



The Impact of Human Resource Management Practices on Farms Development and Succession Planning – a PLS-SEM Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices on farm development, employer branding, and succession planning in the agricultural sector. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the research analyzes data from farm owners across different geographical regions to explore the relationships between HR strategies, workforce challenges, and long-term business sustainability. The findings highlight that effective recruitment, selection, and employee retention strategies significantly influence farm expansion, workforce motivation, and investment in training programs. Additionally, the study confirms a strong correlation between farm development intentions and succession planning, demonstrating that farmers with a strategic growth mindset are more likely to engage in structured succession planning. Employer branding and retention policies are key determinants of workforce stability, reinforcing that farms perceived as attractive employers are better positioned to retain skilled employees and ensure business continuity. While HRM challenges have a moderate but statistically insignificant negative impact on employer branding, farmers often mitigate these issues through adaptive strategies such as seasonal workforce collaborations. The study's practical implications suggest that policymakers and agricultural stakeholders should develop targeted HR support programs to enhance employee retention and succession planning.

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1. Introduction

Agriculture ensures food security at a global level, addressing a key objective of sustainable development, namely "zero hunger". The efficiency of the agricultural sector depends on a multitude of factors, both human and environmental, which, through their action, can influence either positively or negatively the outcomes achieved (Viana et al., 2022). The multidimensional role of agriculture is therefore relevant to the study of human resource management strategies in agricultural holdings, leading to increased efficiency and competitiveness both nationally and internationally (Mykhailichenko et al., 2021). The importance of studying the efficiency of human resources in farms and their particularities has been recognized by numerous researchers, who have demonstrated in their studies that an improvement in labour productivity in agriculture is directly linked to a detailed knowledge and understanding of the importance of workforce and the key factors influencing it (Brezuleanu et al., 2015, Nuthall, 2018, Pandey et al. 2024). At the European Union level, according to recent data published by Eurostat (2024), the agricultural labour productivity index in the member states increased by 1.6% in 2024 compared to 2023. This growth was determined, on the one hand, by an increase in farm incomes and, on the other hand, by a 0.9% reduction in the agricultural workforce. The highest increases were recorded in countries such as Latvia (+46.9%), Luxembourg (+27.1%) and Sweden (+22.5%), while the largest declines in agricultural labour productivity were in Romania (-16.8%), Hungary (-15.5%) and Poland (-12.5%). Studies in the literature confirm the existence of significant differences between European regions regarding this indicator, highlighting the importance of agricultural management practices (particularly those based on investments in education and training programs) in enhancing workforce performance (Giannakis and Bruggeman, 2018; Kijek et al., 2020; Popescu et al., 2021; Dinis, 2023). The development of human resources in farms is a complex process that requires not only effective management strategies, but also public policies and educational interventions aimed at improving skills and competencies (Rivera, 1995). Although the specialised literature includes comprehensive studies on human resource

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management in agriculture, there is little research that directly addresses the impact of management practices on farm performance, especially in the international context. Furthermore, there is a limited number of studies focusing on the challenges farmers face in managing human resources (Berber and Slavić, 2020), as well as their intentions to develop their farms through team expansion and employee training. Studies examining the impact of employer branding and employee loyalty policies on workforce retention and motivation remain insufficient. Additionally, farmers' succession plans, designed to ensure the continuity of farm management, have been little explored. In this context, there is a significant opportunity to fill the gaps identified in the literature through research that evaluates farm management practices at an international level, with a central focus on human resource development. Such research is essential not only to support farmers but also to optimize public policies and contribute to the development of an efficient and competitive agricultural sector in Europe. This research also makes a valuable contribution to the advancement of the specialized literature by applying the PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling) method (Ringle et al. 2020; Sarstedt et al. 2021). This approach enables the modelling of complex relationships between exogenous variables (human resource management practices and challenges in human resource management) and endogenous variables (farm development intentions, employer branding and retention policies, as well as succession plans).

The main objectives of the study were to evaluate human resource management practices in agricultural farms at an international level, focusing on recruitment, selection, and employee assessment methods. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the key challenges farmers face in managing human resources and the strategies they employ to overcome them. It also analyzed farmers' intentions for farm development in the coming years, including team expansion, activity diversification, and employee training. We have also investigated the impact of employer branding and employee loyalty policies on workforce retention and motivation. Lastly, the study explored succession plans in agricultural holdings, identifying the factors that contribute to their success.

