



# Whitaker Institute Policy Brief Series

## Policy Brief No.: 31

**Cluster:** Environment, Development and Sustainability

**Theme:** Sustainable and Inclusive Societies

**Further Reading:**

Conway, S.F., McDonagh, J., Farrell, M. and Kinsella, A. (2017) Uncovering obstacles: The exercise of symbolic power in the complex arena of intergenerational family farm transfer. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 54: 60-75.

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**Read More About:**

The Environment, Development, and Sustainability cluster within the Whitaker Institute for Innovation and Societal Change.

*The content and views included in this policy brief are based on independent, peer-reviewed research and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Whitaker Institute.*

## Unearthing Stumbling Blocks to Farm Succession & Land Mobility

Intergenerational family farm transfer is a complex and highly topical issue. Joint farming ventures (JFVs), including arrangements such as farm partnerships, share farming and contract rearing, have been advocated within Irish farm transfer policy discourses as succession models that can enable young farmers to become formal partners in the family farm business. They also allow the older generation to remain active and embedded in the farming community. While appreciating the merits of JFVs, the low levels of land mobility currently experienced in Ireland indicate that a clear disconnect exists between the younger generation's readiness to begin their career in farming, and their parents' lack of preparedness to hand over the farm. The sheer number of family farms, their aggregate impact on the agri-food industry, and the potential economic and social losses that may occur as a consequence of this phenomenon, demand a deeper probing into the mindset and mannerism of older farmers.

### Research Findings

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) the findings indicate that the policy challenge to mobilise and support unconventional JFVs is not straightforward due to various defence mechanisms utilised by the older generation to avoid succession and deter it from occurring. Members of the senior generation were found to continually reiterate their indispensability to the daily management and operation of the farm, thus giving their dominant position within the farm household an entrenched legitimacy. This self-reinforcing aura of importance enables them to become the purveyors of beliefs, narratives and ideologies that a reduction in their involvement in farming, and particularly their retirement, would bring detrimental consequences onto their personal health and well-being. Empirical findings also highlighted the contradictory and conflicting desires of the senior generation. Even those in the process of, or who had already planned for, succession, resist 'fading into the background' and instead move to reassert their authority and centrality on the farm, thus forcing the younger generation to work under a generational 'shadow'.

### Policy Implications

While JFVs appear to tick all the boxes in relation to the ideal family farm transfer facilitation strategy, findings from this research indicate that they will be of little benefit if existing and future policy and schemes fail to consider methods of addressing the micro-politics and management power dynamics at play within farm households. A concerted effort is therefore required if the senior generation is to maintain normal day-to-day farming activity in later life, while also releasing the reins to allow for the delegation of managerial responsibilities and ownership of the farm to successors. If this fails to materialise, there will continue to be extraordinary socioeconomic challenges for younger people aspiring to pursue farming as a career. As every farmer and each family situation is unique, the full report on this study published in the *Journal of Rural Studies* (Conway *et al.*, 2017) acknowledges that while there are no easily-prescribed solutions to solving this complex challenge, the services of a certified farm succession facilitator, trained in accordance with an international best practice model such as the one offered by the International Farm Transition Network, is essential, particularly when facilitating discussions on family members' objectives, goals and expectations for the farm. There must be a seed that stimulates the need to act however. Therefore, instead of facilitation being a voluntary service available to farmers, this study recommends that existing and future policies and programmes encouraging land mobility insist on a course of mandatory facilitation sessions with a farm succession facilitator, ideally funded or subsidised by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in order to be eligible for financial incentives such as tax exemptions and concessions. This would stimulate and encourage open lines of intergenerational communication, something that currently seems not to be the case.