

The Rural Economy Research Centre (RERC) Working Paper Series

Agriculture, Rural Development and Potential for a 'Middle Agriculture'
in Ireland

Working Paper : March 2010

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10-WPRE-04

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March, 2010

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1. Introduction

In rural Ireland and across rural areas of the EU, a number of socio-economic problems were reported as having reached "crisis proportions" in the late 1980s: "Rural population decline was acute, particularly so in remote disadvantaged areas; the effects of the polluting, non-sustainable character of heavily capitalised intensive agriculture was becoming evident in the natural environment (CEC, 1988); there were steeply declining numbers at work in agriculture in addition to low agricultural incomes (stemming in part from the high proportion of officially categorised non-viable farms); rural underemployment was rife; and there was a deficiency of outlets for off-farm employment opportunities" (Kearney et al, 1995, cited by Curtin & Varley, 1997).

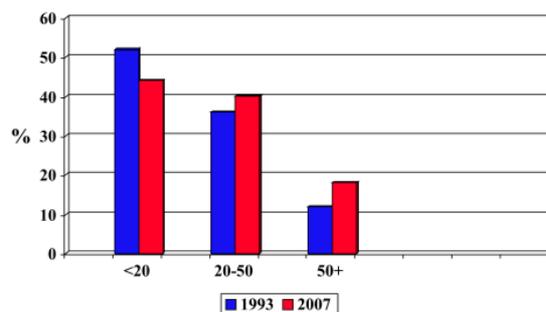
Such problems were common across many rural regions of the EU and an alternative policy framework for the development of rural areas was instigated to respond to shifting policy emphases and changing world market forces (CEC, 1988). A 'post-productivist' agenda in EU rural development policy has accentuated since the late 1980s and this trajectory is set to continue. Contemporary policies demonstrate an increased policy focus away from mainstream commodity productivist models of agriculture development towards high value-added and innovation in the rural economy. Governance and rural development programmes, such as the EC LEADER Programme, have been in place since the early 1990s to assist diversification of the rural economy. While farmers' uptake of agri-environmental schemes such as the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) is high, farm families are noted to have been reluctant to engage with contemporary rural development programmes in Ireland (Conway, 1991; Teagasc, 2005; Macken-Walsh, 2009a) as well as elsewhere in the EU (Osti, 2000; Van der Ploeg, 2003; Esposito-Fava & Lajarge 2009).

This paper gives a brief overview of current farm viability in Ireland and summarises some of the main 'barriers' to farm families' engagement in contemporary rural development programmes. Against this backdrop, the paper discusses the potential of a middle agriculture model for rural development. The capacity of such a model to address some of the economic, social and cultural predicaments of Irish family farms is outlined. The potential of the model is also discussed in terms of how it may respond to contemporary EC rural development policy priority objectives.

1.2 Farm Viability

As we can see from the graph in Figure 1, the largest proportion of farms in Ireland is under 20ha in size. Over the period from 1993-2007, while the number of farms was decreasing, the average farm size was increasing.

Figure 1: Percentage of Farms by size: 1993-2007



Source: Connolly (2009)

As we can see from the National Farm Survey (NFS) data presented in Figure 2, the overall number of farms in Ireland is on the decrease (from 163,000 in farms in 1993 to 113,200 farms in 2006). An economically viable farm is defined as one having (a) the capacity to remunerate family labour at the average agricultural wage, and (b) the capacity to provide an additional 5 per cent return on non-land assets, (Frawley and Commins 1996 cited in O'Brien and Hennessy, 2008). The proportion of economically unviable farms is remaining more or less constant.

Figure 2: Farm Numbers and Viability 1993-2006

	1993	2006
	000 Farms (%)	
Viable Full-time Farms	34.2 (21)	20.2 (18)
Viable Part-time Farms	12.3 (8)	11.0 (10)
Non Viable Farms	118.0 (71)	82.0 (72)
	164.6 (100)	113.2 (100)

(Full-time = >0.75 Lab. Units)

Source: Connolly (2009)

Hennessy (2010) presents recently available statistics on farm viability in Ireland (see Table 1 below). The author notes that approximately a quarter of farm enterprises in 2008 are classified as economically viable (Hennessy, 2010). It is noted that approximately an additional 40,000 farms (32 percent) of farms were economically unviable in 2008 but can be classified as 'sustainable' because of the presence of off-farm income. Hennessy (2010) classifies twenty-five percent of farms as economically vulnerable, indicating that these farms are economically unviable and that there is an absence of off-farm income.

Table 1 differentiates between economically vulnerable farms that have poor demography and good demography using the classification devised by Frawley and Commins (1996). Households where the farm holder is over 55 years of age and where there is an absence of a household member who is 45 years of age or younger are classified as having 'poor demography'. In contrast, households having 'good demography' arise where the farm holder is under 55 years of age or where any one or more household member is less than 45 years of age. According to these criteria, eleven percent of the total farming population is classified in the economically vulnerable group with good demography while a further 14 percent are classified as having poor demography.

Table 1 below also includes a figure of 21,620 farms in the 'micro' farms category and it is important to note that because these farms are small and/or do not receive EC subsidies (small mixed farms, poultry farms or pig farms), data is not collected on these farms in Teagasc's Annual National Farm Survey. The total number of farms recorded in 2008 (below), minus the number of 'micro' farms, amounts to 104,780 farms, representing a reduction of 8,420 farms since 2006 (see Figure 2 above).

