

The potential of an “Agriculture of the Middle” model in the context of EU rural development: An American solution to an Irish problem?

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Abstract

In the context of historical policies that pursue economies of scale in agriculture, and of ever-declining farm incomes among small and midsized farms, rural policies of the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (EU CAP) have demonstrated a shift from productivist commodity agriculture toward modes of economic activity that are innovative as well as environmentally and socially sustainable. One of the key policy initiatives implemented by the EU is the Liaisons Entre Actions de Developpement de l’Economie Rurale (LEADER) initiative, a governance and rural development program designed to foster a participatory approach to cultivating economically diversified, innovative local economies. Indigenous Irish farmers have been slow to engage with the LEADER program, however. Recent research points to farmers’ experiences of occupational and cultural estrangement when challenged with making

the transition from primary agricultural production activities (and the associated forms of social and cultural capital that are esteemed by farmers) toward economic activities supported by LEADER that are based on service provision and processing. In light of this research, rather than focusing on encouraging farmers to adopt alternative rural enterprises, this paper proposes that a more promising policy approach may lie in a form of organizational innovation that builds on and valorizes indigenous farmers’ existing range of agri-cultural practices. Drawing on the example of the American “Agriculture of the Middle” (AotM) movement, parallels are drawn between the policy aspirations of the EU governance and rural development model, and the economic, social and cultural aspirations of the AotM model. The organizational characteristics of how middle agriculture could be practicably operationalized in the Irish context are explored.

Keywords

agriculture of the middle, European Union, farmers, food value chain, governance, innovation, Ireland, rural development, value-added

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Introduction

The problem of poor economic farm viability is a longstanding issue in the European Union (EU) and is associated with forms of social and cultural decline in agricultural regions. In rural Ireland and across rural areas of the EU, a number of socio-economic problems were reported as having reached crisis proportions in the late 1980s (see Kearney, Boyle and Walsh, 1994). An alternative policy framework to development models emphasizing large-scale agricultural production was instigated to respond to the failure of such policies to deliver economic and social prosperity (CEC, 1988). Alongside policies that pursue economies of scale in agriculture, a post-productivist agenda in EU rural development policy has accelerated since the late 1980s, a trajectory that is set to continue. Contemporary policies demonstrate an increased focus on value-added products and innovation in rural economies. Governance and rural development programs, such as the EC LEADER Program,¹ have been in place since the early 1990s to assist diversification of rural economies. The governance and rural development approach is designed to foster a participatory democratic process at the local level, which allows the input of local people in designing and implementing development strategies that are appropriate for local conditions (Ray, 2000). Over the past two decades, three main forms of activities are noted to have emerged at the core of programs such as LEADER: culturally oriented tourism products and services; differentiated and artisan food production; and alternative uses of agricultural resources for energy generation and recreational pursuits (CORASON, 2009). These types of economic activity are intrinsically different from conventional agricultural production, in that they depend on service provision, value-added production through design and novelty, and manufacturing and processing.

Poor participation by farmers in contemporary rural development schemes has been noted in Ireland (Conway, 1991; Macken-Walsh, 2009a;

Teagasc, 2005), as well as elsewhere in the EU (Esposito-Fava & Lajarge, 2009; Osti, 2000; Van der Ploeg, 2003). The estrangement of farmers from contemporary rural development programs is partly explained on the one hand by their attachment to those forms of social and cultural capital closely associated with agricultural production; and, on the other hand, by conventional farmers' lack of occupational preferences for income-generating activities such as service provision and processing. However, a movement originating in America, the Agriculture of the Middle movement, may offer a suitable institutional vehicle for addressing some of these issues. The movement is characterized by a discourse that, similar to governance and rural development discourses in the EU, emphasizes principles of popular participation and local ownership of economic development. Furthermore, the movement focuses on supporting farmers in adding value to their production, and in so doing attempts to address the problem of poor economic viability among small and midsized farms.