The paper is organized into the following sections: literature review, methodology, results, discussions, and conclusions. The literature review contextualizes the present research by relating it to previous studies on human resource management in farms at an international level. The methodology describes the research design, from the research instrument used and the data collection process to their statistical analysis. The results are presented in a dedicated section, illustrated through graphs and tables. The discussion section evaluates and interprets the findings, comparing them with those in the specialized literature. The conclusions synthesize the main results, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of the study. This section also outlines future research directions emerging from this study.

2. Literature review

Human capital development in agriculture is highly relevant, according to Wenlu (2014), both in developing and developed countries, contributing, through an innovative approach (Farida, 2023), to improving agricultural production outcomes, farmer welfare and, implicitly, to achieving human development goals. Globalization, the introduction of new technologies, digitalization and the increasing international competition are major challenges faced by companies in the agribusiness sector. In this context, human resource management in this sector becomes essential to cope with these challenges (Berber and Slavić, 2020). A less recent but important study, from the perspective of understanding the historical evolution of "Human resource management (HRM) in agriculture" (Howard and McEwan, 1989), highlights the fact that there are several stages in the development of agricultural management. In the early stages, the main concern of farm managers was to achieve the highest possible production, with a focus on technology. Between 1970 and 1980, concerns shifted towards finance and marketing. It was only later that human resource management became a critical factor for the success of farms (Howard and McEwan, 1989). Thus, in the 21st century, one of the main challenges facing the agricultural sector is the recruitment, motivation and retention of the workforce (Bitsch, 2009). Fernando and Silva (2021) argue that HRM within agricultural farms has unique characteristics compared to other sectors. The key management practices mentioned by these authors are: employee recruitment and selection, performance evaluation, training and professional development, reward management, discipline management, employee health and safety, motivation, as well as working conditions (Fernando and Silva, 2021). According to a study by Lawton et al. (2024), the adoption of best human resource management practices, such as compliance with labour laws, employee health and safety, recruitment, workforce management and retention, is influenced by the farm size and the number of employees. These practices align with those mentioned by Fernando and Silva (2021), who emphasize that HRM in agriculture has distinct characteristics compared to other sectors. According to researchers Ullah et al. (2023), HRM practices can positively or negatively influence staff turnover, with annual evaluations and career opportunities being more significantly associated with this phenomenon. Additionally, informal communication may contribute to increased absenteeism on farms. HRM practices should be integrated into the overall strategies of the agricultural business, focusing on delivering quality products and services (Ullah et al., 2023). The conceptual model based on the "employment relationship" analysis developed by Nettle et al.

(2005) makes significant contributions to the understanding issues related to staff turnover on farms. They highlight that the so-called “mediation practices” are established solely by employers, and employees are not prepared to actively and effectively participate in this process. The same authors emphasize that HRM should focus on meeting the needs of both employees and employers to achieve long-term results in labour relations (Nettle et al., 2005). Innovative human resource management practices in agriculture are reviewed by Farida (2023), who emphasizes the importance of training farmers, applying new information and communication technologies, and using performance-based management approaches to increase the sustainability, competitiveness, and adaptability of agricultural farms. These innovative practices will improve farmers’ skills, access to information, teamwork abilities, and the capacity to manage risks effectively (Farida, 2023). The importance of qualifications and education of individuals employed in agriculture was analysed by Berde and Piros (2006), who demonstrated that agricultural units employing staff with higher levels of education are more efficient.

The agricultural labour market differs from other markets, with demand being influenced by several factors, such as seasonality, uncertainty related to agricultural production, weather conditions, wage levels, agricultural commodity prices and migration (Charlton et al., 2021; Gabin, 2022; Martin and Rutledge, 2024). Moreover, agricultural policies and farm size play an important role in employment within the agricultural sector. A study conducted by Bojnec and Fertő (2022) highlights the positive effects of subsidies granted under Pillar I of the Common Agricultural Policy on the attractiveness of the agricultural sector for future employees in EU member states.