Table 1: Farming Population 2008

Farm Group	Numbers	% of total
Viable Farms	32,970	26
Sustainable	40,240	32

Economically Vulnerable	31,568	25
<i>Good Demography</i>	<i>14,153</i>	<i>(11)</i>
<i>Poor Demography</i>	<i>17,415</i>	<i>(14)</i>
Micro	21,620	17
All Farms	126,400	

Source: Irish National Farm Survey Data (2008), presented in Hennessy (2010)

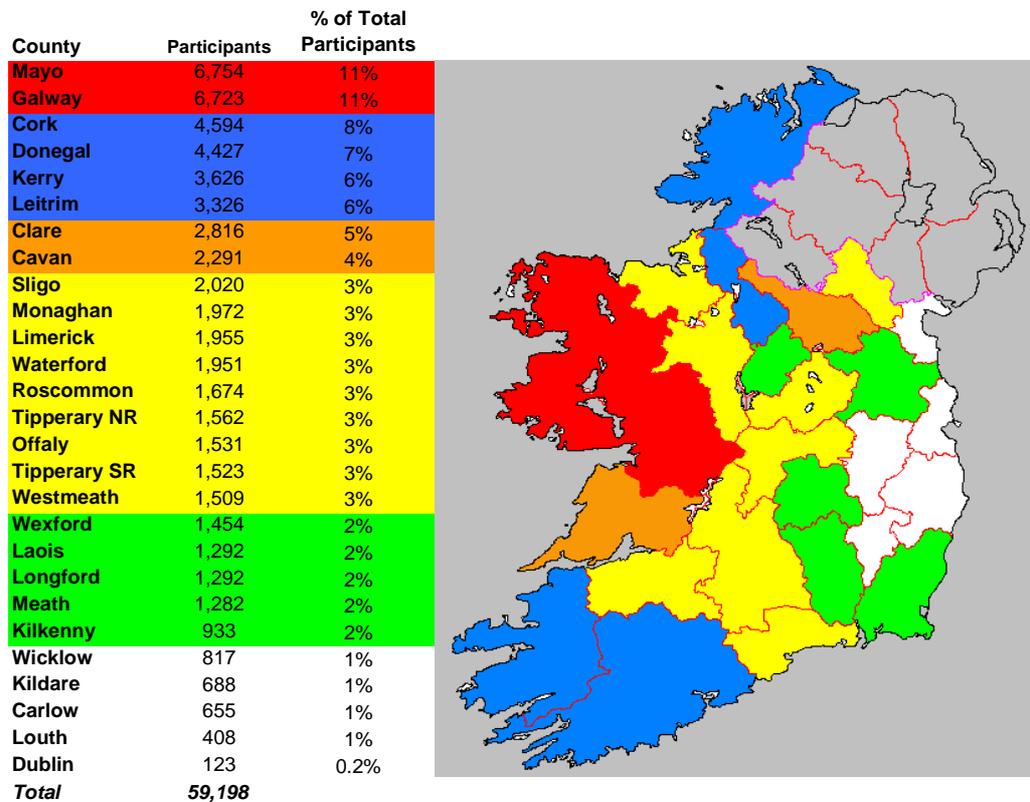
Considering these indicators of farm viability in Ireland in 2008 and recent changes in the availability off-farm work, a significant proportion of the farming community are in an increasingly vulnerable position economically. In 2008, an Irish study on the contribution of off-farm income to farm households found that income diversification is a 'key factor to stabilising incomes in Irish rural areas' and that 'off-farm income/farm diversification outside of conventional agriculture is a protector against poverty' (Keeney & O'Brien, 2008). A high proportion of economically unviable farms are dependent on off-farm income, and in 2008 it was evaluated that 70% of farm households would be in an economically vulnerable position without off-farm income (O'Brien & Hennessy, 2008). Meredith et al (2009) highlight that off-farm employment declined by 30.2% between the second quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2009. They furthermore highlight that declines in construction related employment account for 52% of the overall reduction in off-farm employment. In addition, it is likely that the generally declining economic circumstances in agriculture contribute in part to the ongoing decrease in farm numbers.

The continuing and future decline in numbers engaged in agriculture is acknowledged to be a problem at the EU level not only from an economic perspective but also considering associated consequences such as land abandonment, land degradation and the loss of rural services and infrastructures (CEC, 1988). The maintenance of landscapes through active agriculture is noted to be a positive determinant on public preferences for recreational landscapes (see Howley et al., 2009). From a social perspective, problems associated with the decline of what in EC terms is called the "rural social fabric", is referred to the EC's *Future of Rural Society* document (CEC, 1988). The particular importance of family-operated farms is acknowledged in the EC Salzburg Declaration, which recognises that "An agriculture on the model of the USA, with vast spaces of land and few farmers, is neither possible nor desirable in European conditions in which the basic concept remains the family farm" (CEC, 1985, p.5).

In part to address the problem of the significant proportion of economically unviable farm enterprises, we have seen over the past two decades a steady increase in EC policy attention and commitment to the non-commodity oriented aspects of agriculture, such as the protection of the environment through custodianship and stewardship as well as the need to cultivate diverse high value-added enterprises outside of conventional agriculture. Agri-environmental schemes have been readily engaged with on the part of Irish farmers. In 2007, over 59,000 Irish farms were participating in the scheme¹.

¹ See Lenihan (2008) for an interesting review of the participatory deficits of how schemes such as the REPS are operationalised.

Geographical spread of REPS Participants



Figures based on active approved participants as of 1/3/07

Source: Teagasc (2007)

However, there has been a weaker tradition of engagement on the part of Irish farm families in programmes such as the EC LEADER² programme. This programme is part-funded by the Irish Exchequer and its funding has increased almost ten-fold since the programme's inception in 1991 (€44m 1991-1996) to €425m, to be spent in Ireland during the current Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) programming period (2007-2013). Although the LEADER programme's main target group was identified as those engaged in agricultural production (see Van der Ploeg, 2003), we have known since the first LEADER programme that farmers have been reluctant to engage with contemporary rural development programmes in Ireland (Conway, 1991; Teagasc, 2005; Macken-Walsh, 2009a) as well as elsewhere in the EU (Osti, 2000; Van der Ploeg, 2003; Esposito-Fava & Lajarge 2009). At the EC Rural Development Conference in Salzburg in 2003, Van der Ploeg (2003) noted that *"the role of farmers is relatively modest if not marginal, not in all, but in many LEADER projects"* (p. 2).

