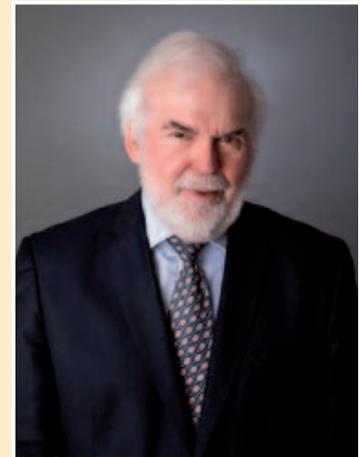


Policies for Agriculture and the Environment on the island of Ireland in the post-Brexit World

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Introduction

Decisions to be taken during the second half of 2020 will have a decisive impact on the future of the Irish agri-food industry, North and South. The most important of these decisions will be on the future relationship between the UK and the EU, including the trade relationship, to apply from 1 January 2021. A hard Brexit would have major negative implications for the agri-food sectors in the UK and in Ireland. A second set of decisions concern how the EU and its member states will move towards a more environmentally sustainable agricultural system. The direction of policy has been set out in EU Commission strategy documents, Farm to Fork (F2F) and the Biodiversity Strategy. The detail as to how these proposals should be implemented at national level will be decided over the coming months. This paper seeks to explain what both sets of decisions will mean for the Irish agri-food sector and to identify the challenges facing political leaders in London, Belfast and Dublin. And this will be played out against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in addition to its cost in terms of death and ill-health, risks generating the worst global recession for centuries.

The article has four sections. First, it describes the evolving European, international and Irish policy framework, with particular reference to policy on agriculture and the environment.

Second, it examines the state of the agri-food sector, North and South, on the eve of Brexit. Third, it discusses the possible implications of Brexit and a new UK agriculture and food policy. Fourth, looking to the future decade, it suggests a set of principles to guide co-operation within the agri-food sector on the island of Ireland, as well as proposing some initial ideas for possible future projects.

The evolving policy framework at European, Irish, and international level

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been the dominant influence on agri-food policy in Ireland, North and South, since Ireland and the UK joined the then European Economic Community (EEC) on 1 January 1973.

The CAP has undergone a number of reforms from the 1970s onwards. During its early decades, it operated a system of price support for the main farm commodities. In 1992, Ray MacSharry, EEC Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, spearheaded a major reform which substantially reduced guaranteed prices for cereals, milk and beef and introduced a 'mixed system' of continuing price support albeit at lower levels, plus 'coupled' direct payments linked to previous levels of on-farm production. In addition, a set of 'accompanying measures' were introduced consisting of three schemes: on afforestation, early retirement for farmers, and the improvement of the rural environment in the form of the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS).

The next major reform came in 2003 and involved a 'decoupling' of direct payments from production, instead introducing direct income payments in the form of the Single Farm Payment (SFP) linked to respecting certain standards in relation to protection of the environment, animal health and welfare, and public health. Member States were given latitude in the timing and methodology of introducing decoupled direct payments. Ireland chose to opt for full decoupling from January 2005.

More generally, the 2003 reform signalled an increasingly integrated European agricultural and rural development policy. Food safety issues loomed larger, influenced by consumer concerns following outbreaks of BSE and Foot and Mouth Disease during the previous decade. There was increased pressure for animal welfare to be adequately reflected in policy.

The essential shape and structure of the CAP has remained in place from 2003 to the present. But we are now on the verge of a further significant reform which began with an EU-wide public consultation process on the CAP's future in 2018. Following that consultation, the Commission proposed that 40% of future CAP funding would be spent on climate mitigation measures.

The momentum towards a 'greener' CAP has been further accentuated with moves towards a more ambitious EU climate policy. In December 2019, the incoming EU Commission proposed the adoption of the European Green Deal (EGD), aiming to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. This represented an increase in the level of ambition in European climate policy and would involve a greater reduction in the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions than has previously been committed to.

