities that help transitioners with getting to know what it means to be a farmer.

The last challenge that immersion addresses is social integration. Only presence and active engagement over extended periods of time addresses the challenge of social integration as previously described by Carmen and Manuel. This way, locals get to know the transitioner and slowly start to develop trust.

So I think that sometimes when you come here, that's when you get to know people, and then they see your face and say, well, yeah, look, I know you, you know? They see that you're a good person or that you're not trouble. (Manuel, personal communication, 22 May 2025)

Through preparative immersion transitioners accelerate the process of giving locals time to adjust to their presence by starting it already before moving. For Carmen and Francisca, being able to immerse themselves as a strategy for developing a life in the countryside depended on the support of friends. Their existing social networks helped them to start building new ones, which in their turn can assist them in starting their farming activities. The start of this social integration is important for the success of other strategies elaborated hereafter. By starting this process already in the initial stages of the transition, neo-rural farmers advance the development of trust and possibilities to collaborate with locals on other strategies.

Do it yourself

A strategy applied by all interviewees is the strategy of doing-it-yourself (DIY). DIY is a way for neo-rural farmers to substantiate their desire for autonomy and alignment with ecological values. After acquiring a house, it often requires renovations. The financial disposition (self) of neo-rural farmers forces them to buy cheap and often abandoned houses which need extensive reconstructions. Neo-rural farmers effectually take advantage of rural depopulation as a landscape development that enables them to buy affordable housing. Additionally, they endeavour in DIY practices such as self-construction for multiple reasons including financial and ecological considerations. It seems that 'doing it yourself' is part of the self-empowering life that neo-rural farmers look for when transitioning to this lifestyle. For example, Maria explained how building her own house and food provision was not just a necessity, but part of her desire to lead a more self-reliant lifestyle (Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025). Similarly, Rafael described DIY as both an economic strategy and a source of personal satisfaction (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). The recurrence of DIY as a coping and enabling strategy suggests its functional and ideological importance among neo-rural farmers. An additional effect that DIY has on a neo-rural farmer's transition is the effect it has on their neighbours. Five out of nine

interviewees mentioned that being seen by their neighbours, working on their house or farm, locals grow appreciation and respect as showcased by Maria.

In any case, they understood the effort, [...] there is a very clear difference in the eyes of the local residents. It is not the same to see you spending money to get things done as it is to see you sweating and working hard. One of the locals here liked that. It was Christmas Day, and we were here on the roof working. He told me, "I love it, I'm doing this, and I see you working there, how great!" Of course, they see you there, they may not understand what you're doing, how you're building it with straw or whatever, but they see that you're working. (Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025)

What this shows is that appreciation from locals is dependent on proving one's ability and willingness to work hard, even on days that are not regular working days. Showing that one is able and willing to work hard seems to be the proof of competence that locals wish to see. This plays into the rural team spirit described in the previous section and shows how it requires trust to be accepted into the rural team. Carmen had a similar experience that confirms this.

They came to see the garden and said, what strange things you plant. Yes, yes, they looked at us. They said, 'But that vegetable garden...' But, of course, when they see you slaughtering animals, going to the market, planting broad beans, they see you there planting potatoes, I don't know what, they start... And, of course, I remember hearing a woman say, 'Of course you're like us, the only thing is... You dress differently and plant different things, right?' (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

What Carmen's experience adds to the analysis is the aspect of time. The actions of slaughtering and planting different crops usually happen once a year. This gives the impression that gaining locals' trust is a slow and gradual process, implying the need for continuous application of DIY practices. Nonetheless, DIY enables neo-rural farmers to operate in the a-legal spheres when it comes to the bureaucratic procedures required for construction works. The respect gained from their neighbours enables them to further build that relationship with lower chances of denunciation as a side-effect.

In conclusion, DIY manifests among neo-rural farmers as both a financial strategy and a form of self-empowerment, reflecting their desire for autonomy and alignment with ecological values. Unconsciously, it contributes to their social integration and makes them part of the rural team, enabling them to overcome bureaucratic hurdles and operate in a-legal ways.

Collaborative workforce

A strategy closely related to DIY that neo-rural farmers use is the application of alternative workforces. The rural team mentioned in the previous paragraph achieves its significance in situations of shared labour. The active engagement with the local community aids them to form a collaborative workforce. One way neo-rural farmers do this is by organising and participating in local traditions such as the *andecha*. The *andecha* is, as said before, a tradition through which villagers share hard and time-constrained labour among each other. Five out of nine neo-rural farmers mentioned to have participated in an *andecha* and/or organised one themselves. Carmen participates the most in these forms of labour and displayed how it became an integral part of her life.

Every Friday we would go to someone's house. Every month they would come to my house, you would make lunch, and we would all work together on something that you didn't feel like doing or that was very hard. We started when we were all building our houses. But of course we formed a really nice bond, we love each other a lot and we were sad to leave it, so now we still get together once a month and we're still going strong, seven years now. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

Since neo-rural farmers widely make use of DIY practices, they end up with having to do a lot of work themselves. Carmen shows how collaboration with her neighbours relieves her of having to do all the labour herself. Additionally, the interactions between those who host and those who help actively build a reciprocal relationship through which they build trust and knowledge. The social aspect of shared labour cannot be dismissed. Most interviewees indicated that the workload is large and working circumstances are harsh (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025; David, personal communication, 11 June 2025; Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025). By sharing the 'suffering', labour becomes tolerable, and as experienced by the researcher, even enjoyable. Additionally, going through these periods of hard labour together creates a bond among participants of the *andecha* that transcends the work itself (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025). It amplifies the relationship between transitioners and their neighbours. The connections built while working together may contribute to social integration more than any other strategy.

Another challenge that collaboration addresses is the lack of resources and the financial pressure of acquiring those. If it were not for the voluntary labour of their neighbours and sharing of resources (e.g. tools, cars, and time), the costs of paid workforces and renting or buying equipment would be their undoing. Francisca often participates in these kinds of collaborations as she explains.

I might not be able to go up the mountain because I don't have an off-road vehicle. But you do, so hey, I'll go with you, we'll go up in your 4x4, and the firewood will be for both of us the next day, right? And I've done that a lot too. I didn't earn much money, but I gained other things. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

What Francisca shows is how collaboration can be a way to bypass having to buy and own certain resources, in her case firewood or an off-road vehicle needed to get it. By working together with those that do have the resources, neo-rural farmers can alleviate some of the economic pressure of such purchases. This exemplifies how alternative workforces can benefit a neo-rural farmer's economic viability. Furthermore, the survival of one's farm and their livelihood can benefit from local collaboration. Francisca also talked about how she invests time and efforts in helping her neighbours that need it.

I remember that [José] had a lot of land and couldn't manage it all and she was sick with her back, right? And she was in pain here, she had pain here. So I said, 'I'll help you.' [...] And people really appreciate that, because when you don't have much money, and you're giving some of it away, you're working. [...] They want to help you if you help them. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

What she shows here is how her investments of time and efforts in helping out her neighbours builds a reciprocal relationship of care. This reciprocity further emphasizes how neo-rural farmers find themselves in a place where mutual trust and care are highly valued and even necessary to become part of the rural team. Francisco mentioned the relationship of care as fundamental reason for the survival of his farm through multiple external crises. For example, he explains how even after having to continue the farm on his own because of separation from his partner and having to let go of the cooperative, the collaboration he has with his network still keeps him going (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). Collaborative workforce can be seen as a combined strategy with DIY. By investing their own time and efforts, they avoid costs but rely on social rural networks to share the workload.