Some illuminating sociological studies have elaborated how changes in rural development policy have differently enfranchised and disenfranchised various social groups. In the establishment and operation of locally-led development there is the risk that only a limited number of local inhabitants will get involved, confining participation to "a very small number of enthusiastic members" (Armstrong quoting Breathnach, 1986). Mannion (1996), for example, points to the

² Liaisons Entre Actions de Developpement de l'Economie Rurale.

danger of local development ending up in the hands of a few³. Similarly, Varley (1991) notes that local community-based development movements “tend to be dominated by a small group of enthusiasts, adept at assembling the illusion of consensus that allows the interests of some to masquerade the interests of all (p.236)”. Kovach and Kucerová (2006) detect the rise of a “project class” that is particularly well suited to new rural development opportunities in Central and Eastern Europe. From another perspective, Osti claims in his article on the governance and rural development processes underpinning LEADER in Italy that farmers’ organisations are “bewildered by the disappearance of their traditional, privileged channels of influence” (2000, p.176).

1.3 Contemporary Rural Development Policy and ‘Barriers to Change’

Contemporary Rural Development policy, in part because of its governance based approach, is perceived by some agriculture organisations as having ‘soft’ and somewhat intangible goals. Illustrating the ‘softness’ of the governance and rural development approach, the aim of governance and rural development has been described as contributing to the creation of a ‘virtuous spiral’ in which “everything positively effects everything else” (Moseley, 2003, p. 90). The governance and rural development model is committed to a distinctive development approach, centred on a ‘facilitation’; ‘animation’; and ‘mobilisation’ methodology that is purposefully non-prescriptive. In addition, governance and rural development programmes, such as LEADER, do not involve the implementation of any pre-defined non-proprietary programme or measure but involves a proprietary innovation on the part of an individual or of an individual group. Contemporary rural development programmes depend on proactive engagement on the part of rural inhabitants to become involved in capacity-building processes and/or to seek practical and financial support for the establishment of rural enterprises.

For family farms across the EU, the governance and rural development model represents a break in tradition from the EC Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) in terms of process, ethos, and development rules. Under various traditional CAP regimes and measures, farm families have experienced a gradual loss of autonomy in decision-making relating to management and production activities on their farms. To some extent, a culture of dependency has been created under non-participatory CAP regimes and supporting extension measures where effective, ‘cutting-edge’ farm management and production systems are developed independently from farmers. Many farmers are not accustomed to creating products/services or to making independent decisions in dealing directly with the market. The poor economic viability of many family farms contributes furthermore to a general reluctance towards entrepreneurship, which inevitably requires capital, investment and risk. Farmers are cognisant of their economically precarious circumstances and can experience disillusionment in light of the changing policy and market circumstances governing the viability of their farms (see Macken-Walsh, 2009a). In turn, feelings of disillusionment and hopelessness may hamper innovative self-led rural entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, the EU LEADER programme is acknowledged to be without a mainstream agriculture ‘tag’ and as such many LEADER-funded projects can represent a departure from traditional occupational identities and preferences. Farmers engaged in conventional agricultural production are generally not expert in activities such as energy production, food processing, marketing, or tourism operation. More fundamentally, farmers can have little inclination or preference towards acquiring new skills in service-based activities (Macken-Walsh, 2009a). Qualitative studies have discussed how farmers’ occupational identities (forms of cultural capital) are firmly entrenched in farming and agricultural production activities (Burton, 2004; Burton, 2004b; Burton et al., 2008; Macken-Walsh, 2009a).

³ There is a debate in the literature concerning the legitimacy of non-elected actors and non-governmental organisations playing a significant role in governance at local and international (European) levels (see Goodwin, 1998, p. 8).

Similar to evolution of the wider rural economy, the general level of education of the younger cohorts of farmers and their spouses continues to increase. Furthermore, farmers' spouses, mainly female, generally have achieved a higher level of formal educational attainment. In addition, many full-time and part-time farmers, farm spouses, and highly educated, cosmopolitan farm offspring have diverse skills and occupational preferences. Some agricultural and rural development programmes target male farmers in isolation from their families. Such an approach is deficient and rural development programmes are challenged with 'tapping-into' the capacities and preferences of members of the family farm household. It is noted in European sociological studies that farm women can be more 'motivated' and confident than farm men in engaging in alternative forms of rural enterprise (Haugen & Vik, 2008). It is also noted internationally that farm offspring have aspirations towards diverse farm-based enterprises providing leisure, artisan, nature and gastronomic goods (Blekesaune et al, 2007).

A significant socio-cultural barrier to indigenous conventional farmers' engagement pointed to in Macken-Walsh (2009a) is that despite the governance-based participatory approach employed by programmes such as LEADER to encourage innovation and diversity, a particular (exclusive) 'status quo' has emerged in contemporary rural development activity. Trends have emerged to suggest that the contemporary rural development 'product' is 'Eurocentric' in nature (Lowe et al. 1998) and contemporary rural development activity is identified as centring on three forms of economic activity: cultural tourism; alternative food; and the management and valorisation of natural resources (CORASON, 2009). There is a distinctive rhetoric surrounding the contemporary EU rural development agenda emphasising 'diversified', 'differentiated', 'niche' high value-added enterprises to cater for a "an increasingly discriminating clientele" (Moseley, 2003, p. 48). It is recognised in the literature that preferences exist for products that symbolise social differentiation and discriminating tastes accompany characteristics of the 'high-modern' cultural era. The contemporary rural development 'product' has developed to respond to particular high value-added consumer niches that are described as emerging from the 'post-industrial' and 'post-agricultural' economy (see CORASON, 2009). In the context of high-modernity, individuals can become disembedded from tradition and locality (see Gray, 2000, p. 6) and in this context, they use alternative strategies to differentiate and re-ground themselves socio-culturally (see Taylor, 1992). Socio-cultural differentiation is often acquired through consumerism, in the acquisition of socio-culturally meaningful products and services). Because it is market-niche-led, it can occur that the contemporary rural development product can become estranged from indigenous production cultures (see Macken-Walsh, 2010). In this context, it is noted in the literature that the forces of consumerism can become more powerful than forces of production, giving rise to what has been described as an 'artificial separation between consumption and production' (see Pratt, 2004; Macken-Walsh, 2010). The emergence of 'status quo' designer products on an international scale emerges from the inter-cultural 'gossip' referred to by Pratt (2004), also referred to by Dilley (2009) who notes that "people are guided to act in certain ways and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural [discourses]" (Dilley, 2009, p. 4, quoting Somers, 1994, p.614). Despite the principles of governance and rural development programmes, the production of contemporary 'alternative' rural development goods can become an exclusive economic activity ! (see Macken-Walsh, 2010). An adverse outcome of such a scenario can be the estrangement of production (producers) from consumption (consumers) leading to disenfranchised producers as well as culturally/ecologically inauthentic consumer experiences (Macken-Walsh, 2010).