Recruiting employees in agriculture, followed by their training, education, professional development and retention, represent, according to Schramm (2006) and Nagendra and Deshpande (2014), “sophisticated” aspects of human resource management (HRM). Employers in the agricultural sector must assume this role, adhering to both the relevant legal regulations and their responsibilities towards employees and society as a whole. These responsibilities begin with the recruitment process (Stenbacka, 2019) and continue with negotiating working conditions (wages, security). Stenbacka (2019) introduces the concept of “caring practices” within HRM in agricultural companies, which should be integrated into the farm’s agricultural practices, based on the employers’ experience. Urbancova et al. (2017) believe that there is an essential challenge in farm human resource management, namely building an employer brand, which involves, on the one hand, investments in the training and continuous development of employees and, on the other hand, modernising the farm and optimising internal processes. The career plan is a tool recommended by Macák et al. (2015) to be used by employers in the agricultural sector, especially in large companies, as an extrinsic factor that can lead to the professional success of employees. Employee performance evaluation in the agricultural sector is another important aspect of HRM. A study conducted by Venclová et al. (2013) indicates that among the most common methods used by employers in the agricultural sector are performance evaluation based on previously established objectives, comparing the results obtained by employees with standardized ones, as well as organizing evaluation interviews. Therefore, effective management of human resources on farms involves multiple roles for the employer, ranging from setting objectives to recruitment, training, supervision and employee performance evaluation. At the international level, farms show different strengths and weaknesses in relation to these elements (Durst et al., 2018).

HRM is strategically relevant not only in recruitment, selection and evaluation of employees, but also in ensuring the continuity of agricultural businesses. Thus, the succession process in farms does not only mean the transfer of tangible and intangible assets, but also a transfer of knowledge, skills and values necessary for the long-term success of the farm. The factors influencing succession are diverse, from individual to family factors (Cavicchioli et al., 2015), as well as institutional and contextual factors (Bertolozzi-Caredio et al., 2020). According to Shahzad et al. (2021), farmers’ social capital and their ability to acquire knowledge have a significant influence on the process of generational renewal on farms. Other studies examine the role of gender in farm succession, indicating that women are still at a disadvantage compared to men when it comes to taking over farms (Cavicchioli et al., 2018; Sheridan et al., 2021). The mobility of human resources, the rural-urban relationship and rural depopulation can also have a significant impact on succession (Nandi et al., 2022). The role of HRM in the succession process is to implement support systems that improve the reluctance of farmers and successors and facilitate this process (Nuthall et al., 2017).

3. Research methodology

To address the stated objectives and test the research hypotheses, we opted for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) method. This approach is suitable for exploratory and predictive analyses, especially when conceptual models include latent variables and complex interrelations. In this study, factors such as HR management practices, workforce challenges, development intentions, employer branding, and succession planning are interdependent, making PLS-SEM an appropriate method for analysis.

As this study examines both direct and indirect effects between variables, PLS-SEM offers the flexibility needed to understand these interactions. Additionally, it allows for analyzing variable influences even with small sample sizes, a relevant aspect in agricultural research where data availability may be limited.

Another advantage of PLS-SEM is its ability to assess model reliability, as well as convergent and discriminant validity of latent variables. This analytical framework helps test hypotheses and deepen the understanding of HRM's impact on farm development and long-term sustainability.

Data was collected through an online survey: <https://forms.gle/d3ifFpAQR5MFec5k9> shared via the Prolific research platform, known for its use in academic and social studies. The survey targeted farm owners with agricultural experience, ensuring participants had expertise in this sector.

The questionnaire measured perceptions of HRM practices and farm development across five latent variables, highlighted in the conceptual model (Figure 1): HRMP – Human Resource Management Practices; CHRM – Challenges in Human Resource Management; DIF – Farm Development Intentions; EBRP – Employer Branding & Retention Policies; SP – Succession Planning.