This paper gives an overview of the agricultural context in Ireland, focusing on current farm viability and some of the main "barriers" to engagement by farm families in contemporary EU rural development programs. Against this backdrop, the paper goes on to discuss the potential of the AotM model and draws key comparisons between AotM and the EU governance and rural development model. Two key areas of confluence between the AotM and the EU governance and rural development models are examined: the type of diversified and innovative products associated with the models, and the type of participatory democratic processes fostered by the models.

Farm Viability in Ireland

Data from Ireland's annual National Farm Survey (NFS) show that the overall number of farms in Ireland is on the decrease, from 163,000 farms in 1993 to 113,200 farms in 2006 (Connolly, 2009).² The ratio of economically unviable to viable farms is remaining more or less constant. An economically viable farm is defined as having the

¹ Liaisons Entre Actions de Developpement de l'Economie Rurale (LEADER)

² The average size of farms, however, is increasing.

capacity (a) to remunerate family labor at the average agricultural wage, and (b) to provide an additional 5% return on non-land assets (Frawley & Commins, 1996, cited in O'Brien & Hennessy, 2008, p. 17). Using such criteria, approximately a quarter of farm enterprises in 2008 were classified as economically viable (T. Hennessy, personal communication, 2010). It is noted that approximately 40,000 additional farms (32%) that were economically unviable in 2008 can be classified as "sustainable" because of the presence of off-farm income. Hennessy (personal communication, 2010) classifies 25% of farms as economically vulnerable, and suggests that these farms are economically unviable and lack adequate off-farm income. In 2008, an Irish study of the contribution of off-farm income to farm households found that income diversification is a "key factor to stabilizing incomes in Irish rural areas" (Keeney & O'Brien, 2008, p. 133). A high proportion of economically unviable farms are dependent on off-farm income; in 2008 it was determined that 70% of farm households would be in an economically vulnerable position without it (O'Brien & Hennessy, 2008). Meredith, Dillon, and Behan (2009) note that off-farm employment declined by 30.2% between the second quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2009, and that a decline in construction-related employment accounts for 52% of the overall reduction in off-farm employment. The construction sector has virtually collapsed in Ireland and is unlikely to recover to previous levels of activity.

Policy Actions to Improve Farm Viability

The continuing and future decline in numbers of those engaged in agriculture is acknowledged to be a problem at the EU level, not only from an economic perspective but also in considering associated consequences, such as land abandonment, land degradation, and the loss of rural services and infrastructures (CEC, 1988). Agriculture is noted to have benefits that extend beyond farmer enterprises' economic performance. For example, the maintenance of landscapes through active agriculture is noted to be a positive determinant in public preferences for recreational landscapes (Howley, Hynes, & O'Donoghue, 2009). From a social perspective, problems

associated with the decline of farm numbers on what in EC terms is called the "rural social fabric," is referred to in the EC's *Future of Rural Society* document (CEC, 1988). Networks of family farms are acknowledged in this document to be a crucial component of rural societies across the EU.

There has been an increase in EC policy attention and commitment to the noncommodity-oriented aspects of agriculture, such as protecting the environment through custodianship and stewardship, as well as the need to cultivate diverse high value-added enterprises outside of conventional agriculture. The contemporary EU rural development agenda is oriented around three major paradigmatic shifts. The first arises from a context in which there has been official recognition of the environmentally, socially and economically damaging effects of policy interventions supporting industrial scale agriculture alone (see CEC, 1988; Kearney, Boyle, & Walsh, 1995; Gray, 2000). The second paradigmatic shift is less specific to rural areas and concerns consequences of globalization, involving not only external pressures to compete by developing appropriate products to cater to increasingly homogenized world markets, but pressures for localities to indigenize and differentiate their economies for higher value-added: "globalisation not only pulls upwards, it pushes downwards, creating new pressures for local autonomy" (Giddens, 2003, p. 13). The third paradigmatic shift represents a transition from "top-down" sectoral models of development to "bottom-up" participatory governance models, in which the design and implementation of development action is handed over to local development stakeholders. From these three broad paradigmatic shifts, new objectives for rural development have emerged in line with a "postproductivist," "culture economy," and "governance-based" approach.