Over almost 20 years since the initial implementation of the LEADER programme in 1992, conventional indigenous farmers have not emerged as leaders of the Irish high value-added artisan foods industry. A Teagasc study of Farmers Markets in Ireland last year found that 17% of the products or ingredients were sourced outside of Ireland (Griffin, 2009). One of the common observations reached in sociological research on 'alternative' food movements in Ireland, for example farmers' markets; local food markets; and organic and artisan food production, is that that individuals who tend to engage in such movements often come from a

"surprising diversity of backgrounds" outside of indigenous agriculture (see Moore, 2003; Tovey, 2006; Tovey & Mooney, 2006; Macken-Walsh, 2009a). Similarly, in the case of organic production, it is noted that the pioneers have been non-indigenous "waves of incomers" (Tovey, 2006). Furthermore, Läßle & Donnellan's quantitative study of a representative sample of organic farmers in Ireland shows that farmers are less likely than other occupational and socio-economic groups to become involved in organic farming. They note that 'farming experience impacts negatively on the likelihood of entry to organic production' (Läßle & Donnellan, 2009).

The estrangement between conventional indigenous farmers and a proportion of existing differentiated 'high-modern' food movements represents a significant 'barrier', because as discussed within the sociological literature, when social groups are not prominently involved in the formation stages of a social movement, it may be difficult for these social groups to break into that movement at a later stage. This, put simply, is because the norms, values and discourses, and forms of agency of that movement, although of course susceptible to evolution and 'creative destruction', have already become institutionalised in motion and action. The 'outside' social group, then, in order to become part of an existing movement, taking as an example the 'alternative food movement' in Ireland, which is strong and promising (Tovey, 2006), is in the disadvantageous position of having to adapt to established rules, norms, values, language, and designs (see Macken-Walsh, 2010).

Aspects of the sociological literature (such as progressive feminisation in agriculture, see Inhetveen & Schmitt, 2004) suggest that it can be practical and fortuitous for 'outsiders' of a social movement to initiate their own movement, called a counter-movement. This is not to say that a counter-movement is necessarily an oppositional movement to the existing established movement, but a movement that sets its own norms and values, valorising its own resources and market strengths and pursuing its own objectives. Such a counter movement requires a significant level of civil mobilisation within a social group. Tovey (2006), with specific reference to 'New Paradigm' rural development (Van der Ploeg, 2000; Van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004), discusses how social movements can underpin rural development initiatives that seek to "restate rights and possibilities of rural inhabitants to generate a livelihood for themselves from a sustainable use of the natural, cultural and social resources specific to their own rural locale" (Tovey, 2006, p.173).

1.4 Overcoming Barriers to Change

A major policy challenge in the context of the socio-cultural 'barriers to change' identified above is to identify new processes for enhancing the viability of a large proportion of unviable farms. Farming is acknowledged to be a "socio-cultural practice and a way of life not simply a technical or income-generating activity" (Vanclay, 2004) and farm families are often deeply attached to sustaining the traditional family farm. In this context, the policy challenge must be approached by focusing not exclusively on the need for a transformation of farms (and farmers) but on how the resources and practices of existing traditional farms can be creatively enhanced by applying new skills, capacities and resources. It is a somewhat unrealistic expectation for a large proportion of farms in Ireland to individually lead and undertake the necessary added service-oriented, processing and other industry activities to become economically viable enterprises in line with the 'new rural economy'. Innovations are often incremental and cross-sectoral, occurring in flexible intermeshed institutional spaces, building on and creatively combining existing competencies of different sectoral actors and institutions. Such incremental changes often seek to add value by putting 'new combinations' into use as either new or changed agriculture-based products, processes, services, ways of organising businesses or entering new markets segments (Heanue & Macken-Walsh, forthcoming).

More nuanced areas of the innovation literature emphasise the culture-grounded process in which innovation takes place. While new technologically-oriented innovations are core to the 'smart economy' the role of existing lay and indigenous knowledge often remains unclear and

un-strategised in the broad schematic. From a purely practical perspective, the generation of a highly-technological and 'smart economy' culture may not even be realisable unless it connects with lay culture and lay forms of knowledge and 'valorises' existing forms of culture and knowledge. A realistic and culturally-appropriate prospect for developing the rural economy would focus on the need to 'creatively combine' existing lay knowledge, culture and resources new forms of industry expertises.

By providing an institutional framework in which the diverse skills of contemporary expert communities in the industries of branding, marketing, design, technology and communications can be channelled and easily accessed by farmers, alternative rural entrepreneurial opportunities can be availed of by farmers in such a way that is farm-centric (farmer-owned) and culturally and socially acceptable for farmers who are attached to (and expert in) traditional agricultural production (see UNFAO, 2000). Governance and rural development activities are presented in the bureaucratic literature as representing loci in which facilitation and 'animation' activities occur between diverse inter-sectoral (NGO; private; public) partners so as to give rise to a holistic 'transverse inter-sectoral debate' (LEADER European Observatory, 1997). In this sense, LEADER is recognised as a potential 'rural development laboratory' (Ray, 2000) where through adherence to the principles of subsidiarity and partnership, the development focus is set to be enhanced by potentially unique local conditions and diverse inter-sectoral inputs. In this context, Fischler (1998) described the LEADER programme as an "innovation and a lever of innovation". However, different social groups in rural areas may not all be equally positioned, inclined or resourced to take power within the context to the rural development debate and rural entrepreneurial projects fostered by programmes such as LEADER often depend on the skills, resources and capacities of individuals acting alone.