The EGD has an important agri-food dimension, through its Farm to Fork (F2F) proposal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.¹ F2F aims at enabling 'the transition to a sustainable food system that safeguards food security and ensures access to healthy diets sourced from a healthy planet'.² The Biodiversity Strategy stresses its centrality to the well-being of other economic sectors, including agriculture.

Negotiations on the new EU emissions targets and how Member States will contribute to them will commence during the second half of 2020. Discussion will also commence on how F2F and the Biodiversity Strategy will be implemented. The reformed CAP will operate through each Member State preparing its own national Strategic Plan, taking account of its specific circumstances, aimed at contributing to overall European targets under the CAP.

This next CAP reform should be seen within a wider international context. In 2015, the international community adopted two landmark agreements: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Climate Agreement. 2030 is the target date for the achievement of the 17 SDGs. The aim of the Paris Agreement is to avoid dangerous climate change by limiting the increase in global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. The COVID-19 pandemic will make achievement of both agreements much more difficult.

Within this wider international context, the role which food systems play in contributing to global and planetary health is coming into sharper focus. There is a strong international move towards the better integration of policies on agriculture and food, health, and climate. In 2021, the UN will host a Food Systems Summit (FSS) aimed at accelerating the achievement of the SDGs and meeting climate change challenges. Preparation for this Summit will include Food Systems Dialogues in many countries aimed at stimulating public engagement on how food systems can deliver better health results and reduce their contribution to climate change.

The policy direction at EU and international level on integrating environmental considerations more closely with agricultural policy is in line with significant political developments in ROI and NI during 2020.

In ROI, the new coalition government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party has committed to a Programme for Government (PfG) with environmental targets that go beyond what is included in the 2019 Climate Action Plan. In addition, the Irish Supreme Court held in a landmark judgement in July 2020 that the Government's 2017 National Mitigation Plan did not provide sufficient detail to show that it met the terms of the 2015 Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act.

The Government intends to respond to the PfG and to the Supreme Court judgement through two key actions: first, the introduction of a Climate Action Bill, within its first 100 days in office, to introduce five-yearly carbon budgets to force sectors to reduce their emissions and second, a National Energy and Climate Plan required by the EU, which must set out how emissions will be reduced up to 2030 and beyond.

The production of the Climate Action Bill and the National Energy and Climate Plan will bring additional focus to what the agri-food sector will contribute to the achievement of national targets. The sector will need to reduce its level of emissions and increase its contribution to carbon sequestration.

In January 2020, the UK and Irish governments adopted the 'New Decade New Approach' programme as the basis for a restoration of devolved government in NI following its collapse in January 2017. The programme contains the following important commitments regarding climate change:

*'The Executive will tackle climate change head on with a strategy to address the immediate and long term impacts of climate change. The Executive will introduce legislation and targets and for reducing carbon emissions in line with the Paris Climate Change Accord.'*³

In summary, there is a high degree of policy alignment and direction on climate policy, and on the important role of the agri-food sector to positively contribute to that policy, at international, European, ROI and NI level. The challenge in all cases will be to translate high level policy statements to programmes on the ground to results in terms of lower emissions and effective climate action. How these challenges might be met is at the heart of our discussion later in this article.

The state of the agri-food sector, North and South, on the eve of Brexit

European agricultural policy over the past half century provides the background to the significant structural, economic and social changes which have occurred within the Irish agri-food sector, North and South, over the period.

At a general level the trajectory of change within the agri-food sector, North and South, has been broadly similar since the 1970s. As expected in the case of growing economies over decades, agriculture's share of national GDP, employment and exports has fallen. There has been a reduction in the number of full-time commercial farms, with a smaller number of farms producing a larger share of the output. Part-time farming has increased, with off-farm income representing an increasing share of farm household income. There are broad similarities in terms of farm size and structure, and soil types. Milk and livestock (cattle and sheep) production are the dominant enterprises, with the share of tillage and horticulture declining in relative terms over time.