Farmers' Engagement in Contemporary Rural Development

Various schemes have been implemented in line with the contemporary EU rural development agenda, some more successful than others. Irish farmers have readily engaged with agri-environmental schemes: in 2007, over 59,000 Irish farms

were participating in the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS).^{3,4} In comparison to agri-environmental schemes,⁵ however, there has been weaker engagement on the part of Irish farm families with governance and rural development programs such as the EC LEADER program.⁶ Although the design of the LEADER rural development program was inspired by problems in the agricultural economy, it has been noted since the first LEADER program that farmers are more reluctant than other social and professional groups to engage with the program, both in Ireland (Conway, 1991; Macken-Walsh, 2009a; Teagasc, 2005) and elsewhere in the EU (Esposito-Fava & Lajarge, 2009; Osti, 2000; Van der Ploeg, 2003).⁷ As the farming community is a major social group in most EU rural areas, poor engagement by farmers poses a conundrum for the LEADER program, which is explicitly intended to provide a democratic participatory forum for rural social groups in designing and implementing local development actions.

Some sociological studies have illuminated how changes in agriculture and rural development policy have differentially enfranchised and disenfranchised various social groups. In the establishment and operation of locally led developments there is a risk that only a limited number of local inhabitants will get involved, confining participation to “a very small number of enthusiastic members” (Breathnach, 1984, p. 6). Mannion (1996), for

example, points to the danger of local development ending up in the hands of a few.⁸ Similarly, Varley (1991) notes that local community-based development movements “tend to be dominated by a small group of enthusiasts, adept at assembling the illusion of consensus that allows the interests of some to masquerade the interests of all” (p. 236). Kovach and Kucerová (2006) detect the rise of a “project class” that is particularly well suited to new rural development opportunities in Central and Eastern Europe. From another perspective, Osti (2000) claims in his study of the governance and rural development processes underpinning LEADER in Italy that farmers’ organizations are “bewildered by the disappearance of their traditional, privileged channels of influence” (p. 176).

Contemporary rural development policy is sometimes perceived as having “soft” and somewhat intangible goals, in part because of its governance-based approach. The governance and rural development model is committed to a distinctive development approach, centered on a “facilitation,” “animation,” and “mobilization” methodology that is purposefully nonprescriptive. EU governance and rural development programs, such as LEADER, generally do not involve the implementation of any predefined nonproprietary program or measure, and instead involve a proprietary innovation on the part of an individual or group. Contemporary rural development programs depend on proactive engagement by rural inhabitants to become involved in capacity-building processes and/or to seek practical and financial support for establishing rural enterprises.

For family farms across the EU, the governance and rural development model represents a break in tradition from the EC CAP in terms of ethos, process, and development rules (Macken-Walsh, 2009a). Traditionally, the trajectory of CAP regimes and measures has contributed to a gradual loss of farm families’ autonomy in decision-making

³ The scheme has been replaced by another one since 2010.

⁴ See Lenihan and Brasier (2009) for an analysis of the participatory deficits of how schemes such as the REPS are operationalized in the Irish context.

⁵ A criticism of agri-environmental schemes in the EU context has been that they have been regarded merely as income-support schemes for farm families, rather than as instrumental for market value-adding or for sustainable change in farming practices.

⁶ This program is funded partly by the Irish Exchequer; its funding has increased almost ten-fold since the program’s inception in 1991, to €425m for the period of the current EC CAP programming period (2007–2013).

⁷ At the EC Rural Development Conference in Salzburg in 2003, Van der Ploeg (2003) noted that “the role of farmers is relatively modest if not marginal, not in all, but in many LEADER projects” (p. 2).