1.5 The Food Economy: a starting point?

Within Irish agriculture there is a diversity of development potential including the production of green energy; safe and nutritious food; and an array of leisure activities. However, in order to build an institution where the necessary cross-sectoral strengths can combine and become accessible to farm families, a practical step may be to identify an existing area of market potential to gain experience and accumulate resources from which other new and innovative initiatives can grow. A central focus in this regard may be the food economy. Kirchenmann (2008) cites the *two ways to be competitive in a global economy*:

1. *being the lowest cost supplier of an undifferentiated commodity (price), or*
2. *providing the market with a unique and superior value in terms of product quality, special features or after-sales service (differentiation) (Kirschenmann, 2008)*

Kirchenmann cites Porter's (1990), *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* in this context: while not impossible it is "extremely difficult for the same firm to do both". The first route towards becoming competitive (*being the lowest cost supplier of an undifferentiated commodity*), is being pursued with some success by a proportion of farms in Ireland. However, it is not succeeding to sustain the viability of the largest proportion of farms. The second route (*providing the market with a unique and superior value in terms of product quality, special features*) may hold more potential for these farms in the Irish context. Such a dualistic overall development approach may be a more appropriate strategy for the future for Irish agriculture.

A particular problem referred to as the 'bifurcation conundrum' gave impetus to the emergence of a movement called the 'Middle Agriculture'⁴ movement in the United States (US). The US White Paper on Middle Agriculture discusses how the American food system has 'increasingly followed two structural paths': the path of artisan food production and direct selling; and the path of mass-production of agricultural commodities. The problem or conundrum that arises from this bifurcation is the loss of what they call the 'middle agriculture', evident from the rapid

⁴ See www.agofthemiddle.org

decline in the economically unviable farms that are mid-sized⁵. As discussed in the US White Paper on Middle Agriculture, the problem of the declining mid-sized farms is a market-structure phenomenon rather than strictly a scale-phenomenon. The paper states that while the problem is “*not scale-determined, it is scale-related. That is, farms of any size may be part of the market that [at any given time] falls between the vertically integrated, commodity markets and the direct speciality markets*” (p. 1). The White Paper furthermore states that “the mid-sized farms are [always] the most vulnerable in today’s polarised markets, since they are too small to compete in the highly consolidated commodity markets and too conventional and commoditised to sell in the direct speciality markets” (p.1).

The middle farmers in the USA are evaluated as having too much output to be conducive to the small-scale artisan producers. The Irish case would suggest that the obstacle to market viability hampering many Irish ‘middle’ farms may not be excessive output but undifferentiated output and the absence of added occupational skills (and perhaps more fundamentally, occupational preferences) that prevent many conventional farms from entering artisan production and trade.

A central characteristic of the Middle Agriculture movement entails joining strategically together the practices and resources of small and mid-sized farm with the necessary professional and cosmopolitan industry skills to market, brand, package and distribute their product. Farm families’ application of such marketing and branding skills to the primary commodity means moving them up the value-chain. The middle agriculture movement in the US emphasises not only the need to move up the value chain but to take ownership of a greater proportion of the value-chain. Kirschenmann (2008) argues that in order for farmers to become economically successful ‘they need to become part (owners) of a functional value chain structure which connects them to the markets, and organized into marketing networks to reduce transaction costs’. Kirschenmann (2008) differentiates between a supply chain, where farmers are input suppliers, and a value chain where farmers should be partners.

The middle agriculture documentation details the process of building up and attaching a ‘food story’ to the product, incorporating the social, cultural and ecological capitals that are identified as core to the branding strategies of contemporary rural development products. Predominantly, branding of agri-food, agri-energy and agri-leisure utilises imagery of scenic countryside, often incorporating an image of a small farmhouse and cultivated terrains. Generally, indeed, marketing imagery for selling environmental and natural goods feature such rural scenes. Ireland’s image internationally is very much the quintessential rural image. The Irish potential for such products, both domestically and internationally is considerable. High environmental quality and farm systems features such as grass-fed beef, puts Ireland in a potentially very strong position. The large proportion of farmers in Ireland who participated in the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) is also conducive to the production of food that has the branding stamp of ‘sustainability’. The value of REPS, however, and the linkage between ecologically-conducive farms with a wide variety of other public goods, remains to be built-in to the branding food story and added-value of the farm food product (see Dunne et al, 2009). Currently, the beef grading grid system in place at Irish meat processing plants (since January 2010) rewards farmers for meat yield but a system to reward the ecological, social and cultural rewards of farming beef (outside of organics) remains lacking.

As a starting point, Ireland has unique potential to become a centre of excellence in the area of differentiated food production. The particular niche is less an organic product or mainstream-artisan food product as they have been common in Ireland and Europe and more a family-farm product that is branded using ecological, cultural and social capitals. The value added of the product is developed and branded in accordance with the central challenge of the new rural

⁵ In a European context, size could be defined by a range of configurations such as the number of hectares, animals or Economic Size Units (ESU) or even in terms of Standard Gross Margins (SGM)

economy, which is to use *'inputs of social and ecological capitals rather than on financial and industrial capitals'* (Tovey, 2006). In this context, indigenous Irish products such as free-range Irish beef or lamb, branded as free-range, openly fed in the Irish countryside, and as contributing to ecological and social sustainability, are marketed and purchased by consumers as differentiated food products because they are not mass produced, because they are produced in a socially and ecologically sustainable way, and because of their high quality and taste. Kirshenmann (2008) cites Rick Schnieders (CEO of SYSCO) in describing the product and associated marketing strategy of the US Middle Agriculture movement of the US as being based on *"memory, romance and trust"*. He also cites John Thackera, who states that successful products are *"all about relationship value"*. Similarly, the fact that the purchasing of food is all about value-systems and that people want to buy food that is consistent with their own principals and values, is noted in the Middle Agriculture literature.