In conclusion, the strategy of applying collaborative workforces is one that relieves workload, increases economic viability, and enables learning and prevalence in crises. Finally, it contributes to social integration.

Building relationships

The strategy of building relationships (of trust) can be seen as an underlying theme within the previously defined strategies. Nevertheless, it is a strategy of its own because of its seeming significance in Spanish rural areas. Among others, Juan mentioned how he actively invests time in getting to know his neighbours and to make work of building his social connections. He mentions: “We've actually been trying to connect with neighbours from the very beginning. Showing that that is something we try to do and keep doing and improve.” (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025). Building this relationship is not just a formality of moving to a new place, but also a way of receiving the accumulation of generational and traditional knowledge as explained by Francisca.

[Francisca]

My neighbours were 70, 80 years old, and I always liked learning what they knew because you can't learn that in books or at school. For example, working with onions, braiding them and hanging them up is an art because you have to know when to harvest the onions so that they will keep for months. You have to dry them properly, know how to dry them. These are things you don't learn anywhere else except from older people, and I wanted to learn all that from older people so that it wouldn't be lost and I could pass it on to younger people.

[Researcher]

And how did you do it?

[Francisca]

Because I was with them, so if I saw them doing it, for example, making the braid, I would sit with them and help them. I go and sit there. Do you want me to help you? Yes, okay, I sit down. They would say, Come on. No, not like that, girl, not like that. You know?

Francisca builds social relations through offering to assist her neighbours, and as added benefit she gets to learn from them. Again, labour is a connecting factor between neo-rural farmers and locals. By building relationships over labour, neo-rural farmers gain access to local and traditional knowledge and skills, which help them run their farm.

Additionally, the construction of trustworthy relationships aids neo-rural farmers through their businesses. As described in the previous section, neo-rural farmers stick to manual and nature-inclusive farming practices because of terrain characteristics and their values and attitudes towards sustainability and self-reliance. This excludes them from participating in the global food market because of the higher costs associated with those practices (lock-out by the regime). However, since neo-rural farmers already maintain such practices, the step to farm completely organic is relatively small. Unfortunately, the labels and certifications for organic produce require significant financial investment in facilities and fees. To bypass such labels, farmers build trust by letting consumers get to know the farm and their farming practices, omitting the financial investments for those labels. The appearance of ‘grupos de consumo’ exemplify this trust based relationship.

Grupo de consumo (EN: consumer group)

Consumer groups are associations of people that organise themselves to buy products directly from producers. Motives for starting or joining a consumer group include, but are not limited to, quality of products, fair prices for producers, and locality of products.

Selling directly to consumers without intermediaries also creates the opportunity for building a relationship between the producer and consumer. The relationship between the producer and consumer group is one of mutual trust and openness, explained by Cristina.

I did produce organic products, but I don't like to sell them as organic because that label is really too expensive. I think it's more about a relationship of trust, you can come to my farm and see how I work. In fact, we were trying to create a seal of trust here, a self-managed organic label, but in the end it fell through. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025).

Farmers like Cristina open their farms to show their farming practices to clients who reward them with fair prices. The trust-relationship also opens doors for diversification of business activities for farmers. Cristina indicated that she buys produce from other local farmers with the same values and production methods to process into e.g. marmalades to sell those to the same consumer groups. The mutual trust relationship she builds enables her to expand and diversify her business, lengthening the value chain and increasing economic viability. This strategy of transparency and trust-based relationships revolving around the personal characteristics and values (self) of the farmer exemplifies how neo-rural farmers address legal and financial difficulties. It also shows how her valuation of ecological sustainability influences her strategy to cope with financial constraints. Cristina liberates herself from needing certifications and leaves her clientele with the chance to decide whether they will buy her products, i.e. the option to trust her.

Another way in which creating relationships of trust can assist neo-rural farmers is during construction of their house. As explained before by Juan, construction works call for extensive permit application procedures. These demanding permit procedures drive people to not apply for them, bypassing the investment of time and resources. The risk of this strategy is that neighbours can denounce the renovation works, resulting in potentially having to demolish the advancements, while still having to apply for the required permits. Again, trusting and building good social relationships with neighbours and municipal officials is essential in the strategy of managing financial and legal challenges as mentioned by Juan. "Because if you get on well with your neighbours, you can arrange all sorts of things to each other's advantage." (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025). In the case of Carmen where even governmental institutions tolerate bypassing the law because of the self-reliance of the village she lives in.

[...] there were people in the town hall, and the mayor heard a woman criticising [the village]. Because she said, they let them do everything illegally in [the village]. Because it's true that this house here is illegal. I mean, we built a lot of illegal houses, a lot of illegal things were done. And they don't say anything to them. In other places they fine us, but there they don't fine them. And the mayor said, look, the day you give me as little work as the people in [the village], we'll see what we do. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

These anecdotes reflect the ambiguity of the relationships through which neo-rural farmers can solve both financial and legal challenges. It shows how neo-rural farmers depend on support from their social and local circles to compose strategies for the challenges they face. The bypassing of legal requirements and bureaucracy shows how neo-rural peasants operate in an 'a-legal' sphere where they omit regime requirements.

Finally, building relationships with one's neighbours is an intrinsic part, and result, of all previous strategies. The construction of these relationships facilitates each of the strategies for overcoming the challenges of economic viability, bureaucratic hurdles, workload, and social integration.

Management of expectations

There comes a time in a neo-rural farmer's transition when they will have to renegotiate their goals and aspirations. Throughout their transition, neo-rural farmers find out whether their strategies work, how they can improve their farm, and if they are satisfied with the way they are running the farm. As mentioned earlier, hard physical labour characterises the life of a neo-rural farmer. An essential part in this regard is managing expectations and being realistic in one's abilities as mentioned in, among others, the interview with Carmen.

It's true that when I was alone with [Ramon], when he fell, it was like, 'Damn, [Ramon], we have to take things down, we have to move things'. And then we separated and we didn't make that change. Because I was kind of demanding that [Ramon] found a way. We have to find another way, another formula, because this isn't viable. I mean, let's lower our standards a little.

It was like getting rid of ideals in my head, that was one of the things I learned over the years of having ideals, none of which are what I can do, what I want to do and what I want to enjoy. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

The situation of losing one's ability to work is sufficiently excessive to force a change of strategy. In Carmen's case, awareness of their abilities as half-injured couple sparked realisation that they needed a change of strategy. Unfortunately, she and her former partner could not make that change, resulting in their separation and her having to start over elsewhere. This emphasises how one should not underestimate the management of their romantic relationship as part of a strategy. Rafael reinforces Carmen's remark, stating how starting the farming endeavour on a small scale manages these aspirations.