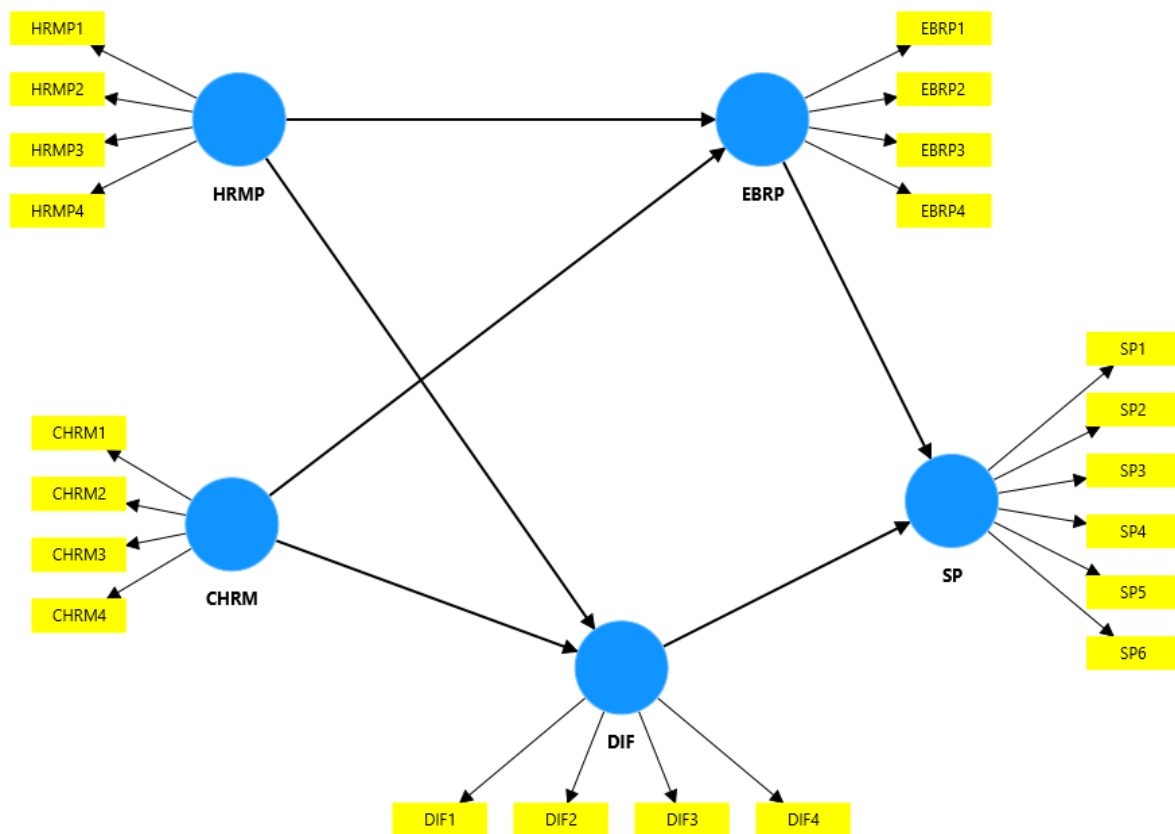


Figure 1. Conceptual model

Source: SmartPLS software v. 4.1.0.9.

Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Given the limited validated scales in agriculture, the study developed a custom measurement model, integrating expert feedback to ensure clarity and relevance.

The data sample structure outlines a diverse and representative selection of farm owners. It includes 110 farm owners from various regions, reflecting a broad global perspective. The geographic distribution of the sample includes farm owners from Africa (24 participants), South and Central America (4), North America (23), Asia (5), Australia (4), and Europe (50). The participants were balanced in terms of gender and distributed across different age groups, considering different generational perspectives on HR management and succession planning.

Farm size varied within the sample, ranging from small-scale farms (<10 ha) to large agricultural operations (>100 ha), ensuring the inclusion of diverse business models and operational scales. Additionally, participants' experience in agriculture spanned from less than 5 years to over 20 years, providing insights into how farm development and HR practices evolve over time.

Study hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Human resource management practices (HRMP) positively influence farm development intentions (DIF).

H2: Human resource management challenges (CHRM) have a negative impact on farm development intentions (DIF).

H3: Employer brand and retention policies (EBRP) positively influence employee retention and motivation through succession plans (SP).

H4: Succession plans (SP) are influenced by farm development intentions (DIF).

H5: Human resource management practices (HRMP) have a positive impact on employer brand and retention policies (EBRP).

H6: Human resource management challenges (CHRM) negatively affect employer brand and retention policies (EBRP).

4. Findings

Table 1 reflects the reliability and convergent validity measurements of the latent variables included in the structural model. The Cronbach's Alpha values, as well as composite reliability (CR), exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70. Items with outer loadings above the 0.70 threshold were retained for further statistical analysis (Figure 3). All values of the average variance extracted (AVE) are above the recommended threshold of 0.50.