⁸ There is a debate in the literature concerning the legitimacy of nonelected actors and nongovernmental organizations playing a significant role in governance at local and international (European) levels (Goodwin, 1998, p. 8).

relating to management and production activities. It is arguable that to some extent a culture of dependency has been created by such policy regimes, and by supporting extension measures in which science-based farm management and production systems are developed independently from and then prescribed to farmers. As a result, it may be the case that over time many farmers have become unaccustomed to creating products or services, or making independent decisions in dealing directly with the market (Heanue & Macken-Walsh, in press). Furthermore, the poor economic viability of many family farms may contribute to a general reluctance toward entrepreneurship, which inevitably requires capital, investment, and risk. Farmers are cognizant of their economically precarious circumstances and can experience disillusionment in light of the changing policy and market circumstances governing the viability of their farms (Macken-Walsh, 2009a). In turn, feelings of disillusionment and hopelessness may hamper innovative, self-led rural entrepreneurship.

Undertaking economic activities in line with the contemporary EU rural development agenda (i.e., culturally oriented tourism products and services, differentiated and artisan food production, and alternative use of agricultural resources for energy generation and recreational pursuits) can raise professional capacity issues as well as issues with social and cultural identity for farmers. Projects and enterprises eligible for LEADER funding are, by definition and according to the program's rules, outside conventional agriculture and fishing activities. Farmers engaged in conventional agricultural production generally are not expert in activities such as energy production, food processing, marketing, or tourism operation. More fundamentally, farmers may have little inclination or preference toward acquiring new skills in service-based activities (Macken-Walsh, 2009a). Qualitative studies have discussed how farmers' occupational identities and associated forms of social and cultural capital are firmly entrenched in farming and agricultural production activities (Burton, 2004a; Burton, 2004b; Burton, Kuczera, & Schwarz, 2008;

Macken-Walsh, 2009a). Farmers have been found in case-study analyses to attach more prestige (cultural capital) to conventional production activities, and less to other forms of professional activity (see, for example, Macken-Walsh, 2009a).

In the nearly 20 years since the initial implementation of the LEADER program in 1992, conventional indigenous farmers have not emerged as leaders of the Irish high value-added artisan foods industry. This industry tends to be led and defined more by cosmopolitan European consumer trends rather than by indigenous tradition (Dilley, 2009; Macken-Walsh, 2010). A study of Irish farmers' markets, one of the more obvious venues for the sale of locally produced, high value-added food products, found that 17% of the products or ingredients were sourced outside of Ireland (Griffin, 2009). One of the common observations in sociological research on "alternative" food movements in Ireland — such as farmers' markets, local food markets, and organic and artisan food production — is that the individuals who tend to engage in such activities often come from a "surprising diversity of backgrounds" outside indigenous agriculture (Moore, 2003; Tovey, 2006; Tovey & Mooney, 2006; Macken-Walsh, 2009a). Similarly, in the case of organic production, it has been noted that the pioneers have been non-indigenous "waves of incomers" (Tovey, 2006, p. 175). Furthermore, Läßle's (2010) quantitative study of a representative sample of organic farmers in Ireland shows that existing farmers are less likely than other occupational and socio-economic groups to become involved in organic farming. The marginalized status of indigenous farmers in the high value-added and artisan foods industry poses problems not only for farmers who are challenged with increasing their profit margin in order to remain viable, but also for the authenticity of claims made to consumers regarding local food culture and food origin. The high food miles associated with differentiated and organic food products is gaining increased consumer scrutiny in a culture that is more environmentally, culturally, and socially aware.

Agriculture of the Middle (AotM)

The AotM movement,⁹ as well as seeking to improve the economic standing of family farms, also has explicit social objectives that closely resonate with contemporary EU governance and rural development policy. Kirschenmann & Stevenson, pioneers of the AotM movement, make the following argument in summation of the economic, public-goods, and social motivations behind supporting an “agriculture of the middle”:

This is not just about “saving” the family farm. It is about the social, economic, and environmental costs to American society. With the loss of each family farm, a rural community loses approximately [US]\$720,000 in related economic activity. Ecologists now affirm that the only way we can manage farmland in an ecologically sound manner is by having the farmer living on his/her land long enough and intimately enough to have learned how to manage it properly. With the loss of ecological land health we see the loss of soil quality, wildlife, and recreational areas. And with the loss of rural populations, the loss of public services — education, health-care, transportation — inevitably follow. (Kirschenmann & Stevenson, 2004, notes for slide 5)