Another very important lesson we learned in our lives was to realise that you have to be careful with scale and that dreams are achieved in stages. You shouldn't think too big at the beginning because otherwise you'll feel overwhelmed. Starting small is always the right thing to do. If later on you have more space, then great, but start small. (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025)

For Rafael, starting small implies the requirement of smaller financial investments, smaller labour efforts, and smaller losses in the case that something fails. These smaller losses also result in less severe letdowns and impact on personal wellbeing. Juan demonstrates another strategy for managing his relationship through careful evaluative conversations with his partner.

I do think in the long run you have to realise that even more like in a regular relationship, you're doing it as a team. Yes, and so that you also have a kind of team meeting from time to time, so to speak. Quasi performance reviews. How do you think you're doing? And is that good for the goal we want to achieve? And how does our relationship relate to that? Is it also good for our relationship because it's double? I still like it too. Do you still like it too. And do we still like each other a little bit, is it not only effective for the house... but also nice for our relationship? (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025)

This shows that the goals that one starts the transition with might not be realistic and that readjusting them is an iterative process through which one should carefully consider their relationship and mental wellbeing. One phrase that all interviewees said at some point during the interview is "poco a poco" which translates to "little by little". Most of the times interviewees used it to indicate that some things in their transition proceed slowly, and saying little by little is their way of voicing agreement and acceptance. It can be seen as a strategy of self-preservation. As said by Juan and others, many things happen in day-to-day rural life (e.g. unannounced visit from a neighbour, a machine or tool breaks, or the weather suddenly changes) that can hinder whatever someone is doing. By not having a strict plan and schedule, these obstructions cannot constantly change one's expectations of the day, week, or month. Letting go of planning all these steps, and trusting in the incremental process of establishment and one's ability to work hard seems to be a strategy applied to maintain physical and psychological wellbeing among neo-rural farmers.

Trial and error

The transition that neo-rural farmers go through is characterised as "a time of trial and error, trying something else, and more error, and not knowing how you were going to make a living." (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). This strategy of just trying something to see if it works is one

mentioned by seven out of nine neo-rural farmers. Through trial and error, they get to know the land they farm on, the climate they live in, and the plants they are growing as explained by Francisca and Cristina.

Here in Asturias, in the countryside, you have to give yourself a little time to learn. To learn and observe. Because you have to know the climate. You have to know the ground you walk on. Know the plant's cycle, when it flowers, when it's going to bear fruit, what the most sensitive time for the plant is, when winter arrives, what happens. All that takes a lot of time. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

Like I said before, you have to prepare the land, you have to make the land yours, you have to know how that land works, and it's always going to be unpredictable, but you're going to need a transition, not just an ecological transition, but a personal transition to what kind of land I want to cultivate, how I want it, and that takes time. You can't just say, 'OK, I want to be a farmer now, I'll buy three hectares and live off it', But in order to be able to live off it, I might need a year to be here and observe what plants grow, because they are indicators. They will tell me what I need, what nutrients I need, and that year of observation. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025)

Francisca and Cristina show how they have taken the time to try things out and accepted the potentially limited returns thereof. Rafael emphasises that trial and error should induce learning but also that it is difficult. "Learning, failure, learning, failure, learning, failure, constantly. I think that is the hard part, that ability to learn from failure and do it again." (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025). The process of trial and error in which different farming activities and business models are accepted or rejected is present for most, but is highly dependent on the farmer's financial situation, as well as their stubbornness and perseverance (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025). Through trial and error, neo-rural farmers innovate within their niche and find ways in which they themselves become financially viable. This innovation potentially finds ways to make use of windows of opportunity in the regime. However, farmers that struggle financially must earn something from their production at a certain moment in time. Therefore, trial and error without success has an expiration date that is based on the financial reserves that the farmer has.

Diversifying income

Through trial and error, neo-rural farmers quite often diversify their businesses. Lessons learned during the transition redirect farming practices and business models both through financial necessity and personal capability. Francisco and Cristina both started processing their harvests into preserves as a reaction to a challenge or opportunity. Francisco mentioned to preserve his fruits to increase the shelf life and be able to sell his products for longer.

Well, when we had that fruit, we went to sell it and, as there was no market for it, people practically left the fruit on the trees, well, it was a whole new world. So, what do we do now? What we did was transform it, make jam. (Francisco, personal communication, 24 May 2025)

Francisco shows how preserving came as a necessity for his business. The trial of growing and selling blueberries failed, leading him to process the fruits and access a different market. Cristina expanded her business with, and eventually even centred her business around, making preserves. Firstly, through her network of consumers and suppliers she got the opportunity to process large amounts of fruits and vegetables from other producers. "Every now and then producers would call me if they had a surplus, and I would preserve it for them and give it back to them so they could sell it." (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025). The sales of preserves are a way of diversifying their income that extends the timespan of income generation (through shelf life), but also the market they can sell to through the creation of a new product.

The diversification of income also happens through changing the business activities of the farm. Carmen expanded her business with a decorative plant nursery and Francisco expanded by planting fruit trees as well as keeping goats. They mention how the other business activities do not earn them enough to be economically viable, so they need to do more. For Cristina, the sales of food baskets came as an opportunity she saw in her farm.

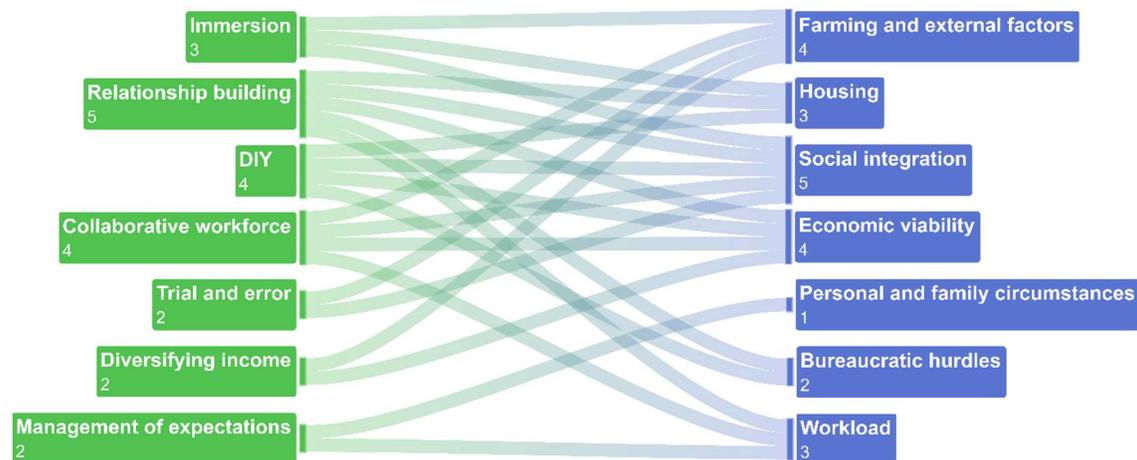
I used to spend all day weeding, and I said, honestly, I'd rather grow food than spend all my time blind, blind, blind weeding, I'll grow food and see what I can do with it, and it's true that then there came a time when I had enough for a lot of preserves and about 10 baskets. (Cristina, personal communication, 25 June 2025)

She saw unused space and was able to increase her preserves production and extend it with food baskets with fresh produce that she sells to her customers. These examples show how income diversification can come from challenges as well as opportunities that come as a form of support from their social or business networks.