Table 1. Description of the reflective measurement model

Constructs' reliability and convergent validity and description of the items	Items' outer loadings
Human Resource Management Practices (HRMP) ($\alpha = 0.830$, CR = 0.888, AVE = 0.666)	
Employee recruitment is carried out efficiently, based on a specific strategy.	0.888
The selection methods used are aligned with the job requirements.	0.886
The evaluation and rewarding of employee performance are conducted in accordance with the assumed objectives.	0.774
Integration programs for new employees contribute to achieving the expected performance.	0.701
Challenges in Human Resource Management (CHRM) ($\alpha = 0.704$, CR = 0.739, AVE = 0.614)	
Identifying qualified personnel represents a major challenge.	0.172
Employee turnover affects the farm's productivity.	0.794
Managing conflicts among employees is difficult.	-0.236
The lack of professional development opportunities leads to demotivation.	0.735
Development Intentions of Farms (DIF) ($\alpha = 0.735$, CR = 0.834, AVE = 0.558)	
I plan to expand the team within the next 3 years.	0.711
I am interested in diversifying agricultural activities.	0.733
Training personnel is a priority for the farm's development.	0.725
I intend to access funding to support the farm's development.	0.815
Employer Branding and Retention Policies (EBRP) ($\alpha = 0.720$, CR = 0.826, AVE = 0.546)	
The farm has a good reputation as an employer in the labor market.	0.854
Employee retention policies contribute to their retention.	0.617
Employees are motivated by the benefits offered.	0.753
Relationships between the employer and employees are based on mutual respect.	0.714
Employer Branding and Retention Policies (EBRP) ($\alpha = 0.709$, CR = 0.775, AVE = 0.574)	
Succession in the farm is a constant concern for the farm owner.	0.444
Family members are actively involved in succession planning.	0.455
I believe that a well-defined succession plan will ensure the continuity of activities within the farm.	0.703
Succession is periodically discussed with consultants or external experts.	0.732
Succession on the farm is already in the process of implementation.	0.711
The farm owner wishes to retain part of the activity even after the succession is implemented.	0.551

Legend: α =Cronbach's Alpha, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, outer loadings; all values are provided by SmartPLS software v. 4.1.0.9.

In this study, the Fornell-Larcker analysis demonstrated that all latent variables met this criterion, indicating that the constructs were well-defined and distinct from one another. The HTMT analysis confirmed that, with one minor exception, all latent variables have values below the 0.85 threshold, reinforcing the reliability of the measurement model.

To test the relationships between the latent variables integrated into the conceptual model, the formulated hypotheses were tested using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. It provides key

indicators such as sample mean (M), standard deviation, T-test values, and p-values, which help determine the significance of relationships between variables. The results are summarized in Table 2, reflecting the extent to which empirical data support the formulated hypotheses.

Table 2. Hypotheses testing results

Hypothesis	Path coefficient	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
CHRM -> DIF	0.213	0.211	0.134	1.592	0.111
CHRM -> EBRP	0.271	0.253	0.158	1.712	0.087
DIF -> SP	0.463	0.473	0.084	5.519	0.000
EBRP -> SP	0.250	0.259	0.090	2.784	0.005
HRMP -> DIF	0.463	0.462	0.078	5.956	0.000
HRMP -> EBRP	0.482	0.482	0.082	5.888	0.000

Source: SmartPLS software v. 4.1.0.9.

H1: Human Resource Management Practices (HRMP) positively influence Development Intentions of Farms (DIF).

The results outline a significant positive influence of human resource management practices (HRMP) on farm development intentions (FDI). A path coefficient of 0.463 indicates a strong relationship between these variables, suggesting that farmers who implement effective recruitment, selection, and employee retention strategies are more likely to expand their business, diversify agricultural activities, and invest in employee training. The high T-test value and p-value < 0.05 further support this hypothesis.

H2: Challenges in Human Resource Management (CHRM) have a negative impact on Development Intentions of Farms (DIF).

This hypothesis is not supported by empirical data, as the p-value > 0.05 indicates a statistically insignificant relationship. A path coefficient of 0.213 suggests a moderate negative influence of human resource management challenges (CHRM) on farm development intentions (FDI); however, this relationship cannot be generalized with a high level of confidence. While recruitment and retention challenges are relevant, farmers are often compelled to find alternative solutions for business development, such as collaborating with seasonal labor forces.

H3: Employer Branding and Retention Policies (EBRP) positively influence employee retention and motivation, having an impact on Succession Plans (SP).

This hypothesis is supported by the results, indicating a statistically significant positive influence (p < 0.05) between employer branding and retention policies (EBRP) and succession plans (SP). A path coefficient of 0.250 shows that farms perceived as attractive employers and implementing effective employee retention strategies are more likely to develop well-structured succession plans.

H4: Succession Plans (SP) are influenced by Development Intentions of Farms (DIF).

The results confirm a strong correlation between farm development intentions (FDI) and succession plans (SP), with a path coefficient of 0.463, identical to the relationship between HRMP and FDI. The high T-test value (5.519) and statistical significance (p < 0.05) demonstrate that farmers who aim to expand their business place significant importance on leveraging its continuity.

H5: Human Resource Management Practices (HRMP) positively impact Employer Branding and Retention Policies (EBRP).

