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The future of Farm Partnerships in Ireland



Key external stakeholders:

Dairy farmers, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), dairy cooperatives; farmers' interest groups such as Macra na Feirme, agricultural advisors and consultants.

Practical implications for stakeholders:

Farm partnerships have the capacity to deliver significant economic, social and cultural benefits to farmers, and to enhance the sustainability and productivity of Irish agriculture. However, a strategic advisory approach to facilitating farmers' establishment of Farm Partnerships is required to optimise the range of achievable benefits and to avoid common pitfalls. This research has developed a methodology for advisors' use in facilitating farmers' learning of key benefits as well as challenges associated with Farm Partnerships. The methodology also incorporates the key information required by farmers in preparation for formulating customised Farm Partnership agreements.

Main results:

- The research found that the types of Farm Partnerships operating in Ireland are diverse, involving private individual neighbouring farmers and different combinations of family members. Farmers with different needs, family situations, work preferences and aspirations have established Farm Partnerships in Ireland. Farmers can be motivated differently, thus, to establish Farm Partnerships. This research found that Farm Partnerships have the capacity to respond to farmers' diverse motivations through customised partnership agreements.
- Irish farmers experienced a wide range of economic, social and cultural benefits as a result of entering Farm Partnerships.
- Reflecting the diversity of circumstances that Farm Partnerships can accommodate, a viable partnership requires a detailed and comprehensive formalised agreement as well as an ongoing process of review.
- With appropriate extension and policy support, there is significant potential for Farm Partnerships in Ireland to reach the level of uptake in countries such as Norway, where over 20% of dairy farmers are involved in partnerships.

Opportunity/Benefit:

An extension template has been developed through a collaborative effort between research and specialist advisory personnel at Teagasc (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012). The extension template highlights the challenges as well as benefits experienced by Irish farmers operating partnerships and sets out an extension methodology for advisors' direct use in promoting and facilitating farmers' establishment of Farm Partnerships.

Collaborating Institutions:

Teagasc with supportive interactions with the School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway (NUI, Galway)
Centre for Rural Research (CRR), Norway.

Teagasc project team: Dr. Áine Macken-Walsh (PI)
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1. Project background:

In the context of joint farming ventures having a crucial role in the development of Irish agriculture, a research project was initiated by Teagasc (2008-2012) to explore Irish farmers' experiences of Farm Partnerships. The core objective was to reach an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Irish farmers' establishment of Farm Partnerships.

2. Questions addressed by the project:

The project sought to identify from farmers' perspectives the incentives and disincentives to establishing partnerships and the advantages and disadvantages associated with partnerships.

3. The experimental studies:

Eleven qualitative case-studies using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) were undertaken to explore the experiences of farmers who were operating a Milk Production Partnership (MPP); and farmers who actively considered but, for various reasons, did not establish a MPP. The case studies represented a diversity of Irish farmers who are involved in or who have actively considered MPPs.

4. Main results:

Influential factors corresponded to diverse types of Farm Partnerships, including partnerships involving various combinations of family members operating the same farm and partnerships involving individual farmers:

- Farmers with diverse needs, family situations, work preferences, and aspirations have established Farm Partnerships in Ireland.
- Numerous benefits of Farm Partnerships were identified. Farm Partnerships:
 - Developed larger farm enterprises/increased scale by managing two previously independent enterprises together.
 - Provided access to milk quota.
 - Increased efficiency by consolidating land and facilities and by developing new management strategies and business plans.
 - Assisted farmers to share their work-loads to cope with the extra work involved in up-scaling and applying new technologies on the farm.
 - Introduced new skills, specialisations and occupational preferences to enhance the operation of the farm.
 - Fostered new diversification activities on the farm by bringing in new expertise and business interests.
 - Facilitated off-farm work.
 - Shared decision-making power between members of farm families (e.g. spouses, heirs).
 - Reduced isolation in farmers' working lives and improved farm safety.
 - Accommodated family circumstances and needs where, for example, farmers had childcare responsibilities.
 - Allowed farmers time-off to pursue other interests and take holidays, improving their quality of life.
- Partnerships have the capacity to be versatile and flexible, but require a detailed planning process and a comprehensive partnership agreement in order to provide customised benefits to farmers.
- Extension activities promoting and facilitating the establishment of farm partnerships are challenged with:
 - Facilitating farmers' learning of technical information relevant to Farm Partnerships (legal, taxation, procedural, financial).
 - Facilitating farmers' learning of benefits associated with Farm Partnerships and practical 'Know-how'.
 - Encouraging farmers' discussion of and mediation through key issues (relationship issues, for example) that arise in Farm Partnerships.

5. Opportunity/Benefit:

Teagasc has published the extension template to promote and facilitate farmers' establishment of farm partnerships. This template is available to Teagasc and private advisors/facilitators of discussion groups. DAFM utilised information generated by the research in the development of its *Farm Partnerships Reference Paper* (DAFM, 2011). A new project has been funded by DAFM's Research Stimulus Fund (RSF) (2013-2015) to expand the approach of the research to other examples of joint farming ventures.

6. Dissemination:

Main publications:

Macken-Walsh, A. and Roche, B. (2012) *Facilitating Farmers' Establishment of Farm Partnerships: a Participatory Template*, Teagasc, Carlow, Ireland ISBN: 10-1-84170-585-3.

Byrne, A., Duvvury, N., Macken-Walsh, A., Watson, T. (forthcoming, 2014) *Women on Farms in Ireland: Understanding ownership, work and contemporary family life through the lens of intersectionality*, in (eds) Barbara Pini, Berit Brandth, Jo Little, *Feminisms and Ruralities*, Lexington, *accepted*.

Macken-Walsh, A. (2011). *Farm Partnerships in Ireland: socio-cultural factors influencing participation and implications for extension*, presentation to the Irish Rural Studies Symposium, Irish Royal Academy, 6th Dec., 2011.

Macken-Walsh, A. (2010). *The Future of Farm Partnerships in Ireland: Project Update*, presentation to Milk Policy Division of DAFM, Kildare St., 28th Sept. 2010.

Input to:

DAFM (2011) *Farm Partnerships Position Paper*

www.agriculture.gov.ie/.../FarmPartnershipsReferencePaperNov2011.doc

Popular publications:

Macken-Walsh, A. and Roche, B. (2012) *Farm Partnerships in Ireland*, *T-Research*. Vol. 7, No. 3, Pages 32-33 ISSN 1649-8917 25845.

Macken-Walsh, A. (2009). *The Social Benefits of Working Together: Farm Partnerships*, presentation to advisors and farmers at Teagasc, Mullinavat, 8th February, 2009.

Macken-Walsh, A. (2009). *The Social Benefits of Working Together: farm partnerships and share farming*, in conference proceedings of 'A New Way of Farming: Farm Partnerships and Share Farming', *Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal*. Teagasc RERC Working Paper Series 10-WPRE-02.

Hennessy, T., Kinsella, A., O'Donoghue, C., Thorne, F., Roche, B. (2009). *The Economic Benefits of Working Together: farm partnerships and share farming*, in conference proceedings of 'A New Way of Farming: Farm Partnerships and Share Farming', *Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal*.

7. Compiled by: Áine Macken-Walsh