One area where the North and South diverged in experience was in the management of the EU milk quota. The quota was introduced in 1984 in order to reduce the increasing cost of the CAP. It imposed limits on the quantity of milk a country could produce. Milk produced in excess of the quota attracted a super-levy which rendered the additional production unprofitable.

However, countries had flexibility as to how they operated and policed their quota. The UK chose to disconnect the sale of milk quota from agricultural land. As a consequence, as the English dairy sector declined, farmers got out of milk, sold their quota and switched to other enterprises. Much of the surplus English quota was bought up by NI farms wishing to expand and restructure. This happened to such an extent that when EU milk quotas were withdrawn in 2015, NI was producing 50% more milk than when quotas were introduced in 1984. NI dairy farms became less in number but larger, with more all year round milk production and higher debt levels than their Southern counterparts.

By contrast the Irish government chose to tie milk quota to land which meant there was much less scope for quota purchase and overall flexibility. National production of milk remained in line with the EU milk quota from 1984 onwards. However, as the prospect of the milk quota's abolition in 2015 came into view, ROI farmers began to expand their production and this expansion accelerated post-2015. By the end of 2020 ROI milk production is expected to be over 50% greater than the 1984 quota. So ROI and NI have had broadly similar outcomes in terms of expanding their dairy sector between 1984 and 2020, although they got there by different routes.

The different experiences in the milk quota North and South help to explain the current integration of the dairy industry on an all-island basis. From the 1990s onwards, ROI made substantial investments in processing and value-added dairy businesses, whereas this did not happen to the same degree in NI. As milk production in NI expanded resulting from the purchase of additional quotas from England, Northern processors struggled to pay a good price

for milk. This provided the opportunity for Southern processors to purchase milk from NI, an opportunity which was substantially enhanced with the arrival of the EU Single Market in 1992. Today, NI exports some 800 million litres of milk annually to ROI, mainly for processing.

The operation of the EU Single Market has facilitated increased integration, processing and value-added in other sectors also. About 400,000 lambs are imported from NI to ROI for processing and a similar number of pigs are exported annually from ROI to NI for processing.

Over the past decade, government policies, North and South, have been similar – that their agri-food sectors should expand and do so in an increasingly sustainable way.

In ROI, the development of the agri-food sector since 2000 has been shaped by a series of five-year stakeholder-led strategies, in partnership with the Government. The current strategy is Food Wise (FW) 2025 which set out a vision focused mainly on increasing value-added rather than production growth, with ambitious targets for increasing the value of exports and the number of jobs in the sector. FW 2025 stated that, as a guiding principle, it would seek to embed at all levels of the agri-food industry that environmental protection and economic competitiveness are equal and complementary.⁴

Work is underway to produce the 2030 Agri-Food Strategy, aimed at ensuring the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the sector. A draft Strategy, alongside an Environmental Assessment of the Strategy's recommendations, were published for public consultation, after which the Strategy will be finalised.⁵

In NI, the agri-food sector was identified as a key future driver for economic growth, as referenced in the 2013 'Going for Growth' agri-food strategy which set out a vision of 'Growing a sustainable, profitable and integrated Agri-Food supply chain, focused on delivering the needs of the market.'⁶ The strategy set a number of ambitious targets for the sector in 2020 in terms of growing sales, employment and value-added. There has not been a follow-on strategy to 'Going for Growth'.

There are other similarities between the sectors, North and South, which are of relevance when examining the potential impact of Brexit. These relate to existing trade patterns for agri-food products and the high percentage of net farm income accounted for by EU direct payments. Both factors present potential vulnerabilities in the context of Brexit and a policy shift at both EU and UK level towards a greater emphasis on payment for environmental services.

On trade, the simple reality is that trade in agri-food products between the EU and UK, and between ROI and the UK, is very significant. Some selected statistics illustrate the importance of this trade.

