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Further Reading:

Conway, S.F., McDonagh, J., Farrell, M. and Kinsella, A. (2018) Till death do us part: Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life through the lens of 'Insideness'. *International Journal of Agricultural Management*, 7(1): 1-13.

Read More About:

The [Environment, Development, and Sustainability](#) cluster within the Whitaker Institute for Innovation and Societal Change.

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The Farmer-Farm Relationship Impact on Generational Renewal

A focus on generational renewal has been highlighted by the European Commission as a priority for future Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform. A major challenge therefore presents itself in the area of intergenerational family farm transfer, to help achieve this objective. There are numerous, intricate emotional facets affecting the older generation's farm transfer decision-making process however, which for the most part have been neglected to date. The outcome; 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 with their farms, and how such a bond can stifle the handover of the farm business to the next generation.

Research Findings

Findings from a survey undertaken with a randomly selected sample of farmers in attendance at a series of 'Transferring the Family Farm' clinics hosted by Teagasc, the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, used in conjunction a list of copyright questions derived from the International FARMTRANSFERS Survey included in the 2014 Teagasc Land Mobility Farm Survey, along with complimentary Problem-Centred interviews, illustrate a clear disconnect between previous and existing farm transfer policy measures and the mind-set of its 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. They 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 benefits to farmers, by improving their quality of life in an almost sanctuary-like setting. 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 farms. 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.

Policy Implications

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 forty years. These really are the 'hard issues'. Policy makers 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 and knowledgeable of the multi-level farmer-farm relationship identified in this research to maintain the quality of life of those concerned. 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, whilst 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, amidst 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.