Conclusion

This section explored what strategies neo-rural farmers apply in the situations encountered in one's transition to answer the question "What strategies do neo-rural farmers compose to address a situation?". Neo-rural farmers iteratively create strategies that are situation-dependent and sometimes reinforce other strategies. They combine practical tactics, social tactics, and adaptive learning practices of which the exact combination is unique to the person (Self), their supports, and the situation itself. In their strategies, the supports that play a role originate from social circles and personal networks. Many strategies, also actively build these relationships which are useful later in other strategies. All strategies address multiple situations that neo-rural farmers encounter as shown in Figure 5. Overall, neo-rural farmers do not use one-on-one strategies for the situations they encounter, but they employ a range of strategies that form a toolbox with which they handle situations. Their strategies help them in bypassing regime lock-outs and innovate to make use of windows of opportunity. Over time, and with these strategies, they transition towards economically viable, socially integrated, and resilient farms.

Figure 5 shows how the applied strategies address the experienced situations.



The next section dissects how the application of strategies differs per neo-rural farmer to find out if there are situations, personal characteristics, or supports that decisively influence a neo-rural farmer's transition.

4.4 What situations, personal characteristics (self), and supports are decisive for a neo-rural farmer's transition?

This section analyses the strategies applied throughout the transitions of individual neo-rural farmers to explore how distinct combinations of the self, situations, and supports that form strategies can influence their transition. Analysis of individual transitions through cross-case comparison identifies combinations of S's that lead to similar or dissimilar outcomes. A summary table of case-by-case analysis can be found in Appendix IV. The following paragraphs present the results as cause and effect in nonspecific order.

Influence of perception

One's perception of their transition plays a part in whether they transition smoothly or not. Neo-rural farmers that describe their transition as difficult, hard, or complicated (Maria & David) transition less easily than those that perceive their transition more positively. Surely, their transitions actually being harder than those of other transitioners might explain this, but the following quotes indicate another reason: their perception. Those that view their transition as a process of learning and improving seem more capable of adjusting where necessary. Meanwhile those that see struggle as defeat or failure leads them to apply new strategies instead of adapting their current ones based on the lessons learned. The difference between David's and Rafael's way of handling setbacks shows how their perception manifests into the outcomes of those situations.

[David]

So, well, the transition was very gradual, very hard too, but we managed to make a good living from the greenhouses. Then we started having problems with a neighbour who was very nasty, so we decided to move to Asturias. And I started looking and looking and looking until I found the farm we bought. [...] We moved the greenhouses and set them up there. Well, we had to fix up the whole house because it was... the house was in terrible condition. I spent nine months on the building work and we set up the greenhouses. And what happened? The market... Well, it was very difficult to get into the market to sell.

[Researcher]

In the plant market?

[David]

Yes, because we sold at markets, right? Of course, it's direct sales, so the profit is direct. There were no middlemen. And we saw that it wasn't working. We started selling to flower and plant shops. What happened? The profit margin was low. And in the end, I had to get into construction. [...] As soon as I saw that the greenhouses were starting to fail, I got into construction.

[Researcher]

What does fail mean here?

[David]

Lowering production, lowering income, lowering everything. So I had to look for something alternative and I was also lucky enough to find construction with friends. (David, personal communication, 11 June 2025)

The question here is not so much whether David took learnings from the greenhouses failing or not. In fact, it is more about how he views the situation, he describes the situation as a problem to which he must somehow find a radical solution. Additionally, he mentions multiple large switches in lifestyle and occupation while not mentioning smaller changes that could have revived his greenhouse production. Rafael dealt differently with setbacks, showing how he sees them as learning opportunities that will get him closer to reaching satisfaction in his abilities.

We also had difficult moments in our relationships and we argued with some people, which makes me quite sad because we haven't yet reached the point of having that capacity, that human management tool of how we can talk to people so that everyone is happy, but we have learned from all the failures we've had so that we can improve our relationships with people. (Rafael, personal communication, 27 June 2025)

Rafael clearly shows how he views difficulties or challenges as learning possibilities that are part of a process in which he as a person will grow. The difference between David and Rafael and their strategies to address these situations confirm what Schlossberg (1981) says about the influence of a transitioner's perception. Setbacks affect David negatively while they affect Rafael positively because he sees them as learning opportunities. The use of the phrase *poco-a-poco* and strategies of trial-and-error indicate the ability to see setbacks as lessons. They indicate an accepting attitude towards slow progress and failure which positively affects their perception. Juan also confirmed this by explaining how he experiences that he changed the way he views plannings and the setbacks coming with those throughout his transition (Juan, personal communication, 17 April 2025).

Saved by support

The romantic partner is a support of fundamental proportions because of their companionship throughout the transition, but also for reasons including the sharing of labour. Unfortunately, stress and other reasons have resulted in the separation of multiple neo-rural farmers with great personal and economic implications such as closure of the farm. The only strategy that really seems effective to prevent having to close the farm seems to be the preventive investment in social relationships and integration. One person alone cannot oversee the increased workload, as well as the mental stress, which result from separation. Examples of Francisco and Carmen show how this is different. Carmen and Francisco were in similar stages of developing their farm at the time of separating. Both had a business going after struggling with access to market but had reached a certain degree of financial viability. When Carmen and her partner separated, they had to sell the farm, and Carmen temporarily took another job. Francisco's farm suffered from the separation of his partner, but because he had invested intensively in his social relationships, he continues parts of his business operations and the cooperative he started through collaborative efforts. Other reasons such as their financial situation might have played a role in whether they were able to maintain the farm or not, but their financial situation is also a result of the support received from others.

Additionally, active stewardship of the relationship (as exemplified by Juan and Maria) prevents separation as a whole and therefore also ensures the survival of the farm. The romantic relationship is an essential form of social support that has fundamental impact on the survival of the neo-rural farmers project. Interviewees that lost this support mentioned it to be devastating to the farm, but also as something which (with therapy) is preventable.

Advancement through struggle

Transitioners' financial position shapes both the pace and the pathways of their transition. Those who are financially insecure (5 out of 9) face intense pressure to achieve economic stability quickly, which tends to accelerate their learning curve. This pushes them to adopt certain strategies including trust-based relationships, DIY practices, and collaborative labour strategies such as the *andecha*. However, one cannot assume access to this alternative workforce, it is earned through a combination of attitudes (openness and trust), investment in social networks, and visible labour efforts that earn neighbours' respect and reciprocity. In contrast, transitioners with side-jobs or partners with steady income experience less financial stress. This reduces their urgency to ask for, or participate in, communal labour, and can therefore decrease their incentive to engage in those forms of cooperation and exchange. Even though personal motivations and goals may still make transitioners choose DIY practices, they often perform those without the support of others.

