



# Highs and lows of collaboration

Researchers from **TEAGASC** and UCD detail an initiative by Irish farmers who set about working together for sustainable agriculture by applying to the EIP-AGRI initiative.

Farming in Ireland, like the rest of the EU, is diverse in terms of the food and livestock different farms produce and raise, the methods they employ, and the social and environmental contexts in which they operate. Diversity is a challenge for policymakers as 'one size' will not suit all farm households or enterprises. In response, the EU, through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), is placing greater emphasis on 'locally-led' initiatives that engage farmers and other stakeholders in the creation and implementation of projects that match their needs, the local context, and EU/national policy objectives. Locally led approaches may receive funding through the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) mechanism, which seeks to enhance the productivity and sustainability of the agricultural sector (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2013).

Locally led approaches are an opportunity for policy stakeholders such as farmers, advisors, researchers, community development professionals, and other parties to collaborate in the development of solutions to the challenges of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The international literature highlights the benefits, but also the challenges, of multi-actor collaboration in agricultural sustainability (Prager, 2015; Toderi *et al.*, 2017). Few studies have assessed the processes through which collaboration arises, the roles of different stakeholders, and the leadership skills required to establish and practise collaborative decision-making (Westerink *et al.*, 2017). In recently completed research, we evaluated the process by which one multi-actor group formed to develop an application to EIP-AGRI. In this case, a group of farmers initiated the creation of an Operational Group that produced a proposal linked to the management of

commonage grazing in an upland area in the west of Ireland. The area is dominated by low-intensity sheep production, with many farmers grazing their animals on unfenced mountain for much of the year. We conducted 47 interviews with people who were involved in, or supported, the Operational Group. The goal of these interviews was to elicit narrative accounts that would allow us to trace the processes of collaboration from a variety of different perspectives. We conducted coding-based data analysis and triangulated the results through workshops in two other upland areas.

## Results and discussion

As part of their Expression of Interest (EOI) application, the group developed a proposal centred on establishing a co-operative shepherding scheme, managing invasive species, and protecting water quality in the local catchment. Although the farmland of 200 farmers was included in the proposal, our analysis reveals that a small group of key people drove the process. This group included three to five lead farmers and a number of institutions based in, or with links to, the case study area. This core group established decision-making processes that were largely facilitated by personnel from a Local Development Company, serving to build support among local farmers and developing a proposal with input from a range of different individuals (**Figure 1**). By tracing this process in detail we identified three key findings with particular policy relevance.

### 1. Decision-making was locally adapted

The EIP-AGRI Initiative was non prescriptive in terms of how the Operational Groups should form. Accordingly, the group in the case



FIGURE 1: People and agencies involved in the local EIP-AGRI application.

study area was able to develop decision-making structures in ways that it deemed appropriate. Importantly, these structures drew on the capacity and support of the Local Development Company, with whom many local farmers had pre-existing working relationships. This points to the importance of existing local institutions and working relationships in the development of collaborative initiatives.

## 2. Organisation, collaboration, and knowledge sharing require significant time, labour, and skill

The process of linking with institutional actors to build the Operational Group began roughly two years before the application was submitted. The lead farmers began gathering information through visits to the Burren Programme as early as 2010, in anticipation of an EIP-type initiative. This highlights the importance of local leadership and vision combined with access to flagship initiatives and experience-based learning. The group held between 15 and 20 meetings over the two years, which could each last three to four hours. These meetings were conducted in evenings on a voluntary basis. Finally, leadership, administrative, facilitative, and scientific skills were all available in the case study area and contributed to the development of the EOI proposal. From a policy perspective then, there is a need to reflect on the extent to which these types of resources are available in different areas, and the extent to which this kind of approach to governance relies on voluntary labour and skills.

## 3. Dealing with rejection

Our case study Operational Group's application was successful in an initial assessment phase and the group received some funding to develop a more extensive application. However, the group was ultimately unsuccessful and did not receive funding to implement the proposed project. This points to an issue identified by Jones *et al.* (2019) pertaining to groups that expend labour, enlist expertise, and develop strong working relationships but are not funded. This was a major disappointment for our case study group and, so far, that group has not engaged in new initiatives. This final aspect also needs consideration in refining the EIP-AGRI approach. Many of these topics were discussed in depth at a Teagasc-run seminar held on March 3. Presentations and video can be found here: <https://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2021/working-together-for-sustainable-farming-agri-environmental-policy-practice-and-experience.php>.

## Bibliography

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## Authors

### Jack McCarthy

Postdoctoral Researcher, Teagasc Ashtown, Dublin 15  
Correspondence: [jack.mccarthy@teagasc.ie](mailto:jack.mccarthy@teagasc.ie)

### David Meredith

Research Officer, Teagasc Ashtown, Dublin 15

### Christine Bonnin

Assistant Professor, UCD Geography, University College Dublin

