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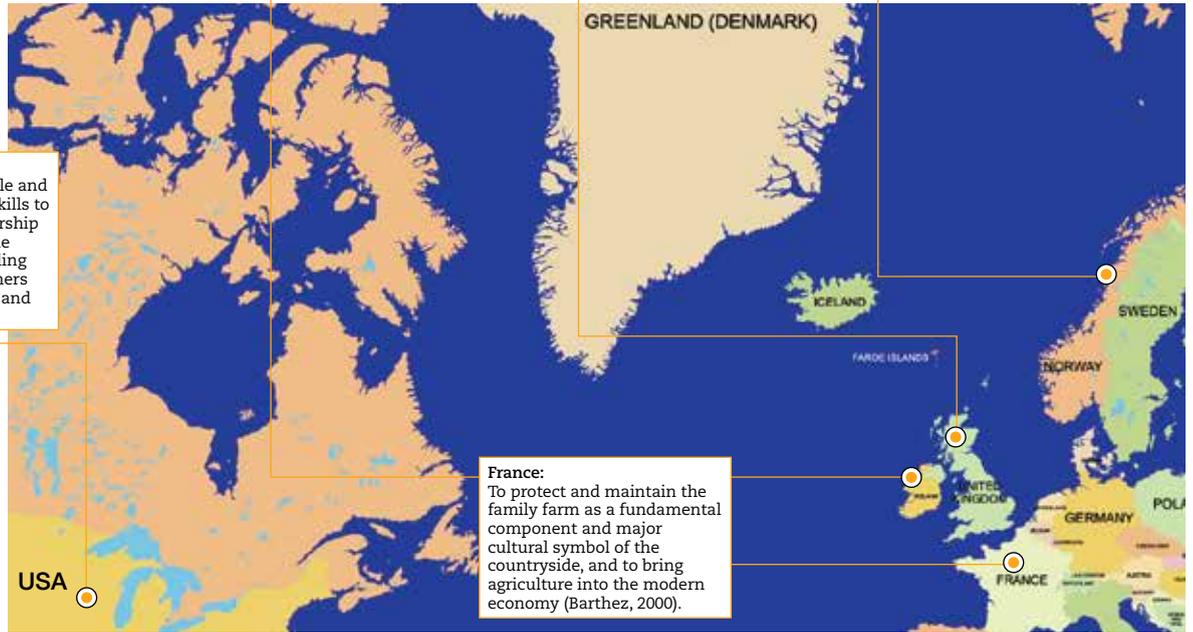


**Ireland:**  
To provide a solution to scale, resource and social support deficits on farms, and through detailed planning and periodic revision, offer customised arrangements that lead to enhanced power-sharing, quality of life and farm efficiency (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2011).

**UK:**  
To increase the scale and efficiency of farms in order to respond to the 'cost-price squeeze' in producing agricultural commodities (Turner & Hambly, 2005).

**Norway:**  
To address the problem of the 'one-man-farm' and, in families where the spouse is working full-time off-farm, to reduce farming work-loads to free up time for more domestic work (Kirbak and Egil-Flø, 2005).

**US:**  
To provide the scale and diverse industry skills to take greater ownership of and move up the value chain by selling directly to consumers (Lyson, Stevenson and Welsh, 2008).



# Strategies of resilience: Cooperation in Irish family farming

## Family farming: strategies of resilience

Ireland's family farming heritage holds crucial elements of rural sustainability – established networks of social support; cultural traditions resourcing ethno-industries such as tourism and craft; and localised human-ecological knowledge important for environmental custodianship. The 'small, not multinational' symbolic value of family farming is strategically used to authenticate the 'brand-centred, consumer focused' marketing 'story' of Irish food and drink internationally (*Food Harvest 2020*), as well as other rural products and services. Family farming is an institution that is particularly enduring in the Irish countryside and this article presents insights from recent Teagasc sociology research on the resilience strategies of family farms. What are the characteristics of these strategies, which have achieved extraordinary resilience throughout periods of intense change and challenge? A fundamental component of Ireland's agri-food industry, there is a clear argument for paying closer attention to the adaptive strategies of family farmers, and for policy and extension to engage with and develop these strategies in furthering the sustainability of Irish agriculture. A range of sociology projects led by Teagasc, including projects on collaborative ventures, gender specific issues in agriculture, and farmers' technology and business

decision-making, all shed light on the make-up of family farm resilience strategies.