In short, whether and how a neo-rural farmer unlocks collaborative labour depends on economic necessity, personal willingness to invest time and efforts in local networks, and DIY labour that signals commitment. These three together open the door to the reciprocal help that sustains many transitioners.

Sticking to ideals hinders collaboration and advancement

Strongly sticking to one's ideals can result in tunnel-vision that hinders collaboration with others by not recognizing that other perceptions and methods also provide valuable options. Even though Maria works hard (see example of working on the roof during Christmas in strategy section on page 37) she is not able to unlock supports from neighbours like Francisca does. Both displayed their financial struggles but their rigidity in sticking to their vision and ideals is what distinguishes them. Maria mentioned how she feels misunderstood by other people when she talks about her vision of permaculture as guidelines in her life.

As permaculture says, it is also a process of dialogue, of conversation with the neighbours from another place. It's not me arriving and saying hello, I'm Maria, and I've come to do something you're not going to understand. But they might need time to see me doing it before you can start to communicate something, that during that time they might find it difficult to build that trust. It's easier to come and do something they understand straight away, but you already know that doesn't work. (Maria, personal communication, 12 May 2025)

Maria acknowledges how her choice to live along permaculture values might raise misunderstanding and confusion with her neighbours and the social networks she builds. This results in her having to prove herself before, if ever, reaching understanding with her neighbours and the ability to collaborate. Francisca shares some of the sustainability values with Maria but gives meaning to those differently as she explains.

I really like the countryside, I really like trees and I wanted to help nature, you know? [...] And then I also realised when I came here, especially because in the village where I lived and in [village] there were a lot of older people, a lot of older people. My neighbours were 70, 80 years old, and I always liked learning what they knew because you can't learn that in books or at school. For example, working with onions, braiding them and hanging them up is an art because you have to know when to harvest the onions so that they will keep for months. (Francisca, personal communication, 8 May 2025)

What this shows is how being open to other people's interpretations of what are 'good' farming practices can lead to knowledge transfers that potentially accelerate one's transition. Guarding one's principals from other perceptions and interpretations may lead someone towards a more individual transition, missing out on collaboration and teamwork. Through openness in this regard, learning and forming networks within the niche of neo-rural farmers is possible, signalling niche development and reduced regime reliance.

Carmen's transition is another example of how her ideals, and attitudes towards those, hindered her from enjoying her neo-rural farming life. After separating from her former partner, she was able to make that change and let go of the perfection she sought in life.

My experience with [Ramon] was amazing because we were quite self-sufficient, but it was very hard. [...] There came a point when I think I even had anxiety attacks, like I can't do this, it's unthinkable for two people to do this alone. [...]

And then when I came here, for example, I was already older and alone, and I said, 'I want to enjoy the space, I want to do things', I have my vegetable garden, but I'm not looking for self-sufficiency or to eat healthily, I'm not looking for anything. I do what I can, what I feel like, I

have a social life, I really like going out, now we've started a group where we go out to visit gardens. (Carmen, personal communication, 14 May 2025)

Carmen shows here how letting go of highly challenging goals not only improved her mental health but also sparked her social life. This enabled her to open the door for collaboration as explained in her example of the *andeches* in which she trusts other people in their abilities. This shows how she transitioned from being idealistic to realistic, accepting more achievable goals and desires. These examples also show how trusting others plays a role in being able to receive support in the transition of neo-rural farmers.

Conclusion

This section aimed to shed light on red lines throughout neo-rural farmers' transitions to find decisive forces that advance or hinder their transitions. Firstly, neo-rural farmers' perceptions of the situations they encounter seem to influence advancement in their transition. Whether they see challenges as obstacles or as learning opportunities influences the way they compose their strategies. Crucial support during neo-rural farmers' transitions comes from their partner and social networks. The romantic partner functions as an extension of the transitioner's efforts in becoming a farmer or as financial contributor to the transition. Support coming from their social networks includes labour, knowledge, and trust. By collaborating with, and making use of social networks, neo-rural farmers can take advantage of bureaucratic loopholes and resources that are otherwise unavailable. However, not all neo-rural farmers equally access these types of collaborations. These mutually beneficial relationships are unavailable to those that are less financially pressured, as well as those that rigidly stick to their goals and specific ways of achieving them.

5 Discussion

This study explored the diverse ways neo-rural farmers in Asturias navigate their transition from urban life to rural life as a farmer. Through an adapted version of Schlossberg's (1981) model for analysing human adaptation to transition, the strategies applied to address situations are analysed. The research shows that their transitions are highly individual non-linear processes shaped by personal values, financial disposition, and social relationships.

This research applied an altered version of Schlossberg's (1981) model for analysing human adaptation to transition to better view the self of the model. This research highlights a difference between perceptions of the transition as a whole, and perceptions of the situations neo-rural farmers encounter in it. Their perception of the transition in general reflects their motives and values (self) with which they hope to align their life. It shows why people choose for their transition regardless of the situations they encounter in it. On the other hand, their perception of experiences gives insights into the situations that neo-rural farmers encounter and how they handle these case by case. This two-level distinguishment provides an extra lens to assess the self of Schlossberg's four S's. Additionally, the inclusion of practical and organisational management of starting a farm enabled analysis of more contextual and physical factors of becoming a farmer. This practical lens proved to be useful for uncovering how neo-rural farmers organise themselves physically to become economically viable, in addition to how they cope with situations and handle them mentally.

Compared to prior applications of Schlossberg's model for analysing human adaptation to transition, often focused on short-term transitions such as student veterans re-entering education in the United States (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015) and young children that enter state care in the United States (Winter, 2014)), this research examined transitions that happen over relatively long periods of time. Neo-rural farmers described their transitions as multi-year and multi-cycle processes, often spanning multiple growing seasons of re-strategizing before reaching a sense of stability. For some, these even extended decades, compared to transitions of several months in the other examples. They mention cycles of years, of which multiple are necessary to transition, confirming Monllor i Rico's (2011) pathway to

become a farmer. The length of the transition has significance: it redistributes stress as chronic and incidental and allowed for analysis of evolution of the S's throughout the transition. For example, trust-based relationships need time to form but increasingly aid transitioners that make work of building those. This suggests that Schlossberg's model benefits from an evolutionary interpretation when applied on longer-term transitions.

The definition of neo-rural farmers assumes that they are challenged threefold because they endure the challenges of both newcomers to farming and neo-ruralists, as well as those of the regime. This research confirms the challenges identified by Vizuete et al. (2024) and Monllor i Rico and Fuller (2016), including access to housing and land, access to capital, access to the market, lack of institutional support, lack of understanding from locals, and poor infrastructure. However, contrary to previous research, this study identifies specific strategies through which neo-rural farmers overcome these challenges. Some noteworthy results in addressing them include: the impact of support from social networks to address missing institutional support, and the sequencing of the four S's. Social networks are especially important because of their ability to resolve or reduce most challenges including poor accessibility of resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and high workloads. The sequencing of certain challenges because of other S's such as the self and the strategies create interesting chains. Self-imposed challenges result from ideals and attitudes towards those, such as for example DIY practices. The widespread use of DIY practices among neo-rural farmers suggests not only economic necessity but also a deeper ideological alignment with self-sufficiency, autonomy, and freedom. This way, DIY is not just a financial strategy, but it reflects a shift in mindset from urban consumption patterns to moderation and adaptability. This aligns with the idea of neo-rural farmers as agents of a new agrosocial paradigm (Monllor i Rico & Fuller, 2016), in which values, beliefs, and resourcefulness are central. At the same time, the persistence of DIY also reflects structural constraints (e.g. limited access to capital and professional services) that shape which strategies are available in the first place.

