

Family Farming: strategies of resilience

Ireland's family farming heritage holds crucial elements of rural sustainability – established networks of social support; cultural traditions resourcing ethno-industries such as tourism and craft; and localised human-ecological knowledge important for environmental custodianship. The 'small, not multinational' symbolic value of family farming is strategically used to authenticate the 'brand-centred, consumer focused' marketing 'story' of Irish food and drink internationally (Food Harvest 2020), as well as other rural products and services. Family farming is an institution that is particularly enduring in the Irish countryside and this article presents insights from recent Teagasc sociology research on the resilience strategies of family farms. What are the characteristics of these strategies, which have achieved extraordinary resilience throughout periods of intense change and challenge? A fundamental component of Ireland's agri-food industry, there is a clear argument for paying closer attention to the adaptive strategies of family farmers, and for policy and extension to engage with and develop these strategies in furthering the sustainability of Irish agriculture. A range of sociology projects led by Teagasc, including projects on collaborative ventures, gender specific issues in agriculture, and farmers' technology and business decision-making, all shed light on the make up of family farm resilience strategies.

While larger scale corporate farms are influenced to a significant extent by economic factors, a defining characteristic of family farm decision-making is that it is informed by social, cultural and economic factors interdependently. The value placed by family farmers on *social* relationships (between family members and farmer peers); *cultural* forms of prestige (styles of behaviour and possessions that are esteemed by farmers); and *economic* (material) wealth, all influence family farms' resilience strategies. Rather than scientific 'objective' information alone informing these strategies, they draw from subjective and culturally shared wisdom and a wide range of relationship, esteem and material wealth considerations both on-farm and off-farm. Farmers prioritise not only the farm as an economic business but as a shared social practice and culturally esteemed knowledge source.

Common resilience strategies identified in a literature spanning over a century illustrate interdependencies of social, cultural and economic resilience: conventions of inheritance that favour a single male heir so as to maintain farmland intact in the family name; the fostering of 'stem family marriage' i.e. strong social contracts of responsibility between older and younger generations; traditions of 'inter-farm cooperation' within communities of family farms to ease workloads; and, more laterally, specialisation, part time farming and off-farm work undertaken by primary operators and spouses (Byrne et al, 2001). Teagasc Sociology research has recently highlighted how farm level strategies to respond to impending dairy quota deregulation rely heavily on family farm labour (McDonald et al., 2014). Contemporary resilience strategies and approaches to the farm business are strongly influenced by cultural effects of off-farm work, leisure and educational pursuits.

There is a high value placed on economic wealth when representing an access route for esteemed leisure and educational pursuits (Macken-Walsh et al., 2012).

The success of policies and extension efforts having their intended impact is largely a reflection of how compatible they are with family farmers' interdependent social, cultural and economic priorities. It is imperative that policy and extension measures deliberately seek to engage with family farmers' social, cultural and economic motives. The social dynamics of farmer discussion groups, for example, are to a large extent accountable for the popularity and success of groups as an agricultural extension tool, giving rise in turn to impacts on the economic success of participating farmers.

Cooperation for the 21st Century: Joint Farming

Research on formalised joint farming ventures - organisational innovations that formalise farmers' collaborative work - suggests that they are popular because they represent a family farm resilience strategy. Joint farming ventures such as partnerships have been found to be potentially responsive to the social, cultural and economic priorities of a wide range of family farmers.

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Farm partnerships, for example, an established type of joint farming venture in Ireland, have involved diverse members of farm families and communities - fathers and sons; uncles and nephews; farmers with no heirs and neighbouring younger farmers; neighbouring farmers of similar ages; brothers; sisters and brothers; mothers and sons; mothers and daughters. These joint farming ventures represent the diversity of social relationships within communities of family farms and offer opportunities to develop farming to respond to contemporary social arrangements and economic challenges. Joint farming ventures have been found to respond to contemporary challenges experienced by family farms, such as social isolation, low farm economic viability, and cultural enjoyment and quality of life

Joint farming ventures not only may correspond to contemporary family farms' resistance strategies but are supported by longstanding traditions of cooperation within agricultural communities. Families have been found internationally to be supportive of engagement in formalised joint farming ventures, examples of which include farm partnerships, share farming and share milking. Existing social relationships between parties who engage in joint farming ventures are identified as a prerequisite for higher success.

It is the peculiar social and cultural dynamic of family farming that supports the motivation for and operational success of joint ventures. While joint ventures typically result in enhanced farm business planning as a result of formalised work sharing agreements, they do not give rise to solely corporate dynamics. It is in this context that Norwegian sociologist Almas (2010) raises the question of whether the consolidation of individual family farms as a survival strategy means an end to the

family farm? He concludes that joint farming ventures represent a highly adaptive strategy for family farms, in strengthening their resilience. While increased efficiency and productivity is associated with joint farming ventures, research shows that the opportunities for farmers to work with others in a supportive way to achieve mutually understood social, cultural and economic priorities, continues to be important to family farms.

Collaboration & Innovation

Existing social relationships, expediting formalised collaborative efforts between farm families, are conduits through which the pooling of diverse physical and human resources can be realised. Without these established social relationships, fostering the 'clever alliances' that are crucial for innovation in agriculture at farm level, and also in farm-resourced SMEs and agricultural cooperatives, would be a different and more complex task for both extension and policy. Contemporary family farming in Ireland reflects changing gender roles and the pursuit of new organisational as well as technological innovations, illustrating the 'room to manoeuvre' that has long been associated with family farms. From a sociological perspective, successful policy and extension initiatives promoting diverse joint farming ventures entail exploiting and further developing existing family farm resilience strategies. Participatory extension models, of which social relationships are a crucial part, can support clients to chart their collaboration to exploit strategies of sustainability.

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