This hypothesis is confirmed by the analysis results, indicating that effective human resource management practices (HRMP) significantly contribute to strengthening employer branding and retention policies (EBRP). A path coefficient of 0.482 and p-value < 0.05 demonstrate that well-implemented HR strategies, including recruitment, selection, and employee rewards, have a direct impact on how a farm is perceived as an employer.

H6: Challenges in Human Resource Management (CHRM) negatively affect Employer Branding and Retention Policies (EBRP).

This hypothesis is not supported by the obtained data, as the p-value = 0.087 slightly exceeds the 0.05 significance threshold, indicating a statistically insignificant influence. The path coefficient of 0.271 suggests a moderate negative relationship, implying that challenges in human resource management may impact employer branding and retention policies (EBRP), but not strongly enough to be considered a generalizable relationship.

5. Discussion

The findings of our study are related with those of Mykhailichenko et al. (2021) in recognizing the strategic value of human resource management (HRM) practices in the development of agricultural enterprises, particularly in workforce management and business continuity. Both studies highlight the importance of HR strategies, including recruitment, selection, and employee motivation, in the process of improving productivity

and ensuring long-term sustainability. However, while our study focuses on the impact of HRM on employer branding, workforce retention, and succession planning, they emphasize digitalization-driven competitive strategies and the role of external and internal motivators in personnel management.

While our research highlights the impact of recruitment, retention, and employer branding on workforce motivation and farm succession planning, Dinis (2023) focuses on structural factors such as farm size, mechanization, irrigation, and regional farming systems as key drivers of agricultural productivity.

Macák et al. (2015) confirm that career success in agribusiness is influenced by HR policies, organizational size, and career development programs, which is in line with our findings on the impact of HRM practices on employer branding and succession planning. However, a key difference is that their research focuses extensively on career success determinants, particularly subjective and objective factors such as career satisfaction, occupational status, and salary progression, while our study integrates a broader perspective on farm development intentions and succession planning.

Nuthall and Old (2017) highlight that many farm owners delay succession planning due to psychological barriers, reluctance to relinquish control, and concerns about financial security, which aligns with our findings that succession planning is strongly linked to farm development intentions. However, a key distinction is that our study focuses on HRM practices, employer branding, and employee retention as drivers of farm sustainability, while the other authors explore succession reluctance through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), identifying attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control as major determinants influencing farm owners' succession decisions.

Pandey et al. (2024) explore the impact of HR-driven training programs on the adoption of sustainable farming practices among small-scale farmers, particularly in the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A notable similarity in their and our study is that both of them recognize the significance of continuous training and skill development in driving agribusiness development.

6. Conclusions

The findings underscore the significant impact of human resource management (HRM) practices on the development of agricultural farms, employer branding, and succession planning. They indicate that farms implementing effective recruitment, selection, and employee retention strategies are more likely to expand their operations, diversify production, and invest in workforce training.

Furthermore, the analysis confirms a direct relationship between farm development intentions and succession planning. Farmers with a strategic focus on expansion tend to place greater emphasis on ensuring business continuity, leading to a more proactive approach to succession planning. Regarding employer branding and employee retention policies, the results suggest a strong influence on the perception of farms as desirable employers. Farms that invest in competitive benefit packages, professional training, and a stable work environment demonstrate greater capacity to retain employees and attract skilled labor. Additionally, a strong employer brand contributes to the success of succession planning, reinforcing the idea that team stability is a key factor in ensuring long-term business continuity.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for farm owners and agricultural policymakers seeking to enhance human resource management (HRM) practices in the sector. The results emphasize the importance of structured recruitment, selection, and retention strategies in driving farm expansion, workforce stability, and long-term sustainability. Employer branding and employee retention policies emerge as strategic pillars for improving workforce motivation and reducing turnover, suggesting that investments in competitive compensation, training programs, and a positive work environment can significantly enhance labor retention. Additionally, the strong link between farm development intentions and succession planning highlights the need for proactive strategies to ensure business continuity, particularly for family-owned farms.

Despite its contributions, we assume several limitations. First, the sample size, while diverse in geographic coverage, remains limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings across different agricultural contexts. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported survey data, which may introduce bias as participants could overstate or understate their HRM practices and challenges.

Future studies should expand the insights of this research by increasing sample size and incorporating longitudinal data to track the long-term effects of HRM practices on farm development and succession planning. Additionally, comparative studies across different agricultural sectors and regions could provide a broader understanding of HR challenges and best practices.

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