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Editorial

Rural Futures and the Future of the Rural

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1. Introduction

To talk of rural and the future in the same sentence was described by Shucksmith [1] as being 'something of an oxymoron' (p. 163). Indeed, the rural has often been thought of and deliberated on in terms of its identifying with the past, fundamental to narratives around heritage, tradition, conservatism, perceptions of the rural idyll and a place in need of modernisation [2,3]. Currently, the rural is also at its most transformative period in our history. Centrally positioned in terms of its role in food production, energy security and most critically, confronting climate change, the rural finds itself portrayed as 'the fabric of our society . . . the heartbeat of our economy . . . a core part of our identity and our economic potential' [4]. While such sentiments are laudable, the rural also represents an amalgam of contradictions with some areas thriving and expanding, while others decline and become increasingly marginalised.

Accordingly, the ways in which rural areas engage with global challenges are multi-layered and numerous. Climate change and protecting biodiversity, for example, must be connected with and operationised at local levels as they have 'profound implications for the future use and regulation of rural space' (p. 28, [5]). Functioning within this space, the rural must also be cognisant of the diversity of rural stakeholders, objectives and key drivers such as urbanisation, globalisation, political and ideological pressures, and changing commodification practices that make up the countryside. These have a key impact on the future of rural places [6] and the ways in which 'conflicting and competing priorities around landscape protection and economic development' (p. 642, [7]) are dealt with.

The rural is also key to discussions on sustainability. The considerations here are often displayed through multitude rural policy programmes like those of the US and their sometimes 'fragmented and incoherent' [8] offerings, or the more reactive and often economically driven policies of Europe. One recent offering is the 'Long-term vision for Rural Areas' that espouses the need for stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas [4] throughout the European Union. What is less vocalized, however, is that the rural in Europe and elsewhere must be viewed against backdrops of ageing farming populations, limited land mobility, depopulation (particularly of rural youth), reduction in employment opportunities, disillusionment among young farmers in terms of future livelihoods, and a steady decline of the farm family. How to address these challenges into the future is considerable. The diversity of rural landscapes, traditions and cultures demands that any vision for rural sustainability must be able to 'incorporate people, practices, economies and environments that do not easily fit into the existing policy models and development visions' (p. 104, [9]). This will necessitate the need to strike some form of viable balance [10], whereby environment and economic goals are not mutually exclusive and where 'exploitative activities give way to an understanding of the complex ecosystems of which human economy and habitation are crucial parts' (p. 642, [7]).

Thus, when it comes to thinking about rural futures, complexities, contradictions and conflicts are many. Nevertheless, an ability to adapt, to strategize, to overcome unexpected obstacles and to build sustainable and resilient systems is a challenge and necessity that rural people and places frequently embrace. In this Special Issue collection, some of the

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ways in which this plays out on the ground are explored. Concerns around poverty, land use change and sustainability, rural regeneration, young rural dwellers, family farms, innovation and farm viability are delved into to provide insights and potential pathways which undoubtedly will be of use for future rural planning and future rural sustainability.

2. This Collection

The articles that make up this Special Issue negotiate a broad spectrum of questions and traverse an extensive geographical area. Authors from Canada, Spain, Scotland, Ireland, Mozambique, Hungary, Chile, Northern Ireland, Czech Republic and Slovakia bring interesting and thought-provoking commentaries in terms of both expertise and case studies.

The first article by Eldridge et al. (Contribution 1) delves into perspectives on the poverty trap and smallholder farmers in Tanzania. The essential question here is how smallholder farmers, essential in terms of food production and addressing poverty, remain 'trapped in a vicious cycle of endemic poverty' (p. 1). Focusing on the Meru district of Tanzania, the authors use the small-holder agro-input supply chain as their unit of analysis, allowing them to depict the complex and interconnected nature of smallholder farmers alongside insights into how and why the poverty trap both exists and persists. The key message is that primarily it must be acknowledged that smallholder farmers are crucial actors in global food production, and secondly, that in order for them to continue contributing in the way they do, it is necessary to develop 'sustainable livelihoods . . . through reducing their susceptibility to the dynamics associated with poverty traps' (p. 29). It is only in addressing constraints around infrastructure, resources such as inputs, credit and information, and government policies and regulations, that such change might be realised.

The complex relationship between human well-being and land use change in Mozambique is the focus of the second paper in this collection. Here, Zorrilla-Miras et al. (Contribution 2) use a multi-scale participatory scenario planning process to explore pathways for agricultural, economic and social development, and their implications for changes in land use and land cover (LULC), ecosystems services and society well-being. The results that emerge from this scenario building exercise undoubtedly produce options for decision-makers in Mozambique, as well as providing a 'richer understanding and gains in context-specific knowledge on LULC and ecosystem services for human well-being (particularly) in areas with populations of vulnerable small-scale farms' (p. 20).

Young rural inhabitants is the theme of the third paper. Drawing from experiences in Chile, Rodriguez et al. (Contribution 3) explore place attachment and the threat to rural livelihoods and sustainability that exists from an exodus of young people to urban areas. While many studies focus on the forces that encourage young people to leave rural areas, such as education and employment, this paper identifies the opportunities that rural places offer. In particular, the authors advocate the need for local policy initiatives to realise the strengths of living in rural areas. They highlight those components that are important to young rural dwellers, such as a connection to nature, social constituents of living in the countryside, a sense of belonging and the importance of community. The paper contributes to our understanding of how these social relations, and relationships with the natural environment, play an important role in young people's appreciation and attachment to place, and how it influences where they want to live.

