



An actor-oriented approach to understanding dairy farming in a liberalised regime: A case study of Ireland's New Entrants' Scheme



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ABSTRACT

With the abolition of dairy quotas in 2015 major change in Europe's dairy industry is anticipated at the level of individual farms, with consequences for how land is utilised and managed. Critical questions in this context are how farmers react to the myriad challenges coming forth from changed policy circumstances and, more specifically, the factors that influence their responses to these challenges at farm level. As part of a broader multi-disciplinary research project, this paper presents a narrative analysis of dairy farmers participating in Ireland's New Entrants' Scheme, an initiative that has facilitated the establishment of over two hundred new dairy farms. Salient with an increasing literature on Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKISs) within agriculture, the paper focuses specifically on the actors who influence the decisions of the New Entrants (NEs) at this critical juncture in the transformation of dairy policy. Led by Norman Long's actor-oriented approach, we examine social interfaces involving NEs and different categories of actors. We found that interfaces conditioned by coercive behaviour on the part of actors had a narrow scope of influence on farmers' decisions compared to interfaces characterised by relatively equal power relations. The latter interfaces had the capacity to be strongly influential on broad habitual production and management decisions. Interfaces involving family members, however, had ultimate influence on major strategic decision-making, including decisions to establish new enterprises. Overall, our analysis suggests that NEs are empowered decision-makers in their social interfaces with other AKIS actors and our biographical approach to the analysis indicates that quota deregulation itself has not led to radical changes in who influences NEs' decision-making.

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1. Introduction

The European Union's (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) introduced milk quotas in 1984 to restrict milk production and guarantee stable prices within the EU (Whetstone, 1999). Arguably, quotas have restricted the entry of new younger dairy farmers and assisted the viability of smaller scale farmers who may not have survived economically in the absence of the market protection that quotas provided (Dillon et al., 2005). The CAP Health Check review in 2008 resulted in a decision to abolish milk quotas by 2015, with a view to reducing trade distortion within international dairy markets (IPTs, 2009). With the abolition of dairy quotas in 2015, major change in Europe's dairy industry is underway at the levels of national and international markets, with impacts at the level of individual farms. Critical questions in this context are how

farmers react to the myriad challenges arising from new circumstances in dairy production and what types of influences ultimately determine their management strategies at farm level?

The dairy industry is an important part of Ireland's agriculture, representing 16,000 farmers and the most profitable type of agricultural enterprise (Teagasc, 2013). In preparing for imminent dairy quota deregulation, the Irish government developed a scheme to allocate 0.25% of the annual 1% anticipated increase in national milk quota between 2009 and 2015 on a permanent basis to new entrants to dairying. Called the New Entrants' Scheme (NES), its main objective was to prepare for the liberalisation of dairy production and to facilitate a cohort of farmers (n230) to access dairy quota and establish new enterprises for the first time in nearly thirty years.

Extension structures have an important role in supporting the evolution of the Irish dairy sector in a post-quota environment. Understanding the different actors who influence farmers – for example, farmer peers and experts such as public extension agents, veterinarians and industry representatives – is a crucial

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consideration in understanding the changes that are likely to occur at farm-level as a result of quota deregulation. Policy design and the work of extension agents tasked with advising farmers through periods of policy transformation is a key area of focus in this context. The literature on the Agricultural Innovation System (AIS) and the Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) pays attention to the diversity of actors involved in agricultural knowledge creation and exchange, the relationships between the actors, and their different roles. There is unprecedented recognition in the policy literature of different knowledge types and the value of non-scientific knowledge. Generating utilisable knowledge that is perceived as credible by end-users is the over-riding objective of contemporary policies such as the European Innovation Partnership (EIP). Crucially, the generating of 'transferable' knowledge through democratised processes that allow different actors to deliberate knowledge in an empowered way is emphasised in the policy literature. Policies such as those under the EIP operate on the assumption that farmers are not passive receptors of knowledge (Vanclay, 2004), but must be active participants in knowledge-generating processes.

This paper presents findings from a multi-disciplinary research project focusing on determinants motivating NEs' decisions and actions in this critical period of dairy policy transformation. At this relatively early stage after dairy quota deregulation, our study presents qualitative insights to the decision-making of a particular cohort of farmers who, through a policy instrument, were allocated milk quota and established new dairy farms in preparation for dairy quota abolition. Our study focuses specifically on the actors who influenced this cohort's decision-making in relation to their production and management activities. The specific focus we take on actors who influence this cohort of farmers is specifically policy-relevant. We focus on social interfaces within the AKIS, increasingly policy relevant in the context of the relatively recent emergence of a suite of actor-focused policies under the CAP's European Innovation Partnership (EIP).