What is pivotal to contemporary rural development products is the branding, packaging design, and marketing and media activities associated with the products. At the consumer level, a shift in attitudes is pointed to in recent literatures, reflecting growing consumer concerns about the high food miles and costs associated with imported organic foods. The more conventional, local and sustainably produced food product has attained, is in this context, a significant market appeal. Authentic Irish food products that have market potential are not just confined to processed food. High value-added distinctive regional foods include primary commodities that have the potential to be marketed as differentiated products because of their regional distinctiveness. One such product is *Connemara Hill Lamb*, which was designated as an EC protected foodstuff (Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status) in 2008. Arguably, many farmers are already producing many foods with regional or local-cultural distinctiveness but the necessary branding and marketing must be applied in order to enter high value-added markets, and create a brand identity and thereby, provide some market protection through differentiation according to place-based significance.

One of the most successful examples of a Middle Agriculture product is the 'heirloom tomato', which is a quite commonly grown open-pollinated tomato. Mid-sized tomato growers were beginning to disappear in the US and the Middle Agriculture movement supported the growth of a tomato brand that capitalised on the heirloom tomatoes being produced by a family that have been 'farming sustainably for over two centuries' and the tomatoes tasting 'like they used to generations ago'. Many of the mid-sized tomato growers, who are now working together in a cooperative, had been growing these open-pollinated heirloom tomatoes at a loss but having integrated to a federated cooperative structure, are now receiving premium prices for their product on the basis of the brand.

Differentiated food does not mean processed food, and there is vast potential for adding branding to Irish produced foods that have a place-based regional distinctiveness. Regina Sexton, the Irish food historian, recognises a plethora of foods that are intrinsic to Irish food culture and provides a typology of livestock and horticultural breeds that are indigenous to Ireland (Cowen and Sexton, 1997; Sexton, 1998). Arguably, Irish farmers are already producing many foods with regional distinctiveness but the necessary branding and marketing must be applied in order to enter high value-added markets.

Ireland's farms have a favourable compliance rate with EC legislation. Irish agriculture's natural, grass-based pasture system is conducive to animal farm-welfare legislation. Recent EC policy developments emphasise the importance of environmental public goods produced by agriculture and the need to maximise livestock access to pasture (Cooper et al., 2009; Boyle et al., 2008). Furthermore, the combination of high animal welfare standards on Irish farms; farmers' high participation rate in environmental schemes such as the REPS; and Ireland's clean and scenic countryside, are attributes of Irish agriculture that will help to leverage EC supports, particularly post 2013. The EC is at the advent of a policy reform of the CAP and in 2013, this policy potentially holds many opportunities for the mid-sized farm considering that both a growing

proportion of the market as well as an increased policy emphasis on public goods is placing Irish indigenous farms in a unique position to take full advantage of a new market and policy-supported niche. Indeed, the Middle Agriculture movement makes reference to several social and ecological benefits associated with the preservation of family farms. Kirschenmann & Stevenson, pioneers of the movement, make the following argument which is a summation of the economic, public-goods, and social motivations behind supporting an 'agriculture of the middle':

"This is not just about "saving" the family farm. It is about the social, economic, and environmental costs to American society. With the loss of each family farm, a rural community loses approximately \$720,000 in related economic activity. Ecologists now affirm that the only way we can manage farmland in an ecologically sound manner is by having the farmer living on his/her land long enough and intimately enough to have learned how to manage it properly. With the loss of ecological land health we see the loss of soil quality, wildlife, and recreational areas. And with the loss of rural populations, the loss of public services - education, health-care, transportation - inevitably follow" (Kirschenmann & Stevenson, 2004).

1.6 Facilitators

However, the methods through which effective collective cooperation among members of the farming community can be encouraged are complex and often gradual. From a rural development practitioner/agriculture extension perspective, the literature on learning provides useful guidance. Learning processes are central to facilitating effective collaboration activities. According to the learning literature, effective learning processes are largely centred on the experiences and engagement of the learner participant (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). For effective learning to occur, the learner must take an active and 'empowered' role in the learning process. A central tenet of contemporary governance and rural development programmes (for example, the EC LEADER programme) is that learning processes are bound up in empowerment processes (see Lowe et al, 1998). Agency, which can be understood as 'representative power' or as the means by which an individual or social group can be 'empowered' and 'cognitively liberated' is a crucial determinant in shaping the broader context in which learning takes effect (see Petterson & Solbakken, 1998). Participatory learning involves participants' leveraging of the learning process, driving the variety of cognitive and sensory processes that are at play (see High, 2009). Learners' own socio-cultural context (language, experience and knowledge) frames the interpretive arena in which learning takes place. In other words, farmers use their own language, experience and knowledge to interpret new forms of knowledge in the learning process. Lave and Wenger (1991), who pioneered the concept of 'situated learning', emphasise that learning is embedded in case-specific socio-cultural frames where knowledge is 'co-constructed' by participants. From another perspective, Vanclay (2004) asserts that

"farmers create their own knowledge through experimentation and trial, and through their own theorising. The knowledge of science, that knowledge created by scientists, is used by farmers when it is consistent with their own understanding. Even then it is adapted to fit their own world view, and so 'adoption', itself, represents a form of scientific enquiry ('science' as a methodology) by farmers. The knowledge of science is rejected when it is inconsistent with the world view of farmers. Thus, farmers are their own scientists, theorising, hypothesising and experimenting to determine what works" (Vanclay, 2004, p. 216).