## Social, cultural and economic factors

A defining characteristic of family farm decision-making is that it is informed by social, cultural and economic factors interdependently. The value placed by family farmers on social relationships (between family members and farmer peers); cultural forms of prestige (styles of behaviour and possessions that are esteemed by farmers); and economic (material) wealth, all influence family farms' resilience strategies. Rather than factors such as profit maximisation or 'objective' scientific information influencing family farm decision-making, subjective and culturally shared wisdom and a wide range of relationship, esteem and material wealth considerations determine how farmers use information available to them in furthering their resilience strategies. Research that focuses on farmers' subjectivities and the intricate interdependencies between economic, social and cultural concerns demonstrates that the family farm is not only an economic business, but a site of shared social relationships and practices and a culturally-esteemed knowledge source.

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Common resilience strategies – identified in the literature spanning over a century – illustrate interdependencies of social, cultural and economic concerns: conventions of inheritance that favour a single male heir so as to maintain farmland intact in the family name; the fostering of 'stem family marriage', i.e. strong social contracts of responsibility between older and younger generations; traditions of 'inter-farm cooperation' within communities of family farms to ease workloads; and, more laterally, specialisation, part-time farming and off-farm work undertaken by primary operators and spouses (Byrne *et al.*, 2001). While resilience strategies have changed, the social framework of the family farm has remained intact. Teagasc Sociology research has recently highlighted how farm level strategies to respond to impending dairy quota deregulation rely heavily on the knowledge and labour of the extended family farm (McDonald *et al.*, 2014). Relationships within farm families have changed, however. The cultural effects of off-farm work, greater gender equality, and increased access to leisure and educational pursuits drive different motivations and relationships within the farm household.

### Cooperation for the 21st century: collaborative farming

Research on formalised joint farming ventures – organisational innovations that formalise farmers' collaborative work – suggests that they are popular because they represent a credible resilience strategy in contemporary agriculture. Joint farming ventures – including partnerships, contract rearing, share farming and producer groups – are potentially responsive to not only the economic needs of farmers and the pragmatic needs of operating farms, but work within established, but transforming, socio-cultural pathways within farm families and communities.

Farm partnerships, for example, an established type of joint farming venture in Ireland, have involved diverse members of farm families and communities – fathers and sons; uncles and nephews; farmers with no heirs and neighbouring younger farmers; neighbouring farmers of similar ages; sisters and brothers; mothers and sons; and, mothers and daughters. Research has found that partnerships represent the diversity of social relationships within communities of family farms and offer opportunities to develop farming to respond to contemporary social arrangements and economic challenges (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2011). A range of joint farming ventures has been found to respond to contemporary challenges experienced by family farms, such as social isolation, low farm economic viability, diminished cultural enjoyment and a desire to improve quality of life.

It is the peculiar social and cultural dynamic of family farming that supports the motivation for and operational success of joint ventures. While joint ventures typically result in enhanced farm business planning as a result of formalised work sharing agreements, they do not give rise to solely corporate dynamics. It is in this context that Norwegian sociologist Almas (2010) raises the question of whether the consolidation of individual family farms as a survival strategy means an end to the family farm? He concludes that joint farming ventures represent a highly adaptive strategy for family farms, in strengthening their resilience. While increased efficiency and productivity is associated with joint farming ventures, research shows that farmers working together, to achieve mutually understood social, cultural and economic priorities, continues to be important to family farms.

### Collaboration & innovation

Existing social relationships, expediting formalised collaborative efforts between farm families, are conduits through which the

pooling of diverse physical and human resources can be realised. Without these established social relationships, fostering the 'clever alliances' that are crucial for innovation in agriculture at farm level, and also in farm-resourced SMEs and agricultural cooperatives, would be a different and more complex task for both extension and policy. Contemporary family farming in Ireland reflects changing gender roles and the pursuit of new organisational as well as technological innovations, illustrating the 'room to manoeuvre' (O'Hara, 1998) that has long been associated with family farms. From a sociological perspective, successful policy and extension initiatives promoting diverse joint farming ventures entail exploiting and further developing family farm resilience strategies that are part of cultural knowledge. Participatory extension models, of which social relationships are a crucial part, can support clients to chart their collaboration to exploit future strategies of sustainability.

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