The UK is only 61% self-sufficient in food and imports about 70% of its imports from EU 27. ROI accounts for 18% of UK food and drink exports.

For NI, Great Britain (GB) is the biggest market for the entire food and drink processing sector while the ROI is the largest export market. The rest of the EU is a significant export market for the beef and sheep meat subsectors.

For ROI, 41% of agri-food exports go to the UK, 32% to EU countries excluding the UK, and 27% to the rest of the world.

Under current arrangements, all of this trade is currently conducted on a tariff free basis and to a common EU regulatory standard. If Brexit leads to the introduction of tariffs or other impediments to trade, this will directly impact on food prices and farm incomes in both the UK including NI, and ROI. This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

We have seen how the support arrangements under CAP shifted over the years from the earlier system of price support towards income support. Since 2003, the income support scheme has been through the Single Farm Payment (SFP), now termed the Basic Farm Payment (BFP).

EU supports make a considerable contribution to aggregate net farm income in both ROI and NI, but NI has a higher dependence on EU direct payments than other regions in the UK and in ROI. Over the three years, 2016-18, direct payments ranged from 67% to 117% of net farm income. The dependence on direct payments is most pronounced on cattle, sheep and cereals farms – this applies both in ROI and NI.

The high dependence on direct payments as a proportion of net farm income means that budgetary constraints, which could apply within the CAP or in NI's devolved budget allocation for agriculture, would expose key vulnerabilities, especially for those in farming systems (cattle, sheep) most dependent on direct payments.

Brexit – a key turning point

Brexit has the potential to have major consequences for the agri-food sector in the UK and Ireland. The outworking of the following four interlocking issues will determine the consequences:

- The outcome of the negotiations on the future UK/EU relationship
- The introduction of the new UK agriculture and food policy
- The future of NI agri-food policy, influenced by the financial terms of devolved arrangements for the agriculture sector and the terms of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol to the UK/EU Withdrawal Agreement (hereafter called the Protocol).
- For ROI, the choices it will make in drawing up its CAP Strategic Plan

As the UK embarks on framing its new independent agriculture and food policy, it will develop a trade policy to enable the UK to negotiate trade agreements with different third countries. The UK government will also take responsibility for standards and regulations in agriculture and food.

Some of the new agriculture and food policy, related to on-farm supports, will be administered by the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. But policy in Northern Ireland will be different from that in Scotland and Wales by virtue of the Protocol. The terms of the Protocol mean that NI will remain aligned to a specific set of rules of the EU's Single Market, many of which relate to agriculture, while still remaining part of the UK's customs territory. What this will mean in practical terms for NI's agri-food sector is discussed below.

The outcome of the negotiations on the future UK/EU relationship

Negotiations on the terms of the future relationship between the UK and EU, to apply from 1 January 2021 when the transition period concludes, have been ongoing since early 2020.

Although progress in the negotiations is reported to be slow, the hope remains that they will conclude successfully in September or October. But the timeframe for completing a successful comprehensive agreement is now very short.

In a forthcoming paper,⁷ Lucey suggests that the future UK-EU trade deal may take place under one of the following three broad scenarios.

Scenario 1 is that a Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (CFTA) is reached and would apply from the end of the transition period. Even in the best case scenario of a CFTA involving zero tariffs and zero quota, new procedures and controls will apply at the UK-EU border.

Scenario 2 is that negotiations fail, and that UK-EU trade from the beginning of 2021 takes place under WTO rules. Full border controls between the EU and UK would be in place, to implement import tariffs and regulatory controls – except for farming and food goods produced in NI to which the regulations ensuring their free access to the UK customs union will apply. UK exports would be subject to the EU Common External Tariff which for agri-food products is high. The practical effect would be that GB exports (NI will remain under the Protocol) would be excluded from the EU Market for most agri-food products. EU exports to the UK would be subject to the UK Global Tariff (see below). This would leave the EU at a disadvantage in the GB market relative to supplies from lower cost countries including the US and Brazil.