Indeed, the close relationship between primary producers and the end product, and the primary producers 'authentic' inputs to the design aspect (branding) of the product is a key differentiating trait of successful middle agriculture products. Such products can address the 'artificial separation' of production and consumption discussed by Pratt (2004) and the market niche for an authentic, quality and sustainable food product. Local farmers' self- and collectively-led action, thus, is where much of the resources on which a successful Middle Agriculture movement depends. In order to assist this action, facilitation, rather than instruction

or demonstration, is a key resource tool:

"Facilitation is a way of working with people. Facilitation enables and empowers people to carry out a task or perform an action. The facilitator does not perform the task, but uses certain skills in a process which allows the individuals/group reach their decision/ set their goal/learn a skill.

Facilitation is a developmental educational method which encourages people to share ideas, resources, opinions and to think critically in order to identify needs and find effective ways of satisfying those needs." (Prendiville, 2004, p.8)

Facilitation processes, rather than instructive or demonstrative practices, are required for effective participatory learning to take place. Farmers' active participation in the learning process is necessary to allow the various interpretive elements of learning (cognitive, sensory) to be leveraged. As found by Jorgenson (2006) with reference to the case of Ireland, the "rules and instructions style of communication hinders learning and disempowers farmers rather than empowering them". There is wide range of accessible and easy-to-use tools and templates to encourage farmers' empowerment and active participation in learning and empowerment processes (see Moseley 2003). In accordance with the principles of situated learning, as well as governance and rural development, Irish farmers require facilitation to create solutions to their own problems.

1.7 Collective Action

Participatory processes for development inevitably represent a range of challenges for local people to act in concert in identifying, articulating, and addressing their set of development concerns. In governance and rural development, local representatives are seen as facing the challenge of equipping themselves with locally representative development agenda for engaging with regional and national authorities, making their problems 'knowable' and thereby bringing them into being as a 'sector' (Murdoch and Ward, 1997).

Collective action is traditionally a common characteristic of farming communities. Farmers have for generations worked together, and indeed the Irish term *meitheal* refers to the unique systems of reciprocity and cooperation in Irish agriculture. Traditionally, farm families helped each other during times of harvest. More recently, we have seen the strength of the Irish farming community in cooperating during time of hardship, such as during the floods of 2009.

Those involved in agriculture are accustomed to working together, within communities and within families. These, are generally informal arrangements or at best loose partnerships which are often not defined in either in the form of the service to be delivered or future time related commitments. In the contemporary rural economy, there are more structured frameworks where working together can be engaged in by family members and neighbours that protect the interests of each party but also allow for pooling of resources and talents and the introduction of human contact and supports in the workplace (Roche, 2009; Hennessy et al., 2009; Macken-Walsh, 2009b). Within contemporary farming communities, there are many individuals with diverse traditional and contemporary skills (see Crowley et al, 2008), and joint ventures⁶ hold potential to bring the necessary skill components together to establish differentiated rural enterprises. Formal farm partnerships between spouses, siblings, parents and offspring, and local business partners are all possible avenues to achieving entrepreneurship arising from pooled skills, resources and preferences.

1.8 Cooperatives: a versatile modus for collective action

Another formalised method of cooperation are cooperatives. Cooperatives are defined as "user-owned and controlled businesses from which the benefits are derived and distributed on the

⁶ Joint ventures fostered by the legal arrangements adjusted to the Irish legal structure developed by Teagasc such as Share Farming and Farm Partnerships

basis of use (Dunn, 1988, p. 85 cited by Gray & Stevenson, 2008, p. 37). Farmers' ownership and control is what gives cooperatives a unique capacity to confront the problems of disempowerment and disenchantment that is pervasive within the farming community. However, the socio-economic, political and cultural context for the emergence of and rationale for cooperatives has changed from one that is dominated by profit accumulation to one that is dominated by particular ethics of how to do business:

"Historically, many agricultural cooperatives were organised to oppose monopoly investment firms on the local, regional and national levels... It needs to be noted, however, that these older cooperative associations were formed in an era when mobilisations were organised predominantly for power and getting a fair share. Many are rooted in the first half of the twentieth century when words like "ecology" and "sustainability" were barely in the language. [As mentioned], collective mobilisations and "new social movements" within the socio-economic culture of high modernity tend more often to be grounded in concerns of identity, safety, a sense of permanence, and a broader democratisation of or opposition to unaccountable power (Melucci, 1988, 1996; Buechler, 1995; Latana et al., 1994; Johnston et al., 1994)" (Gray and Stevenson, 2008, p. 39).

Issues of identity, safety and security, permanence and democratisation are central to the motivations underpinning the formation of contemporary cooperatives that seek to respond to a particular ethic and a corporately astute way of utilising marketing and branding expertise. The rhetoric and imagery of safety and permanence, articulated and conveyed through assurances of ecological and social sustainability to consumers, is what dominates the identity and rationale of nouveau cooperatives. In this sense, the organisational structure of nouveau cooperatives could also serve to promote the product that it is marketing to consumers who arguably have never been as ecologically, and socially aware. The principles of the federated cooperative is also being conducive to ecological and social sustainability objectives prioritised in contemporary and upcoming EC rural development policy⁷.

There are three dominant forms of cooperative discussed in the middle agriculture literature, and the third of these is considered to be the most effective (see Gray and Stevenson, 2008; Gray, 2009).

Local Cooperatives

The first is a local cooperative structure, where there are ten to fifteen members. These cooperatives are evaluated within the middle agriculture literature as having the local democratic benefits of cooperatives, but as having competitive disadvantage in terms of "coordination and congruency across national operations". "Larger organisations can be more powerful in the marketplace by creating scale and coordination advantages" (Gray and Stevenson, 2008, p.45)

Centralised Cooperatives

Larger cooperatives, such as centralised cooperatives, can have thousands of members, where "typically, the headquarters is far removed from most farm locations" (Gray and Stevenson, 2008, p.45). In the US, local facilities service members, but these facilities are controlled by the centralised headquarters. The local facilities provide grading and packaging but the decision-making takes place centrally by an elected board. The democracy provisions of centralised cooperatives are described as democratic bureaucracy rather than direct participatory democracy (Corbia 1989, cited by Gray and Stevenson, 2008, p. 46). Bureaucratic forms of democracy are evaluated as leading to the silencing of "individual and community efficacy,

⁷ All information on and analysis of cooperatives presented in this paper is derived from reading the literature of the Middle Agriculture movement at www.agofthemiddle.org and from Lyson et al (2008); Gray and Stevenson (2008); and Gray (2009).

relationship and meaning" (Gray and Stevenson, 2008, p. 26). The inherent tensions between achieving a genuinely democratic forum for members and achieving market and business success are explored in the middle agriculture literature. One of the more prominent disadvantages associated with centralised cooperatives is the loss of consumer trust and connection with the food product, which is directly correlated with the loss of trust and connection with the farmer and the cooperative. It is noted in the literature that as the cooperatives grow bigger, a serious consequence is the loss of the cooperative values that led to its emergence in the first place and in such cases, the cooperative loses its market competitive advantage and become, in principle, undifferentiated to private limited companies.

