

Uncovering obstacles to intergenerational farm transfer

This article looks at the micro-politics and managerial dynamics at play within farm households.



Joint farming ventures (JFVs), particularly farm partnerships, 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, while also allowing the older generation to remain active and embedded in the farming community (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Conway *et al.*, 2016). 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, as these individuals ultimately have the authority to decide whether the transition of farm management and ownership takes place successfully or not.

Transferring the family farm clinics

In order to secure an in-depth understanding of the manner in which members of the senior generation maintain their authoritative position on farms, questionnaires were initially distributed to a randomly-selected

sample of farmers in attendance at a series of transferring the family farm clinics delivered by Teagasc in 2014 at 11 locations throughout Ireland. In order to deepen and build on the quantitative data gathered at the clinics, interviews were then conducted with a 10% sample of questionnaire respondents who gave their consent to be interviewed.

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Generational shadow

Research 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'. Take for example what Colm, a 71-year-old mixed livestock farmer from the south west of Ireland, said: "Even though most of the farm is now signed over to my son, in my head it's still mine, well while I am fit and able to do a bit around the place anyways. In fairness though, I've made sure that all the returns on the cattle and sheep and everything else are going into the farm account, which is now in his name, but at the same time, I stay in charge of that account, because I do the biro work you see – I sign the cheque books and that kind of stuff".

International best practice

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. 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 (DAFM), in order to be eligible for financial incentives such as tax concessions. This would stimulate and encourage open lines of intergenerational communication within farm households, something that currently seems not to be the case. Such an implementation has the potential to greatly enhance the uptake and success of existing and future policy measures.

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