Scenario 3 assumes that, in the event that a CFTA is not possible, an agreed compromise agreement is reached, termed here as a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA). The outcome for agri-food products under a PTA is unclear.

In May 2020, the UK government published the tariff schedule that will apply from 1 January 2021, termed the UK Global Tariff. In overall terms, it is likely that GB tariff levels on agri-food products will be lower than their equivalent EU External Tariffs, thus enabling the market to move over time to lower food prices.

Any outcome other than Scenario 1 – the CFTA – would leave ROI and NI food exporters in a worse situation than under current arrangements when there is tariff free access and regulatory alignment to the UK market. How much worse would vary by product, but beef and cheddar cheese exports would be particularly hard hit. There is a deep folk memory among Irish farmers, dating back to the Economic War in the 1930s, of tariffs applying on Irish food exports to the UK, and how this directly translates into falling prices and incomes. The hope is that what lies ahead will not revive memories from that time.

Introduction of a new UK agricultural and food policy

The Agriculture Bill 2019-2020, published in January 2020 and currently in its final parliamentary stages before being enacted, set out the new direction for UK national policy and provides the basis for future agriculture schemes. Farmers in the UK in recent years have been receiving about £3.2 billion annually from the EU's CAP (£3.4 billion when UK government funding is included). For the future, the major change is that direct payments will be based on 'public goods' produced by farmers – 'Public Money for Public Goods'. In December 2019 the Government made a commitment to provide the current annual budget to farmers every year of the term of the current parliament.

When the UK was a member of the EU and abiding by the rules of the CAP, international trade policy was an exclusive EU responsibility. From 1 January 2021, international trade policy will

be a UK central government responsibility, as will standards and regulations for agriculture and food. Other parts of the former CAP will be the responsibility of the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Future trade policy will determine both the terms of access to the UK market and the price level in that market. The UK has already commenced negotiations for new trading agreements with a number of countries including the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. This has led to political and public discussion about the possible implications of new trading arrangements for food standards and animal welfare. The issue of chlorinated chicken and hormoned beef has been a particular focus of public discussion in relation to a possible UK/US trade agreement.

Partly in response to this public debate, the government established a Trade and Agriculture Commission in July 2020, reporting to the International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss, which is due to report in six months. It has been asked to advise on trade policies, market access, protection of animal and environmental standards in food production and consumer interests.

Work on developing a National Food Strategy has been going on since 2018, under an Advisory Panel chaired by Henry Dimbleby. The Panel had planned to issue its report in March 2020, but revised its plan given the disruption caused by COVID-19. On 28 July 2020, it issued Part One of its report containing 'urgent recommendations to support the country through the turbulence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to prepare for the end of the EU exit transition period on 31 December 2020'.⁸ Part Two of the National Food Strategy will involve 'a root and branch review of the food system, the benefits it brings and the harms it does'. It will be published during 2021 and the Government has committed to publishing a White Paper six months after its publication.

Although the recommendations of Part One of the National Food Strategy are not binding on the UK government, some of its key findings seem worthy of particular note. The report notes that 'Diet-related illness is one of the top three risk factors for dying of COVID-19. This has given a new urgency to the slow-motion disaster of the British diet'.⁹ It strongly welcomes the recently published UK government's New Obesity Strategy and commits to return to the issue of dealing with obesity in Part Two of the Strategy.

The report also states 'In negotiating our new trade deals, the Government must protect the high environmental and animal welfare standards of which our country is justly proud' (p.7).

Both processes – the Trade and Agriculture Commission, and the National Food Strategy – will feed into a UK government decision on its future food strategy. This will be a highly political decision, bringing into focus different views about Britain's role in the world which were part of the Brexit referendum debate in 2016. At the heart of this will be the outcome sought in terms of the price level for food on the UK market which will be related to the degree of access granted to imports under an expanded number of trade arrangements between the UK and third countries.