Federated Cooperatives

The third form of cooperative structure, which is the one preferred by analysts of the middle agriculture movement, is the federated cooperative. The federated cooperative is made up of several local cooperatives and the local cooperatives co-own the federated cooperative. The local cooperatives can continue to operate as local cooperatives, or can contract in various service functions (contracted by the federation). The local cooperatives fund the federation and elected members of the local cooperatives sit on its board. The local cooperatives remain distinguishable from each other in terms of defining local production arrangements although the federation engages in quality control and also allocates a seal of approval to its members that is marketed independently by the federation and can be withdrawn from members if members' quality is not up to par. The federation is made up of elected representatives of the local cooperatives and in accordance with the principles of federated cooperatives the farmer would retain independent operation status, but would have to obey particular business, ethical and quality-assurance 'rules'. More obvious rules in the Irish context would be compliance to REPS schemes, high animal welfare schemes, and a maximum farm size/farm enterprise. The main objective of the federated cooperative is to offer market-oriented services to cooperatives to enhance their success in the marketplace. It involves the 'creative combinations' of existing and contemporary strengths to become an innovative market success.

The following is a summary of the main activities of a federated cooperative:

- Professional broad-scale marketing and advertising
- Regional/national coordination of activities and flows of product
- Research, education and other professional supports
- A third-party certification methodology bringing consistency and guarantees

1.9 Conclusion

Economic viability is a problem for a significant proportion of farm enterprises in Ireland. While some contemporary rural development support schemes such as the REPS has been readily engaged with on the part of farm families, other rural development programmes such as LEADER can entail antagonisms to farm families' engagement. Farming is evaluated as a "socio-cultural practice and a way of life, not just a technical or income-generating activity" (Vanclay, 2004). Farm families, thus, are influenced by socio-cultural factors and not just economic/efficiency factors in how they make decisions relating to their farms. Farmers' occupational identities are strongly rooted in agriculture and most farmers are not experts in the service-based, processing and marketing activities that are conventionally funded by LEADER. However, within increasingly diverse farm households there are members (farm holders, spouses and farm offspring) who have preferences and capacities to engage in alternative rural entrepreneurship. As such, the diversity of farm household members (and not farm holders alone), must be specifically targeted by contemporary rural development programmes.

However, the era of high-modernity has given rise to conundrums that can be antagonistic to both principles of governance and rural development as well as to contemporary forms of

'authentic' consumerism that are desired by an 'increasingly discriminating clientele' (see Taylor, 2000; Moseley, 2003). The emergence of a status quo in contemporary rural development design and action can give rise to an estrangement of diverse indigenous primary producers. The 'spectacularisation' of consumption (Pratt, 2004) arising from 'Eurocentric' (Lowe et al, 1998) 'intercultural gossip' (Pratt 2004) can isolate many diverse, indigenous producers.

However, developing aspects of high-modern (Gray, 2000) or indeed post-modern (Bryden and Shucksmith, 2000) culture also posit new opportunities for small and medium-sized indigenous producers. Consumer preferences, in the context of growing scrutiny of high food-miles associated with imported organic and artisan food products, are increasingly inclined towards local, quality and sustainably produced food products. Branding resources such as high farmer participation rates in agri-environmental schemes and the large proportion of relatively small and mid-sized farms, give Ireland a valuable market opportunity. What is required to valorise the products and practices of such producers is a form of organisational innovation that is focussed on 'creative combining' of cross-sectoral industry strengths (see Heanue & Macken-Walsh, forthcoming). Incremental innovations, combining existing lay knowledge with scientific or new knowledge, are pointed to in more nuanced aspects of the innovation literature (see Heanue & Macken-Walsh, forthcoming).

The Middle Agriculture federated cooperative is a potential model for achieving the 'creative combining' of family farm culture, knowledge and resources with industry strengths to improve the viability of many small and mid-sized Irish farms. The model is designed to facilitate farmers' moving up the value chain and, most crucially, taking ownership of a greater proportion of the value chain. The federated cooperative, constituted of a diversity of small cooperatives is, by definition, farmer-owned and farmer-operated. It represents an institutional innovation whereby cosmopolitan industry strengths are contracted or employed by the federation to provide the necessary service-oriented, processing, branding, marketing and other industry expertise to add value to farmers' produce. A vital characteristic of the federated cooperative (as it has arisen in the context of the Middle Agriculture movement) is that it is responsive to the principles of governance and rural development model (i.e. Axis 4 of the EC Rural Development Regulation) while also allowing for opportunities for coupling the production of public and ecological goods with new market niches (in keeping with Axes 1 and 2 of the EC Rural Development Regulation). Considering the broader social benefits of maintaining farmers and other service providers in rural areas, maintaining family farms is also conducive to rural development aims more generally. Agencies such as Teagasc (with dispersed and embedded entities with development activities in rural areas); ICOS, Bord Bia, LEADER, FÁS, and County Enterprise Boards encompass the plethora of facilitation and industry expertise to assist farmers in creating the market and policy-driven institution that can deliver social, cultural, economic and ecological goods.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Dr. Liam Dunne for valuable comments.

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