Additionally, interviewed neo-rural farmers refrain from seeking institutional support for multiple reasons such as the misalignment in requirements and bureaucratic hassle, confirming the exclusion found by Hummel and Escribano (2022). However, their motivations might include desires of self-sufficiency and autonomy. Their end goal of liberty, freedom, and being self-sufficient might overshadow their options, so they do not see that asking for (institutional) support is possible. The lack of requests for government support complicates institutions in assisting them in making rural areas more resilient. Arguably, assistance reducing the (financial and administrative) requirements could be a more appealing option, instead of giving support that requires neo-rural farmers to perform more work. For example, governments could reduce the requirements that neo-rural farmers must comply with to receive support. Additionally, they could legalise the 'loopholes' that neo-rural farmers take advantage of by recognising their peasant lifestyle and its practices. "Welcoming, listening, caring and accompanying people over time is a central element in the success of repopulation programs." (Garcia de Oteyza et al., 2023, p. 16). This research supports those findings, especially on the aspects of collaboration and accompaniment. So far, this accompaniment happened mostly by other locals instead of institutional supports. This further emphasises the type of roles they should fulfil, confirming recommendations by Garcia de Oteyza et al. (2023).

The question whether neo-rural farmers constitute a genuinely novel niche or a continuation of the peasantry as argued by Van der Ploeg (2008) is theoretically important. Historically, pre-war peasant agriculture was common, resembling what Monllor i Rico and Fuller (2016) call an agrosocial paradigm. The post-war mechanisation and productivity-oriented farming in Europe gradually marginalised many of those peasant farmers and pushed them to the agro-regime periphery. From an MLP perspective, industrial agriculture evolved from a niche into a dominant regime that competed with and constrained small-scale and labour-intensive food production. Today, neo-rural farmers combine elements of traditional peasant ethos with skills and business models derived from urban backgrounds. This two-sidedness complicates categorisation as a niche. Peasant-style agriculture never fully disappeared but persisted on small scale, therefore neo-rural farmers may represent a reconfiguration and scaling of

that type of agriculture instead of the emergence of an entirely novel niche. Conversely, neo-rural farmers come from cities and bring new networks, farming methods, and organisational forms that were previously absent, signalling that they may indeed constitute a new niche that can potentially promote regime changes. In Asturias, the empirical signal is ambiguous but instructive: neo-rural farmers often adopt traditional practices for material reasons (terrain, labour), while their motivations and market strategies (e.g. openness to direct sales, value-added processing, and urban networks) show clear innovation. That combination suggests not merely a return to an old model but a reconfiguration which redesigns regime knowledge and infrastructures into niche practices. The co-occurrence of these two matters because it questions whether the process is continuous or novel, which influences the introduced kinds of innovations and the potential pathways of adoption.

While neo-rural farmers contribute as producers of food, their existence within the regime does not implicitly result in contributions to global or urban food security. Interviewed neo-rural farmers mostly sell to local rural markets, while global markets supply cities, with the largest population share. The regime locks neo-rural farmers out of the global market through competition. This raises questions about how neo-rural farmers' as a niche can change the regime. It might be through reconfiguration or transformation but not likely through complete substitution or de-, and re-alignment of the regime through large scale food production. Neo-rural farmers can supply a niche market of high-quality products to restaurants and (potentially urban) consumers. Though the market may be small, neo-rural farmers are able to contribute to small-scale healthy food provision, addressing some of the CAP goals (Nifatova & Danko, 2024) and reconfiguring the food system/regime.

The current trend of agriculture and the regime informed by CAP result in the mechanising of farms which become larger and more efficient. This trend has been argued by Hummel and Escribano (2022) to foster a shift in power relations that forces non-conventional farmers to exist in a-legal spheres. This research argues that a-legal practices can be seen as the fight against, or resistance of, the regime. The a-legal practices found in this research extend the agricultural a-legal practices described by Hummel and Escribano, expanding towards practices that facilitate accessible housing. As the regime described by Geels (2002) locks itself in, neo-rural farmers are locked out. While Geels describes niches as protected spaces in which innovation waits for windows of opportunity, these protected spaces are not as hospitable as they may sound. In the case of neo-rural farmers, waiting for windows of opportunity constitutes a struggle for sustenance. The regime actively disfavours neo-rural farmers by deciding the land they farm on, the practices they can perform, and supports they are eligible for. These conditions complicate neo-rural farmers' transitions and leave them out-competed by conventional farmers. Therefore, waiting for windows of opportunity may be better defined as being locked out of the regime whilst overcoming the challenges posed by it. Considering the incremental innovation in search of more efficient agriculture, the regime will potentially grow to increasingly lock neo-rural farmers out through technical innovation.

Legislation and public authorities create a-legal spheres in which neo-rural farmers take advantage of. In some cases, local government officials actually appreciate these a-legal practices. This puts two-sidedness at the argument that Hummel and Escribano (2022) make about the exclusion of small-scale livelihoods and highlights how international and local governments/institutions can view these practices differently. On the local scale, this can be seen as transformation through adaptation of policy enforcement. This micro-change in perception of government officials signals a niche-regime interaction that adapts to accept or incorporate a-legal niche practices into the regime. Additionally, current macro landscape developments including climate change and biodiversity loss have brought attention to other types of agriculture that have less detrimental effects on the environment and are less reliant on the high inputs of conventional agriculture (Fresco, 2009). These developments pressure the regime to transform, providing opportunities for neo-rural farmers as a niche to become more recognised in their practices. Additional reconfiguration of policy might increasingly stimulate individual regime actors to collaborate or partner with neo-rural farmers. The opposing pathways of increasing exclusion or recognition highlight the role of governments to adapt to facilitate neo-rural

farmers, aiming to address CAP objectives and decrease a-legality as recommended by (Hummel & Escribano, 2022).

Limitations

The study is based on nine in-depth interviews, which provides depth but limits the range of experiences represented. The inclusion of limited farmers who abandoned their projects and none who were less accessible during the high-workload season may skew the findings toward those who were more established or willing to participate. The same high workload season (late spring, early summer) may have shaped participants emphasis on stress, labour demands, and time constraints.

Schlossberg developed the model for analysing human adaptation to transition for distinct transitions and applications have mostly been in short-term transitions. Contrastingly, neo-rural farmers go through multi-year transitions that encompass multiple dimensions including housing, farming, social integration, and economic viability. Schlossberg's model supported clear analysis, but some concepts required interpretive adaptation, limiting generalisability of the analytical findings.