The genesis of the declining numbers of family farms has been linked to a conundrum of bifurcated markets. The white paper on middle agriculture discusses how the U.S. food system has “increasingly followed two new structural paths”: the path of artisan food production and direct selling, and the path of mass-producing agricultural commodities (Kirschenmann, Stevenson, Buttel, Lyson, & Duffy, 2005, p. 1). The problem that arises from this bifurcation is the loss of what the white paper calls “middle agriculture,” evident from the rapid decline in the number of economically unviable farms that are midsized.¹⁰ As the

white paper discusses, the problem of the declining midsized farm is a market-structure phenomenon rather than strictly a scale-phenomenon. While the problem is “not scale-determined, it is scale-related. That is, farms of any size may be part of the market that [at any given time] falls between the vertically integrated, commodity markets and the direct specialty markets” (p. 1). The white paper states furthermore that “the mid-sized farms are [always] the most vulnerable in today’s polarized markets, since they are too small to compete in the highly consolidated commodity markets and too conventional and commoditized to sell in the direct specialty markets” (p. 1).

Kirschenmann (2008), in his work on AotM, cites two ways to be competitive in a global economy:

1. being the lowest cost supplier of an undifferentiated commodity [price], or
2. providing the market with a unique and superior value in terms of product quality, special features or after-sales service (differentiation). (Kirschenmann, 2008, p. 12)

Kirschenmann cites Porter’s *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* (1990): while not impossible, it is difficult for the same firm to pursue both routes towards competitiveness. The first route toward competitiveness is being pursued with some success by some farms in Ireland, but it is not succeeding in sustaining the viability of the larger number of farms. The second route — providing the market with a unique and superior value in terms of product quality and special features — is advocated in the context of AotM, and may hold potential for Irish small and midsized farms that are finding it difficult to pursue economies of scale.

The AotM literature details the process of building up and attaching a “food story” to the product; that is, incorporating the forms of social, cultural, and ecological capital that are identified as core to the branding strategies of contemporary rural

⁹ See <http://www.agofthemiddle.org>

¹⁰ In a European context, size can be defined by a range of configurations, including the number of hectares, animals,

Economic Size Units (ESU), or Standard Gross Margins (SGM).

development products. Agri-food, agri-energy, and agri-leisure branding predominantly utilizes scenic countryside imagery, typically incorporating an image of a small farmhouse and cultivated terrain. Generally, marketing imagery for selling environmental and natural goods features such rural scenes, and Ireland's image internationally represents very much a quintessential, perhaps fetishised, rural image (see Van Auken, 2010). The Irish potential for such products, both domestically and internationally, is considerable, as discussed by Bell and Shelman (2010). As hitherto noted, conventional farmers may be disinclined towards food processing and service-based activities. Differentiated food does not mean processed food, however, and following the example of the strategy employed by AotM, there is vast potential for adding branding to Irish primary products which have a place-based regional distinctiveness. Irish food historian Regina Sexton recognizes a plethora of primary food products that are authentically rooted in Irish food culture, and identifies a typology of livestock and horticultural breeds indigenous to Ireland (Cowen & Sexton, 1997; Sexton, 1998).

Arguably, Irish farmers are already producing many foods with cultural and environmental distinctiveness, but the remaining challenge is for the application of branding and marketing to enter high value-added markets. High environmental quality and farm systems features, such as grass-fed beef, put Irish products in a potentially very strong marketing position (Bell & Shelman, 2010). Recent EC policy developments emphasize the importance of environmental public goods produced by agriculture and the need to maximize livestock access to pasture (Boyle et al., 2008; Cooper, Hart, & Boldock, 2009). Ireland's farms have a favorable compliance rate with EC legislation with regard to food production standards. The large proportion of farmers who participated in the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS) is also an indication of Irish farmers' conduciveness to the production of food that has the branding stamp of "sustainability." The value of REPS and of the linkage between ecologically conducive farms and a wide variety of other public goods, however,

remains to be built into the branding food story and the added value of the farm food product (Dunne, O'Connell, Shanahan, Drennan, & Keane, 2009). The beef grading grid system in place at Irish meat processing plants since January 2010 rewards farmers for meat yield, but a system to reward the ecological, social, and cultural benefits of farming beef (outside of organic products) remains lacking.