Two broad options may be considered. The first is the option of low food prices, a modern day version of Britain's 'cheap food policy', which applied from the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846 well into the 20th century. This would be associated with providing widespread market access to imports through a range of trade agreements.

The second option would involve a somewhat higher average food price, a target level of self-sufficiency and more limited import access. This option would require that support

arrangements for UK producers would be adequate to enable them to deliver the targeted level of self-sufficiency. It would also be associated with minimum levels of food standards, animal welfare and environmentally sustainable production.

What the outcome of this political debate will be remains to be seen. But there are reasons to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic and the likely response to it may have changed the terms of the debate. The pandemic has caused many countries and regions to aim for a greater level of food security, more resilient food systems, increased local production and shorter supply chains, and a more circular economy. All of these factors point towards choosing the second option.

The Irish government has a definite interest in the outcome of this debate but will have no role in influencing it. NI political leaders who will have some role in influencing UK government policy will have to decide on their position. Given that NI will continue to be a substantial exporter to the GB market, both NI primary producers and its processing sector would appear to have a strong vested interest in supporting the second rather than the first option.

Future of agri-food policy in Northern Ireland

The agri-food situation in NI is defined by the terms of the Protocol and by the responsibilities devolved to the NI Executive to administer a range of services including on-farm supports. The provisions of 'New Decade New Approach' will also influence policy.

The Protocol provides a legally operative solution that avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland, protects the all-Ireland economy and the Good Friday Agreement, and safeguards the integrity of the EU Single Market. The implementation details are to be resolved by the EU-UK Withdrawal Committee Joint Committee and the Ireland/Northern Ireland Specialised Committee. The Protocol will apply from the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020 and will continue to operate in the future unless it fails to get majority support in the NI Assembly.

The Protocol has a number of important implications for NI agri-food policy. NI will remain aligned to a specific set of rules of the EU Single Market, many of which relate to agriculture. NI will be part of the UK customs territory and goods produced in NI can in future be exported to a third country under the same conditions as goods produced in other parts of the UK. But in order to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, EU customs duties will apply on goods entering NI if those goods risk entering the EU's Single Market.

Allocation of agriculture budgets between the devolved administrations is a reserved UK government function and is not part of the block grant under the devolution settlement. Heretofore, the UK received EU CAP funding, which the UK government then allocated to the devolved administrations. The amount of future funding to each part of the UK will depend on the outcome of negotiations between the UK government and the devolved administrations.

In December 2019 the UK government announced a total funding level for agriculture of almost £3 billion. NI was allocated £279 million for 2020/21. Allocations for later years will be the subject of negotiation.

This hybrid existence of the NI agri-food system being part of the EU Single Market, which has the advantage of enabling free trade within the island of Ireland, while the UK Exchequer continues to provide the funding for NI on-farm supports, has the potential to create future challenges for NI political leaders, policy makers and the industry.

The agri-food sector in ROI has the assurance that there is an agreement on the levels of CAP funding under the EU's Multiannual Financing Framework (MFF) agreement for seven years. (There will be active debate between farmer representatives and government about the adequacy of the funding, but that is a separate matter). For NI, funding for on-farm supports provided by the UK Exchequer will be provided on an annual basis – and there will also be active debate in this case about the adequacy of the funding. But these year-to-year funding arrangements must generate concern for NI political leaders about their capacity to do any longer term planning and funding for the sector.

An indicator of the range of uncertainties is captured in a briefing paper on the UK Agriculture Bill 2019-20 produced by the Research and Information Service of the NI Assembly.¹⁰ It notes that the provisions of the Bill are likely to take effect from 2021 onwards and that the government has committed to guaranteeing the current annual budget to farmers in every year of the Parliament. But it then notes the Conservative Party 2019 manifesto pledge to repeal the Fixed Term Parliament Act. This suggests that the life of the current Parliament could be less than five years which could have ramifications for farm payments beyond 2020.