Geels' describes the MLP as a "middle-range theory that conceptualizes overall dynamic patterns in socio-technical transitions." (Geels, 2011, p. 26). It is primarily a meso-level framework for analysing systems, not individual life transitions. This research used the MLP as exploratory lens to position neo-rural farmers within food systems as a broader context. Claims about niche-regime interactions therefore remain tentative and illustrative rather than predictive.

6 Conclusion

This research hypothesised neo-rural farmers as actors of change in depopulating areas. Several challenges that neo-rural farmers encounter had been identified, but little was known about how they overcome these challenges. This research set out to explore the strategies that neo-rural farmers employ in their transition to life as a farmer in Asturias and to answer the research question:

What strategies enable neo-rural farmers to transition to life as a farmer in Asturias?

This study has found that neo-rural farmers succeed through iterative problem-solving and multi-year adaptation. The role changes, source, timing, and duration of the transition are quite similar for most transitioners and positively favour their process. However, the transition does not affect all neo-rural farmers positively, and/or allow them to prepare for it, resulting in higher levels of stress and more struggles in their transition. The situations they encounter, and their perception thereof are often a result of their disposition and attitudes towards their transition. Overall, interviewees mentioned more challenges than opportunities and variety exists in their timing, sequencing, and intensity. Because of the variation in encountered situations, a multitude of strategies is composed to address them. Strategies address different situations when applied in multiple forms and are not single-use. The available strategies are strongly linked to the personal characteristics of the neo-rural farmer. Most strategies aim to increase learning and/or collaboration with locals. Cross-case comparison of each participant emphasises that advancement in the transition to neo-rural life as a farmer is highly dependent on the transitioner's ability to cope with failure. Individuals' perceptions of the transition shape the strategies that they employ. Additionally, transitioners' ability to adjust and trust in collaboration significantly increases the internal supports they can receive. Neo-rural farmers rarely access institutional supports because of regime lock-outs and also for reasons concerning personal motivations. In sum, the factors that allow neo-rural farmers to transition smoothly are about perceptions and strategies. Viewing the transition as a learning process in which other perceptions are gained increases knowledge transfer and network building. The strategies that focus on, and are embedded in, collaboration with others to unlock interpersonal support which is essential in rural Asturias.

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Appendix I. Interview questions

Introduction

Before we start this interview I want to let you know that at any time, you are free to stop this interview. If you don't want to answer a question, you don't have to. Everything you tell me will be anonymised in the report and if in hindsight you don't want your data to be used you can let me know and I will make sure it will not happen.

It's a formality but I would like to record your consent on being interviewed and recorded by having you sign this consent form. Please take your time to read it carefully so you know what you are signing.

sign consent form

I'm doing this research because one day, I hope to start a farm here in Asturias as well. So my research is mostly motivated by my interest in how to tackle this challenge and finding out how to start. My research focuses on people with urban backgrounds that have started a farm. I want to find out about the key challenges, opportunities, and other situations that people experience. My hypothesis is that these farmers have certain strategies that they use to transition to this new lifestyle, and I wish to find out what characteristics decides a successful or non-successful transition.

Questions

What was it like for you to transition to life as a farmer?

What would you say was the biggest change?

Situation

What is a situation you encountered here that you did not expect?

- What made it so unexpected?

What were some key turning points in your time starting/having the farm?

- Why was its impact so great?

What made you move to this place?

- What attracted you specifically?
- Was it more social, environmental, financial, or something else?

How was it for you to move here?

- What was your plan?

How would you describe the conditions of this new place?

- Were there specific challenges?
- How did you overcome those challenges?
- Were there specific opportunities?
- Have you utilised those?

Self

What personal qualities or skills were most helpful in moving here?

- Any specific skills?
- Did you have resources that made the difference?
- What knowledge was most fundamental in your establishment?

How do you think that your urban origin has shaped the way you have established here?

- Did you use your urban network?

- Do you think that the money earned in cities was significantly helpful?
- Was there something you missed, didn't know or didn't have when moving here?

In what ways have you had to adapt yourself to succeed here?

- New routines?
- New skills?
- New resources?

Supports

Did you have any supports helping you establish yourself here?

- Any financial supports?
- Supports in knowledge?
- Supports in labour?
- Supports of resources?
- If not, how have you managed without any support?

Can you give an example of a situation where you were supported to overcome a challenge?

- Did you ask for that support?
- How do you think the support helped you?

Can you give an example of a situation where you managed to overcome a challenge without support?

- What was your own knowledge used?
- Did you have specific resources?

How do you plan to use (or not use) supports in the future?

- What relationships do you need to maintain for that?
- Who are some key people/partners?

Strategy

What strategy did you initially have when you came here?

How did you change that strategy over time?

- What made you change it?
- Did that happen because of any specific events?

Looking back, what do you think have been success factors contributing to your establishment here?

- Were there also things that made it significantly more difficult?

Where do you think you gained the resources to come up with your strategy?

- Networking skills from an urban job?
- Computer skills from office job?
- Contacts that came to help you met while traveling?
- Local people offering machines?

Closing-off

Do you consider yourself established?

Is there something we have not discussed that you think is important to know?

Appendix II. Consent form

Informed Consent Form for Research Participants

Title of Study: A neo-rural farmer's path towards addressing rural resilience

Researcher: XXX

Institution: Wageningen University & Research and Delft University & Technology

Contact Information: XXX

Supervisor: XXX

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this research is to learn about your experience transitioning to the rural farming life. Your participation in this semi-structured interview will provide valuable insights how neo-rural farmers overcome challenges and their role in addressing rural depopulation.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview that will last approximately 1 hour. The interview will include a series of open-ended questions, and you are free to respond in your own words. With your permission, the interview may be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions, and you may stop the interview at any time without any consequence. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality:

All information you provide will be kept confidential. Any identifying information (e.g., your name or contact details) will be removed or anonymized in the study results. The information collected will be used only for research purposes. Audio recordings will be stored securely and destroyed after the completion of the research project.

Potential Risks and Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this study beyond those encountered in daily life. There may be no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, but your contribution may provide valuable insights for the research field.

Right to Ask Questions:

If you have any questions in the future about this research or your participation, please do not hesitate to contact XXX.

Consent to Participate:

By signing below, you indicate that you have read and understood the information above, that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate, and that you understand you can withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant's Name: _____
Date and Place: _____
Participant's Signature:

Researcher's Name: XXX
Date and Place: 11-04-2025 Bospolín, Spain
Researcher's Signature:

Appendix III. Data management plan

General Information

Student Information	
Name	XXX
Student Number	
WUR Email	
Personal Email	
Course	YMS-80330 - MADE MSc Thesis
Start Date*	27-03-2025
End Date**	26-11-2025

*Date of approved Thesis Interest Form

**Date of Defense

Supervisor One		
Name		
Email		
Institute	TUD	WUR
	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Department</i>
		Social Science
	<i>Department</i>	<i>Chair</i>
		Rural Sociology (RSO)
Role		

Supervisor Two		
Name		
Email		
Institute	TUD	WUR
	<i>Faculty</i>	<i>Department</i>
	Architecture and the Built Environment	
	<i>Department</i>	<i>Chair</i>
	Management in the Built Environment	
Role		

