

Understanding the farmer-farm relationship in later life

Research from NUI Galway looks at the complex and deeply emotional relationships older farmers have with their farms, and the impact this has on family farm transfer.

With a steady decline in the number of young farm families reported as being key in the demoralisation of rural communities, and the recent declaration by European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development Phil Hogan that a priority for future CAP reforms must be a focus on generational renewal, it is increasingly clear that a major challenge presents itself in the area of intergenerational family farm transfer. While attempts to confront the global demographic trend of an ageing farming population and a low level of land mobility have added significantly to existing knowledge in this field, there are numerous, intricate emotional facets affecting the older generation's farm transfer decision-making process, which for the most part have been neglected (Conway *et al.*, 2016). The outcome is a derailment of the process in many cases. This research brings into focus the suitability and appropriateness of previous and existing farm transfer policy strategies, by presenting an insightful, nuanced analysis of the deeply embedded attachment older farmers have to their farms, and how such a bond can stifle the necessary handover of the farm business to the next generation.

Data collection

In order to generate a comprehensive insight into the multi-level farmer-farm relationship in later life, questionnaires were initially distributed to a randomly selected sample of farmers in attendance at a series of 'Transferring the Family Farm' clinics delivered by Teagasc in 2014, which were held at 11 locations throughout Ireland. A list of copyright questions derived from the International FARMTRANSFERS Survey, refined for Irish conditions, were then included in the 2014 Teagasc Land Mobility Farm Survey to validate, strengthen reliability and build on the quantitative data gathered at the clinics. Finally, interviews were conducted with a 10% sample of questionnaire respondents who gave their consent to be interviewed in order to peel back the layers and broaden the two farmer survey responses.

Results

Empirical findings from this study illustrate a clear disconnect between previous and existing farm transfer policy measures and the

mindset of their targeted population. Older farmers were found to have developed a deeply rooted familiarity and sense of belonging in their home environment later in life, which is notably distinct from the outside world. The senior generation therefore find it almost impossible to visualise what their lives would be like if they no longer lived on the farm or worked in an agricultural environment. The farm setting, and the daily and seasonal habitual routines that occur therein, also offer therapeutic-like benefits to farmers, by improving their quality of life in a secure and intimate arena. Take for example Aoife, a 68-year-old mixed livestock farmer from the Midlands:

"Space is the most wonderful thing in the world to have. If there was something or another bothering me, I find there is nothing better than to just walk up the fields early in the morning or late in the evening, and look back across the land, and watch all my lovely cattle grazing and thriving ... your head would be a lot clearer after that".

Findings also reveal that the farm provides the farmer with a sense of legitimate social connectedness within the farming community. The farm and its associated practices provide a fulcrum around which social interactions can take place. It is therefore almost impossible to untangle a farmer's everyday social interactions from their farm. A farmer's relationship with their farm is also found to extend beyond the physical setting and social milieu to represent a space and environment that has a temporal depth of meaning. The farm represents a mosaic of the farmer's achievements over their lifetime as well as being a landscape of years of hard work and memories.

Conclusion

Farming is more than an economic activity. The so-called 'soft issues', i.e., the emotional issues, identified in this research, are the issues that distort and dominate the older generation's decisions on the future trajectory of the farm. Such issues have resulted in



intractable challenges for succession and retirement policy over the past 40 years. These really are the ‘hard issues’. Policymakers and practitioners must therefore re-examine their dominant focus on economic-based incentives encouraging the process when reforming and developing future initiatives and strategies, and become more aware of and knowledgeable about the farmer-farm relationship identified in this research to maintain the quality of life of those concerned.

As there are no bodies or services currently in existence in Ireland suited to the older farmer’s interests and needs, the full report on this study published in the *International Journal of Agricultural Management* (Conway *et al.*, 2018) recommends the establishment of a national voluntary organisation that specifically represents the requirements of the senior generation of the farming community in rural areas, equivalent to that of younger people in rural Ireland, i.e., Macra na Feirme. A nationwide organisation, with a network of clubs in every county, would allow older farmers to remain embedded ‘inside’ their farms and integrate within the social fabric of a local age peer group, while also providing them with opportunities to develop a pattern of farming activities suited to advancing age. This would contribute to their overall sense of self-worth, amid the gradual diminishment of their physical capacities in later life. Collaborating with their younger counterparts in Macra na Feirme on various campaigns and activities would also allow the older farmers to retain a sense of purpose and value in old age. Such measures have the potential to finally unite farm transfer policy efforts with the psyche of their intended audience, after decades of disconnect.

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