



Whitaker Institute Policy Brief Series

Policy Brief No: 11 July 2016

Cluster: Environment, Development and Sustainability

Theme: Sustainable and Inclusive Societies

Further Reading:

Conway, S.F., McDonagh, J., Farrell, M. and Kinsella, A. (2016). Cease agricultural activity forever? Underestimating the importance of symbolic capital, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 44: 164–176.
[doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.01.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.01.016)

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Acknowledgement:

Funding for this project was provided by the Galway Doctoral Research Scholarship, the Geographical Society of Ireland and the National Rural Network. Sincere gratitude and appreciation to all the farmers who took part in this study. Thanks also to Teagasc, the agriculture and food development authority in Ireland, for their assistance with this research.

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Transferring the Family Farm: The Human Element

Intergenerational family farm transfer is a complex and highly topical issue that is increasingly seen as crucial to the survival, continuity and future prosperity of the agricultural sector, traditional family farm and broader sustainability of rural communities. While financial incentives to stimulate and entice the process are important, there are many more facets to the farm transfer decision-making process, which in a large part have been neglected. This has resulted in the formulation and implementation of largely unsuccessful policy strategies, which have had little regard for elderly farmers' emotions. One key example was the recent Early Retirement Scheme (ERS 3), which requested farmers retiring under the scheme to 'cease agricultural activity forever'. Essentially, farmers were asked to revise their self-perceptions upon retirement. It is in probing the behavioural intentions and attitudes of older farmers towards succession and retirement that this research is based.

Research Findings

Findings from a survey undertaken with a randomly selected sample of farmers aged 55 and over (n=324) in attendance at a series of 11 'Transferring the Family Farm' clinics hosted by Teagasc, The Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, used in conjunction with complimentary problem-centred interviews (n=19) provide an appreciation of the complex emotions involved in the process. Key research analysis showed that many farmers' identities and self-esteem are strongly attributed to their occupation and, as a result, sacrificing one's professional and personal identity upon transferring managerial control of the farm and retiring is a concept that they find difficult to accept. Farmers also resist the process on the basis of an anticipated loss of the recognition and social status that has accompanied their position as an active and productive farmer in society. Subsequently, the senior generation resist succession and retirement planning as a means of sustaining their position as head of the family farm. There is also a cultural expectation within the farming community that 'farmers don't retire'. Those who do retire are generally perceived to have a defeatist attitude or else seen to have no option but to do so due to ill health.

Policy Implications

This research acknowledges that the phenomenon of an aging farming population calls for, and justifies, the development of various farm transfer incentives that will enable enthusiastic young farmers gain access to productive assets and subsequently improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector. However, as it is the older generation who ultimately decide whether the process occurs or not, even the most sophisticated of farm transfer plans are of little avail if policymakers and practitioners are not adequately cognizant and understanding of how painful it is for the older generation of farmers to 'let go'. Ideally, any new initiative put in place to support and encourage family farm transfer 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. The development of future strategies addressing the emotional well-being of elderly farmers has the potential to ease the stresses of the process.