Operationalizing AotM: A Governance Approach
While "middle" farmers in the United States are considered as having too much output to be conducive to small-scale artisan marketing, the Irish case would suggest that the obstacle to market viability hampering many Irish "middle" farms may not be excessive output, compared to farms internationally, but output that is undifferentiated in the marketplace and the absence of occupational skills — and, perhaps more fundamentally, occupational preferences — that prevent many conventional farms from entering artisan production and trade. The AotM movement presents a potential solution, as it seeks to join together strategically the practices and resources of small and midsized farms with the necessary professional and cosmopolitan industry skills to market, brand, package, and distribute their products. In so doing, the product is intended to move up the value chain and result in a more sustainable profit for the producers. Kirschenmann (2008) argues that in order for farmers to become economically successful "they need to become part (owners) of a functional value chain structure which connects them to the markets, and organized into marketing networks to reduce transaction costs." In this regard, the AotM movement emphasizes the need not only for farm families to move up the value chain, but also to take ownership of a greater proportion of the value chain. This is consistent with the governance aspect of contemporary rural development policy. Farmers' ownership of the product, however, is also an intrinsic element of the marketing strategy of AotM, because consumers prefer assurances of an authentic connection between the product and the producer.

Advocates of AotM advocate a cooperative approach to achieving the aspirations of the AotM

movement. In the context of AotM, many aspects of how cooperatives are formed and operate are comparable to aspirations of the EU governance and rural development model. Cooperatives are simply defined as “user-owned and controlled businesses from which the benefits are derived and distributed on the basis of use” (Dunn, 1988, p. 85, cited by Gray & Stevenson, 2008, p. 37). However, over time cooperatives have shifted their emphasis from profit accumulation towards governance. The evolution of the cooperative movement is aptly summed up as follows:

Historically, many agricultural cooperatives were organized to oppose monopoly investment firms on the local, regional and national levels...It needs to be noted, however, that these older cooperative associations were formed in an era when mobilizations were organized predominantly for power and getting a fair share. Many are rooted in the first half of the twentieth century when words like “ecology” and “sustainability” were barely in the language. [As mentioned], collective mobilizations and “new social movements” within the socio-economic culture of high modernity tend more often to be grounded in concerns of identity, safety, a sense of permanence, and a broader democratization of or opposition to unaccountable power. (Gray & Stevenson, 2008, p. 39)

Values surrounding identity, safety and security, permanence, and democratization are central to the motivations underpinning the formation of contemporary cooperatives. Such cooperatives clearly adhere to principles of governance, yet it is also explicit in

the approach of AotM that such principles are instrumental for marketing and branding activities that rely on the existence of an authentic relationship between the producer and the product. AotM cooperatives, following the value-added noncommodity route, cater to a clientele that is strongly influenced by matters of authentic food origin.

Furthermore, issues of environmental and social sustainability feature prominently in the identity and ethos of many such nouveau cooperatives. It is also so that efforts to safeguard environmental and socio-economic sustainability complements the rhetoric of the governance-based approach.

Cooperatives have a long history in Ireland, particularly in the agriculture sector.¹¹ Many agricultural cooperatives are very large, selling undifferentiated commodities and challenged to achieve even greater membership growth to remain competitive. There is evidence to suggest, however, that Irish cooperatives may function more efficiently and remain more democratic when they are smaller in size (Briscoe & Ward, 2006). In this regard, the federated cooperative structure that is advocated in the context of AotM may be suitable in the Irish context.