Addition Contacts	
Name, Organization, Email	
Name, Organization, Email	

Description of Research

Research Information	
<i>Title of Thesis / Project</i>	Challenging the regime: neo-rural farmers as agents of change in food systems
<i>Abstract</i>	<p>Neo-rural farmers, urban-origin individuals who move to rural areas to start small-scale farms, are increasingly recognised as potential agents of change within European food systems. While their motivations and the challenges they encounter are well documented, little is known about how they manage this transition. This thesis explores the strategies that enable neo-rural farmers to establish themselves in Asturias, Spain. Through Schlossberg's (1981) model for analysing human adaptation to transition, nine semi-structured interviews are analysed to shed light on the situation, self, support, and strategy that describe their transitions. Neo-rural farmers are positioned as niches in Geels' (2002) Multi-Level Perspective where they are seen as potential actors of change. Findings show that transitions are shaped by yearly cycles and interconnected challenges concerning economic viability, knowledge gaps, social integration, bureaucratic barriers, and access to land. Successful strategies combine adaptive learning through DIY and trial and error, with diverse business models of trust-based markets and collaborative labour. The individual learning processes of neo-rural farmers illustrate how micro-adaptations can contribute to broader sociotechnical experimentation and innovation in food systems. This study highlights the importance of supporting neo-rural farmers' transitions to advance their long-term contributions to global food systems.</p>

Data Management Roles

Role Definitions	
Data Collector <i>Name, role, and process</i>	XXX Researcher Interviews.
Data Analyzer <i>Name, role, and process</i>	XXX Researcher Transcribing, coding using Atlas.ti, analysis using Atlas.ti.
Other Relevant Participants <i>Name, role, and process</i>	N.A.
Supervisor <i>Name, role, and process</i>	XXX Thesis coordinator Supervision

Overview of the Research Data, Software, and Data Size

Data Stage	Research Data Type	Software	Data Size
Raw Data (e.g. data from experiments or observations)	Interview recordings	Apple recorder	
Processed Data (e.g. raw data that has been entered, cleaned and processed)	Interview transcripts	Microsoft Word	
Model & Syntax (e.g. codes or formula of your model, as well as the syntax to explain what the various codes/formula mean)	Interview transcripts and codes	Atlas.ti	
Others			

Data Structure

Directory and File Naming Structure
YYYYMMDD_INT_NAME YYYYMMDD_OBS_TITLE

Ownership and Accessibility

Aspect	Approved Access
Data sharing - Do you expect that others may be interested in re-using your data? Do you have plans to share your data with these parties? - How are you going to make sure your data files will be accessible once you leave the department? Who will take care of your data?	Data will be shared for storage purposes with Wageningen University & Research and Delft University of Technology compliant with international research standards.
Data ownership - Any funder's requirements to share your data, or to impose an embargo? - Are there agreements on how the data will be used and shared within your group or with other parties involved in this research? (outside your group or outside Wageningen UR)	N.A.
Privacy - Are there any agreements being made with regards to whether the data should be kept private and confidential? - Who can or cannot see the data?	All data is anonymized and only the anonymized versions are stored or visible to the researcher, thesis supervisors, and the thesis coordinator.

Appendix IV. Cross-case analysis

Farmer	Situations	Characteristics of the Self	Supports	Strategies	Outcome
Juan	Social integration, bureaucracy, poor living environment, lack of resources, first time doing things (hard to plan).	Financially secure, with partner, foreigner, young, no expectations, highly motivated, positive perception, previous knowledge.	Partner, neighbours.	Planning, immersion, flexible bureaucracy, integration, 9-to-5 working hours, helping neighbours, trial-and-error, poco-a-poco, diverse learning, managing relationship, financial management, self-reflection, DIY.	Advancing slow but steadily.
Francisca	Hard labour, first time doing things, caring for child, economic viability, seasonal work availability, gain a farm, crop destruction, male-dominated work, old population, lack of resources, high workload, bureaucracy.	Previous knowledge, single mother, motivated to learn, love for plants, financially insecure, hard-working, persistent, engineer, dislike city, perception fun but hard.	Friend, social network, neighbours, government (building school).	Take the plunge, courses, immersion (internship), diverse income, build network, helping neighbours, poco-a-poco, reciprocity, learn from elders.	Sustaining herself through hard work.
Maria	Psychological strain, poor living environment, mismatch scale EU subsidies, bureaucracy, first time doing things, denunciation by neighbour, high stress, not being understood, old population, misunderstandings in community.	Motivated by societal crises, with partner, lack of knowledge, financially insecure, strong vision, parents of young child, perception difficult.	Government financial aid, parents, partner.	Courses, reduce expenses, have parents move close, natural building methods, flexible bureaucracy, diverse income, personal development, poco-a-poco, DIY, work hard.	Struggling and advancing.
Carmen	Housing through network, lack of resources, pests, separation 2x, social integration struggle, bureaucracy.	Young mother, financially insecure, dislike city, positive perception, curious, motivated to live rural, hard-working, lack of knowledge.	Partner, social network, neighbours, municipality.	Immersion, diverse income, no plan, share resources, reduce consumption, let go of ideals, shared labour, helping neighbours, building network, communal learning,	Sustained on a very small scale.

				flexible bureaucracy, DIY, reciprocity.	
Manuel	Housing through network, pests, social integration, access to housing, land of neighbour, separation.	Financially secure, positive perception, dislike city.	Social network, neighbours.	Immersion, trial-and-error, building social network, increase farm size, alternative pest control.	Struggling.
Francisco	Uncertain future, access to market, economic crisis, high workload, lack of resources, old population, loss of pollinators, separation.	Motivated to live rural, financially insecure, lack of knowledge, positive perception, hard-working, stubborn.	Partner, social network, neighbours.	Take the plunge, trial-and-error, processing produce, expansion of farm, direct sales (to consumer groups), shared labour.	Sustained but on smaller scale.
David	Neighbour feud, access to market, financial viability, separation, pests, policy change to tourist.	Young children, dislike city, perception hard, financially insecure, hard worker, wanting to be independent.	Social network (work), NGO (food bank).	Invest in farm, DIY, direct sales, secondary jobs, diverse income, no plan, not making use of financial aid, processing produce, trial-and-error.	Withdrawn after struggling.
Cristina	Bureaucracy, access to market, surplus from producers, health issue, relocation, high workload.	Dislike city, likes to be with her children, connection with the land, perception slow but fun, no expectations, with partner, legacy building, environmental values, with partner.	Clientele, social network, partner.	Processing produce, diversifying business, trust-based relations, diverse income, DIY, expand business, poco-a-poco, direct sales (to consumer groups), scale down farm, invest in relations, poco-a-poco, get to know the land, immersion.	Sustained but on smaller scale.
Rafael	Encounter with self-construction, finding out one does not need much, bureaucracy, high workload.	Dislike for urban life, with partner, passion for bioconstruction, minimalist attitude, clear vision, open to change, positive perception, accept child within.	Partner, social network, volunteers.	Travel to figure out life path, poco-a-poco, courses, immersion, internships, start small, diverse income, relocation, shared labour, trial-and-error, investing in social relationships and people.	Sustained through adapting.