

## Transitions to sustainable rural development in Ireland: Waving goodbye or saying hello?

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This is an opportune moment to reflect upon the direction of travel of rural Ireland. In the wake of the fallout from the implosion of the Celtic Tiger, what is the state of Irish rural society and economy? Arguably, this is an important moment to take stock: in Brussels intense lobbying, involving Irish farming and land owning interests, is shaping the next period of the Common Agricultural Policy; at home, Food Harvest 2020 continues to drive agricultural policy (although it is not, itself, government policy). The Irish countryside continues to be regarded primarily as the site of export-led production and, with the removal of milk quotas in 2015, is likely to witness further intensification. Meanwhile rural poverty and social exclusion are on the rise, while the environment continues to suffer the consequences of increased stocking densities and agri-chemical applications. What are the prospects for making the transition toward a more sustainable rural development?

The notion of sustainable rural development garnered increased political interest with the 1987 publication of the Brutland Report, *Our Common Future*. This was reflected in the 1988 EU Commissioned report on the Future of Rural Society and, at a national level, was evident in the publication of the 1991 White Paper on Rural Development, *Ensuring the Future – A Strategy for Rural Development in Ireland*. While these documents reflected a shift from a sole focus on agriculture as a panacea for rural development and gave rise to the 'promotion of new endogenous models' of rural social and economic development (McDonagh 2009:7) it has been argued that 'efforts at pursuing sustainable rural development have so far hardly gone beyond the greening of farming' (Lowe and Ward, 2007) that 'progress is likely to be limited as long as policies remain centered excessively on agriculture and therefore confined largely to one sector (Marsden 1999; Bryden 2005). Whilst to date CAP Reform has culminated in the creation of Pillar 2 and the allocation of financial resources to a specific Rural Development Programme, McDonagh (2009:7) argues that the 'potential of endogenous development and partnership based approaches (Characteristic of the RDP) still remains substantially unrealised'. As the European Commission, and 27 Member States, come closer to negotiating a new Common Agricultural Policy for the period 2014-2020 (unlikely now to be actually implemented until 2015), the first objective of this paper is to explore what has happened in rural areas over the lifespan of the last CAP 2007-2013 and to review its impacts in terms of achieving sustainable rural development. This will require us to review the substance of Food Harvest 2020 and examine what the implications of this strategy might be for rural life and our environmental responsibilities.

The second objective of the paper, however, is to reveal just how thoroughly we appear to have embraced unsustainability in our prioritisation of economic growth and the pursuit of export markets over domestic considerations. While, for example, there is great excitement around the achievements of FH2020 to drive increases in export volumes, there is remarkably little attention given to the matter of food imports rising at an even faster rate – by 9 percent during 2011. Our belief in global markets – and relative neglect of the issue of domestic food security – stands in sharp contrast to our nearest neighbour which has begun to seriously address the supply of its domestic market. Moreover, our strategy of increasing beef and dairy production is likely to result in failing to meet international obligations with regard to abatement of greenhouse gas emissions. There are a multitude of other environmental responsibilities (eg Water Framework Directive, Nitrates, Habitats) that are also threatened by the present course. Consequently, the paper will ask: is it possible for us to look ahead to sustainable rural development or are we waving it goodbye?