Kovach et al. (Contribution 4) in the fourth contribution explore what they call the 'unstoppable process', that is, the ageing farm workforce and the implications this has for a reduction in agricultural activity and consequent impacts on the landscape of the European countryside. Presented here is a fascinating insight into the complexity of challenges that young farmers, successors and new entrants into farming face. These include dealing with issues of education, access to land and family traditions, all of which ultimately influence future sustainability practices. In focusing on these, the paper opens up interesting discussions on the reasons that young people engage in farming alongside their ideas around sustainability and what that means in the context of their farming practice.

Attachment to land, a particular way of life, and the part played by working outside and with nature, were the typical responses elucidated by the young Hungarian farmers. Rather interestingly, what also emerged was their views on sustainability and what that meant in the context of their farming practice. The discussion here indicates that as well as having an environmental protection aspect, sustainability was very often couched in the economics of farming in that environmental schemes were engaged with, or in some way justified, only if it lead to either sparing money in terms of input materials or was useful in helping to access subsidies from Europe. The authors conclude that while nature conservation and environmental protection were important, there was a growing space for discussion around the need to 'strengthen the emergence of sustainability practices' (p. 12).

Holloway et al. (Contribution 5) in their contribution address one of the more sensitive aspects of future rural sustainability, namely that of how farms are passed on to the next generation. Exploring the emotional aspects of retirement and the succession decision-making process, the authors take us beyond the oft-used economic arguments to one that explores the emotional aspects that influence such decisions. What emerges from their innovative 'walk and talk' methodology is the complex relationship and emotional attachment farmers have to their farms, as well as the lack of appreciation and/or understanding policy makers have for such attachment. A greater understanding of emotional aspects, alongside that of a sense of place belonging, is identified as being crucial in the broader farm decision-making process, and particularly in the relationship between farmer and successor.

The sixth paper in this collection by Conway et al. (Contribution 6) continues with this theme by exploring ways in which the older farmer could be supported and reassured 'that their sense of purpose and legitimate social connectedness within the farming community will not be jeopardised upon handing over the farm business to the next generation' (p. 1). The need to overcome the typical succession processes of the past which is described as 'effectively obstruct(ing) the transfer of farmland from one generation to the next' can perhaps be tempered by addressing the needs of the older farmer more carefully. This, the authors argue, particularly relates to self-worth, farmer identity and quality of life. What emerges from this research is an interesting call for the development of a social organisation specifically for older farmers that would ensure a connection with their past farming lives remains in place. Such an organisation would undoubtedly impact the quality of life of those most impacted by successional change, and ultimately would help 'transform farming into an age-friendly sector of society' (p. 8).

Farrell et al. (Contribution 7) also use the family farm as the backdrop to their paper. Here, the focus is on options that may help ensure both viability and longer term sustainability. Recognising the role that the family farm plays in the broader social and cultural traditions of Europe, the attention here centres on exploring innovative practices that could play a role in encouraging younger farmers to become involved in farming, but which would also be important in terms of climate change, environmental protection, farm viability and ultimately long-term sustainability. The case study evidence is drawn from a group of Irish farmers engaged in the Maximising Organic Production System (MOPS) EIP-AGRI project. The subsequent empirical evidence gathered from interviews and focus groups suggest that not only would the uptake of diversified practices such as organics 'improve farm viability, but (it) would also encourage the next generation of young farmers to commit to the family farm and consider farming long-term'. (p. 1). The paper concludes with the assertion that opportunities presented by organic farming can be important in securing farm viability, and even more so can 'act as a catalyst in attracting new entrants to the agricultural sector' (p. 11).

In McDonagh's paper (Contribution 8), the discussion moves from the previous emotional arena whereby farmers who retire often find themselves on the outside looking in (Contribution 6), and the issue of farm viability and the pursuit of innovative practices towards sustainability (Contribution 7), to an arena drawing from both but which is often mired by contested and often conflictual engagements. Here, the discussion is built around

farmers who, looking to enhance their farm's viability, often find themselves on the outside, not by virtue of retirement but by virtue of the top-down policies enacted on their lands under the banner of sustainable practices and environmental management. In this paper, the ways in which environmental objectives can be addressed alongside a farmers' ability to farm are the main considerations. The premise of the paper is that a top-down policy driven approach will not be successful, and what is required is an inclusive and farmer endorsed one. In particular, the argument is made that a combination of top-down and bottom-up with that of a locally-led vision can yield better environmental outcomes and more engaged farming practices. The 'key ingredients' that emerge from the research include the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement and a prominent role for farmers in the decision-making process. In all, the best path is a combination of action-based, results-based and locally-led programmes alongside the integrating of local and scientific knowledge in pursuit of the best environmental outcomes.

In the final paper of this collection, Vaishar et al. (Contribution 9) bring the discussion to Eastern Europe and the Moravian–Slovak borderland. In this paper, the possibilities for rural development in the context of the changing geopolitical positioning of the rural region of Eastern Moravia are explored. The paper considers the challenges posed for this region as it emerges from being marginal and agricultural to industrial, to its (re)positioning on the margins of the eastern border of Czechia. The 'movement' of borders and how issues such as migration and other indicators of mobility such as the construction of new dwellings provide insight to how this region is evolving. What emerges from the research is that East Moravia is on the threshold of change from manufacturing to a region of shared services with great opportunities for the rural, particularly in the context of cultural tourism development.

Collectively, the papers in this Special Issue make an interesting contribution to our understanding of the challenges facing rural areas across Europe and beyond. What is clear is the need to embrace the diversity that rural areas present, and allow this diversity to be reflected in policy discourse and practical application. The bringing together of farmer, policy maker and rural community is an important strategy and a powerful tool in shaping rural futures. Ultimately, with policy acting as a facilitator, the bringing together of diverse experiences, knowledge and resources will better equip the broader decision-making process and better enable sustainable rural futures.

3. Contribution List

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