While another paper has presented how different types of information influence NEs' decisions (McDonald et al., 2014), this paper focuses specifically on the relational context in which influence occurs and the various *actors* (i.e. 'experts', family members and peers) who influence the decisions of NEs. Knowledge generating processes occurring within agricultural knowledge systems inevitably involve interfaces between different actor types and it is in this respect that the value of Long's (2001) theory of social interfaces as an interrogative tool becomes apparent. First, this paper presents a review of theoretical work that may be applied to understand interactions between different actors within the AKIS drawing in particular from Long's (2001) theory of social interfaces. Second, the methodological approach of the study is described, which utilises a case study methodology using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) as an interviewing tool. Third, the paper presents findings of our qualitative analysis, identifying the range of actors ('experts', family members and peers) who influenced NEs' decisions and how, paying attention to relational aspects of the social interface in which influence occurs.

2. Social interfaces: realms of inter-actor influence

A theory that is particularly salient to investigating realms of inter-actor influences is Long's (1989, 1999, 2001) 'actor oriented' theory of social interfaces. This theory, which has its origins in agriculture and rural development, focuses on actors' information, power and goals in understanding outcomes (Skutsch, 1996). The theory posits that actors' decisions are conditioned by factors such as knowledge and consideration of the social, cultural and economic outcomes of taking particular decisions (Macken-

Walsh et al., 2012). This concurs with the view that influences on farmers' decisions are not oriented only to technical, scientific and other forms of knowledge or expertise but are socially oriented (Leeuwis et al., 1990; Vanclay, 2004). In what are described as social interfaces between people (farmers and other actors, for example), issues such as power differentials (e.g. status and resource inequities) frame and condition how information is brought to light and deliberated by the people involved (Long, 2001; Skutsch, 1996). Long (2001, p. 243) describes a social interface as: "a critical point of intersection between different lifeworlds, social fields or levels of social organisation, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power, are most likely to be located". An interface involving farmer peers, for example, is conditioned by the relationships between the farmers and their social, economic and cultural status vis-à-vis each other. Another example is an interface between an extension agent and a farmer, where different power dynamics may arise from the 'expert' status of the agent. Power differentials between different actors are, as theorised by Long (1999) and numerous other scholars in the field of rural development and agriculture, critical determinants of how farmers reach decisions in processes of knowledge transfer and exchange (Leeuwis et al., 1990; Scoones and Thompson, 1994).

Equally deterministic on farmers' decisions are their own values and goals. A farmer's own goals can be understood as partially constituting a prism through which new information is appraised on the basis of how instrumental it is for achieving their goals. The concept of subjectivity (Wright-Mills, 1959) is central to understanding farmers' goals, which reflect their own circumstances, aspirations and, more generally, their world-views. Information that is 'objectively' generated through science and promoted to farmers as leading to enhanced farm efficiency and productivity may not be used by farmers when it is not conducive to their inter-relating social, cultural and economic goals (Vanclay, 2004; Macken-Walsh et al., 2012).

Vanclay (2004) elucidates how farming is not only a technical or income generating activity, but a socio-cultural practice bound up with occupational identity, cultural esteem, and family as well as peer relationships. Bourdieu (1986) identifies three main forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) that have been applied in rural sociology in order to understand farmers' goals (Burton, 2004). Cultural capital can be described as what is prestigious or esteemed by farmers, from the perspectives of farmers themselves. Cultural capital, or 'pride', can be attached to types of knowledge, skill, or tradition that are valued, esteemed and important to farmers. Social capital can be described as the value of social relationships to farmers. Economic capital, which essentially means material or financial wealth, is often inter-dependent with forms of cultural and social capital, particularly where economic wealth is required to maintain or enhance cultural or social capital and vice-versa. The various forms of economic, social and cultural capital that are subjectively esteemed by individual farmers to some extent reflect their life circumstances and ultimately shape the nature of their goals.

Farmers' identification and achievement of subjectively esteemed goals is influenced by a wide range of factors, including diversity of life experiences and access to relational support and technical information. There is a large expert community within the agriculture sector, with diverse public and private agencies generating scientific and professional knowledge for the purposes of informing extension services to farmers (Prager and Thompsom, 2014). Using a lens that is oriented to the AKIS, crucial questions are how farmers' production decisions are influenced, the types of social interfaces that are most influential and the different types of actors who are influential relative to specific decision-making contexts. An actor-oriented approach, understanding farmers'

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