The federated cooperative structure joins together and represents the interests of individual small cooperatives, which remain autonomous under the umbrella of the federated cooperative. The small local cooperatives co-own the federated cooperative, which provides coordinated services and facilities such as processing and packaging to the member cooperatives with the primary aim of improving their positioning and bargaining power in the market. The local cooperatives remain distinguishable from each other in regards to their product and local production arrangements, although the federation can engage in quality control by allocating a seal of approval to its member cooperatives.

As discussed by Gray and Stevenson (2008, p. 49), the following summarizes the main activities of a federated cooperative:

- Professional broad-scale marketing and advertising;
- Regional and/or national coordination of activities and flows of product;

¹¹ Informally, farming communities have worked together for generations; the Irish term *meitheal* refers to the unique systems of reciprocity and cooperation in Irish agriculture.

- Research, education, and other professional supports; and
- A third-party certification methodology bringing consistency and guarantees.

In the contemporary rural economy, there are other formalized mechanisms for family members and neighbors to work together. Formalized farm partnerships between spouses, siblings, parents and offspring, and local business partners are possible mechanisms to support entrepreneurship arising from pooled skills, resources, and occupational preferences (Macken-Walsh, 2009b; Roche, 2009). Within contemporary farming communities, there are many individuals with diverse traditional and contemporary skills (Crowley, Walsh, & Meredith, 2008), and joint ventures¹² hold potential to bring the necessary skill components together to establish differentiated rural enterprises.

Conclusion

Economic viability is a problem for a significant number of farm enterprises in Ireland that have little success in pursuing economies of scale. Policies have emerged at the EU level designed to offer alternatives to mainstream industrial agriculture in the rural economy and to compensate farmers for producing environmentally sustainable goods. While farm families have readily engaged with some contemporary rural development support schemes, such as environmental protection schemes, they have tended not to engage *en masse* with other rural development programs, such as LEADER. Farmers' occupational identities are strongly rooted in agriculture, and most farmers are not experts in the service-based processing and marketing activities that are conventionally funded by LEADER. Lack of skills and, more fundamentally, lack of occupational preferences for service-based processing and marketing activities can impede farmers' engagement with supports such as LEADER.

¹² Joint ventures fostered by the legal arrangements adjusted to the Irish legal structure have been developed by Teagasc and include Share Farming and Farm Partnerships.

Developing aspects of high modern food culture (Gray, 2000) presents new opportunities for small and medium-sized indigenous producers. Consumer preferences, in the context of growing scrutiny of the high food miles associated with imported organic and artisan food products, are increasingly inclining toward more local, high quality, and sustainably produced food products. Branding resources such as high farmer participation rates in agri-environmental schemes and the large proportion of relatively small and midsized farms, give Ireland a valuable market opportunity. What is required to valorize the products and practices of such producers is a form of organizational innovation that focuses on "creative combinations" of cross-sectional industry strengths (Heanue & Macken-Walsh, in press).

AotM addresses some of the key problems relating to the viability of Irish farms and also the objectives of contemporary EU rural development policy. There are two main areas of confluence between the governance and rural development model and AotM: the product fostered by the models is a high value-added, noncommodity product that is characterized by responsiveness to high modern consumer trends; and the development process fostered by the models subscribes to a distinctive democratic approach based on principles of social justice. As a model that is specific to farmers and their products, however, AotM may hold greater potential to engage farmers who are failing to engage with EU governance and rural development programs.

AotM promotes a federated cooperative structure for valorizing family farm products with the goal of improving farm viability. The model is designed to facilitate farmers' moving up the value chain and, most crucially, taking ownership of a greater proportion of the value chain. In adding value to primary agricultural products — by developing a regional product brand, for example — the AotM model responds to some of the key objectives of EU rural development policy. It represents an institutional innovation whereby cosmopolitan industry services are contracted or employed by the federation to provide the necessary service-

oriented, processing, branding, marketing, and other industry expertise to add value to farmers' produce. The federated cooperative, constituted through a diversity of small cooperatives is, by definition, farmer-owned and farmer-operated. As such, it is compatible with the democratic principles espoused by the EU governance and rural development model.

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Note: Teagasc is the Agriculture and Food Development Authority of Ireland.

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