



The 'language' of farming

Research from NUI Galway and **TEAGASC** is giving voice to the older farmer's position in the generational renewal narrative.

Introduction

The senior generation's reluctance and indeed resistance to alter the status quo of the existing management and ownership structure of their family farm is undoubtedly strong within the farming community. This phenomenon has resulted in extraordinary socio-economic challenges for young people aspiring to embark on a career in farming. The reasons why older farmers fail to plan effectively and expeditiously for the future are expansive, and range from the potential loss of identity, status and power that may occur as a result of engaging in the process, to the intrinsic multi-level relationship farmers have with their farms. These so-called 'soft issues', i.e., the emotional and social dimensions involved, are the issues that distort and dominate the older generation's decisions on the future trajectory of the farm. These really are the 'hard issues'. The full report on this study, published in the *International Journal of Agricultural Management* (Conway *et al.*, 2019), draws on three interrelated journal articles exploring the complex human dynamics influencing the decision-making processes surrounding farm succession and retirement published by Conway *et al.* (2016; 2017; 2018) to put forth a series of recommendations that sensitively deal with problematic issues surrounding generational renewal in agriculture, while also ensuring farmers' emotional well-being in later life.

Data collection

Conway *et al.* (2016; 2017; 2018) employed a multi-method triangulation design to obtain an in-depth, holistic understanding of the various facets governing the attitudes and behaviour patterns of older farmers towards the intergenerational farm transfer process. 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, held at 11 locations throughout Ireland (n = 324). 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 (n = 309). 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 (n = 19).

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Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at allowing older farmers to maintain and sustain existing activities and daily routines on their farms in later life, while also 'releasing the reins' to allow for the necessary delegation of managerial responsibilities and ownership of the family farm to their successors, in order for generational renewal to occur.

Recommendation 1:

Farmer-sensitive policy design and implementation

Conway *et al.* (2016) found that policy strategies put in place over

the past four decades, designed to encourage older farmers to retire, had little or no regard for their emotions and were preoccupied with financial incentives to encourage the process. This study recommends that any new initiatives to support/encourage the process should not be conceived so narrowly as to ignore possible social consequences or wider issues of human dignity. Both emotional and economic needs must be catered for, and ideally a policy for structural reform in agriculture must be accompanied by a comprehensive set of interventions to deal with the personal and social loss an older farmer may experience upon transferring the family farm. For example, on its own, and with the numerous perceived negative connotations associated with it identified, the term 'Early Retirement Scheme' is no longer appropriate language for policymakers to use in a farming context. Perhaps the term 'Farm Progression Scheme' would be more effective as it portrays a sense of purposefulness rather than one of cessation.

Recommendation 2:

Farm succession facilitation service

Conway *et al.* (2017) discovered that the senior generation employs an intricate array of complex strategies and practices of power and control in an effort to galvanise and sustain their positional dominance as head of the family farm. This study advocates that the services of a certified farm succession facilitator, trained in accordance with an international best practice model, such as the one offered by the International Farm Transition Network (IFTN) in the USA, is essential, particularly when facilitating communication and discussions between family members' objectives, goals and expectations for the farm.

Recommendation 3:

Establishment of a national voluntary organisation for older farmers

As there are no NGOs or services currently in existence in Ireland that represent the needs and interests of the older farmer in rural areas, this study recommends the establishment of a national voluntary organisation that represents the needs of the senior generation of the farming community, equivalent to that of younger people in rural Ireland, i.e., Macra na Feirme. Conway *et al.* (2018) found that a significant obstacle to the farm transfer process is the rigid inflexibility of the occupational role, where farmers wish to remain 'rooted in place' on the farm and, in many cases, have developed few interests outside of farming. Such a voluntary organisation, funded annually by the Government and through membership, would provide farmers with a support around which they could remain embedded inside their farms and social circles in later life.

Recommendation 4:

Occupational health and safety in agriculture awareness

On a related aspect, the insight into the intrinsic link to farmer-farm attachment in later life and the importance attributed to the habitual routines within the farm setting obtained by Conway *et al.* (2016;

2018) will provide the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) with an invaluable understanding of the various actions taken by (or that should be taken by) older farmers to handle age-related physical limitations and barriers on their farms. This knowledge will aid in the development of an effective health and safety service tailored specifically to the needs of older farmers.

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Authors

Shane Conway

Postdoctoral Researcher, Rural Studies Research Unit, Discipline of Geography, NUI Galway
Correspondence: s.conway9@nuigalway.ie

John McDonagh

Lecturer, Rural Studies Research Unit, Discipline of Geography, NUI Galway

Maura Farrell

Lecturer, Rural Studies Research Unit, Discipline of Geography, NUI Galway

Anne Kinsella

Senior Research Officer, Teagasc Agricultural Economics and Farm Surveys Department, Athenry, Co. Galway