The paper further notes that NI will receive £279 million for the 2020-21 period but that it remains unclear how much NI will be allocated in direct payments for farmers beyond this date. It may be that the 'New Decade New Approach' which commits to 'a multi-year Programme for Government, underpinned by a multi-year budget and legislative programme' may provide a basis to resolve this apparent dilemma.

A medium term challenge is foreseeable as the implementation of the F2F and Biodiversity Strategies commences within EU member states. From 2022 onwards, ROI CAP Strategic Plans will include programmes and associated funding to implement these schemes. This raises the question as to what capacity and funding will there be in NI to follow a similar trajectory of improving environmental standards as is likely to apply in ROI. Here also, there may be a precedent which could assist: in the past the UK government and the EU provided special funding to NI, because of its unique situation, through the Peace Programme and INTERREG. Similar creative thinking may be necessary in the future.

Future of agri-food policy in ROI

The major short-term issue facing the Irish government will be the outcome of the UK-EU negotiations on the future trading relationships between the two blocs. The Irish position on this has been consistent: it would like to see a Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement delivering trading conditions as close as possible to those that have applied when the UK was an EU member. It will seek to avoid a hard Brexit, which would have major short and long term costs to the agri-food sector.

Looking beyond this critical issue, preparing Ireland's Strategic Plan under the new CAP will be a high priority. This should incorporate ideas on how Ireland will interpret and implement the F2F and Biodiversity Strategy, which will be the subject of discussion at EU level with other Member States later in the year. It may be assumed that the Strategic Plan will also reflect the recommendations of the 2030 Agri-Food Strategy report.

Just as the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the direction of future UK agriculture and food policy (as discussed earlier), they will also probably influence the policy principles underpinning the 2030 agri-food strategy and indeed the strategies of other countries. Building resilience into food systems will play a more central role than heretofore,

linked to a more diversified sector, a greater emphasis on the circular economy and a reduction in food waste. Sustainability will be a central focus, involving a better use of natural capital. Preventing and managing systemic risks will become a crucial strategic priority, involving an ever greater emphasis on food safety and the prevention of zoonotic diseases that spread between animals and people.

Agriculture and Environment, North and South, in the post-Brexit world

We are finally ready to discuss the theme of this paper. We have seen that agriculture and the environment are at the heart of policy at EU and ROI level, and will also play a central role in the UK agriculture and food policy which will emerge in the coming years. The outcome of the Brexit talks will have a crucial bearing on the short and longer term relationships between the agri-food sectors in ROI and the UK. But whatever the outcome of the Brexit process and the consequences flowing from it, there appear to be good reasons why the agri-food sectors, North and South, should identify opportunities to collaborate in the fields of agriculture and food, nutrition and human health, and the environment.

An agreement to collaborate on these themes on an all-island basis should fit within a wider political vision.

This is a good moment to renew a political commitment to the spirit and structures of the Good Friday Agreement and the New Decade, New Approach Agreement. Such a renewal would, coincidentally, be a fitting tribute to the memory of John Hume who provided much of the vision for the Good Friday Agreement, including the critical three strands of relationships – within NI, between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and between the Irish and British governments – to both underpin it and implement it.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause great damage and no one knows when it will be over, there will come a time when a recovery programme will start. At that moment some lessons will be learned and built into how to plan for the future. One of these lessons should be on the importance of linking food, diet and health policies to plan for a healthier population. Another should be on doing this in an environmentally sustainable way. The basic approach towards the future should be ‘Build Back Better’.

A set of groundrules on how to proceed would be a good starting point. The following are suggested for discussion:

- Agree to work within the spirit and three stranded structures of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the ‘Shared Island’ concept articulated in the Programme for Government in the recently formed Government in Dublin.
- Identify areas where there is a clear mutual benefit in working together and which present no threat to anyone’s essential interests or identity.
- Think long term and connect with leading European and international thinking, particularly in the context of a post-COVID-19 recovery programme.
- Give preference to projects which involve young people and citizens in their design and implementation

On the basis of these guidelines, a first set of suggestions are offered below to kick off a conversation about future possibilities.

Soil Health Ireland

Great soil is the basis of great food. There is a vital necessity to improve the soils on the island of Ireland. The 2020 Teagasc Soil Fertility Report estimated that 21% of ROI soils are at optimum fertility.¹¹ The equivalent figure for NI, at 18 %, is slightly lower. There is scope for a commitment to work towards long term and sustained progress, North and South, on improving soil fertility. In NI, an independent working group of DAERA has produced an impressive report 'Delivering Our Future, Valuing Our Soils: A Sustainable Agricultural Land Management for Northern Ireland' which could be a good starting point.¹²

Agriculture and a Better Climate

In both ROI and NI, the agri-food sectors are already under considerable scrutiny on the issue of their contribution to national emissions targets, climate goals and a suite of wider environmental targets, such as water quality and biodiversity. They will both be under pressure to show how they are maximising their contribution to emissions reduction and increased carbon sequestration. There appears to be obvious scope for increased cooperation and joint research programmes, North and South.

A Covenant for the Health and Wellness of the peoples of Ireland and the UK

There is growing international awareness of the link between overweight/ obesity and health. Under current trends, developed and developing countries are heading towards a crisis in public health contributing, in turn, to a public finance crisis. ROI, NI and the UK each have Obesity Strategies. What lessons can be learned from the implementation of these strategies and then expanded into a set of principles aimed at promoting the health and wellness of all the peoples of Ireland and the UK? Uncomfortable issues and compromises may have to be faced: what should be the future of the Ulster Fry which supplies almost three quarters of a woman's daily recommended calories and over half of that suggested for men? But accommodation has been reached on more difficult issues in recent decades so maybe an agreed future can be found for the Ulster Fry.

Sustainable Food Island of Ireland

Bord Bia's Origin Green brand is a global leader in sustainability but it now needs to be taken to a different level. NI has also made progress in marketing its food. Over the coming decade, what scope is there for aspiring to a brand for Irish food, North and South, that meets the highest standards of sustainability, safety, quality and taste – and therefore can return the best possible price to the producer – while becoming a global leader in farming, nutritious food production, environmental and human health improvement?

Adopting any one, or all, of the above initiatives would require vision, political will, planning, perseverance, human and financial resources. But the opportunity is there. Can we start talking about it?

Notes

- ¹ European Commission, “Farm to Fork Strategy” (2020); European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Social and Economic Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030. Bringing nature back into our lives (20 May 2020).
- ² European Commission, “Reinforcing Europe’s resilience: halting biodiversity loss and building a healthy and sustainable food system” (20 May 2020).
- ³ Northern Ireland Office, “New Decade, New Approach” (2020), p.8.
- ⁴ Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, *Food Wise 2025* (2015).
- ⁵ See <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/agri-foodindustry/agri-foodandtheeconomy/agri-foodstrategyto2030/publicconsultation/> [last accessed 25/08/2020].
- ⁶ Agri-Food Strategy Board, *Going for Growth* (2013), p.11.
- ⁷ Con Lucey “UK Agriculture and Food Policy Post Brexit: An Irish Perspective”, IIEA (forthcoming).
- ⁸ National Food Strategy, <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/partone/> [last accessed 26/08/2020].
- ⁹ Henry Dimbleby, *National Food Strategy: Part One* (July 2020), p.7.
- ¹⁰ Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service, “UK Agriculture Bill 2019-20” (19 February 2020).
- ¹¹ Mark Plunkett et al, “Teagasc Soil Fertility Report 2020” (April 2020).
- ¹² Expert Working Group on Sustainable Land Management, “Delivering Our Future, Valuing Our Soils: A Sustainable Agricultural Land Management for Northern Ireland” (2016).

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