




Think-tank for action on social change

Stories of the Pandemic:

The impact of COVID-19 on Food Producers in Ireland

A TASC social listening project



Compiled by
Seán McCabe, Tate Donnelly &
Ciara McFadden

September 2020

About this Project

This collection of stories reveals the challenges and opportunities facing food producers in communities around rural Ireland during the time of the COVID-19 public health emergency – and their reflections on the challenges that may lie ahead. This third, specific collection looks at the experiences of fishermen and farmers who have been deemed essential workers during the pandemic.

Note that the names and some details of these stories have been changed to ensure anonymity.

These 10 stories were collected via phone interviews over a three-month period from June to August 2020. This project is on-going, and we are looking for more individuals affected by Covid-19 to share their experiences with us.

If you would like to share your story, do not hesitate to get in touch with the TASC administrator John White at contact@tasc.ie.

Introduction

This third installation of *Stories of the Pandemic*, an on-going social listening project that focuses on the experiences of workers in the current economic and social climate, focuses on the challenges and opportunities which the pandemic presents to fishers and farmers around Ireland. Should you visit the list of essential workers, first published on the Gov.ie in March, the first category listed, understandably, is Agriculture and Fishing¹. Ensuring the ongoing production of food is at the heart of any emergency response. This collection of interviews seeks to understand how food producers experienced this time as essential workers and how they differed. Participants also share their perspectives on the successes, and shortcomings, of supports provided by the government during this time. They share their concerns or aspirations for their own future and the future of their respective sectors when Ireland eventually emerges from the pandemic and begins to rebuild.

This edition of *Stories of the Pandemic* differs significantly from the first to entries in the series. Both previous editions - the first which focused on the experiences of workers and job loss due to COVID-19, and the second which explored the experiences of "millennial" and "generation y" workers living in Ireland and facing into the second major recession of their working lives - were primarily focused on the experiences of people in urban areas. This edition not only covers a broad range of age groups, but also captures important experiences of the pandemic from people living in rural communities around Ireland. The awareness of the importance of community life, and the interdependence of community and rural livelihoods comes across strongly this collection of stories. Many interviewees quickly moved from their own experience and their own livelihood to discuss their concern for older members of their communities at risk of isolation due to cocooning, or the mental health impacts of the closure of marts for farmers for whom the mart is not just a hub of business but also a social outlet.

This collection is not exhaustive and does not represent all experiences for food producers across the country. However, in speaking with fishers, livestock farmers and horticulturalists, as well as a number of farm shop owners or green grocers, we do get an insight into the diverse experiences which people have lived through over the past 6 months and that helps us to understand how differing contexts and relevant policy shaped the outcomes for individuals and communities.

While the experiences differ greatly, there seems to be three important determinants of outcomes. Firstly, the **state of resilience that an individual or sector found themselves in at the onset of the crisis** seems to have been a fundamental determinant as to whether opportunities could be seized, and harmful impacts of the pandemic mitigated. Secondly, and relatedly, **the ability of an individual or sector to adapt quickly to the changing circumstances** offered some the chance to take advantage of changing consumer preferences. The final and most important factor is **the supports, or lack thereof, from government and their appropriateness to the challenges being faced on the ground by food producers.**

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/ga/foilsuichan/dfeb8f-list-of-essential-service-providers-under-new-public-health-guidelin/>

Resilience, adaptability, and government policy are all interrelated. We see this, for example, in the difference in experiences between the two beef farmers interviewed. While Cian has designed his business to bypass commercial supply chains and the prevalent supermarket model by selling direct to the customer and as a result has seen a positive uptick in business during the pandemic, Francis experienced significant losses for his cattle in the traditional system. And yet, this is differentiation between the experience of those involved in direct sales as compared to the supermarket model is not clear cut.

While many of the interviewees lamented the power held by the supermarkets and middle-men in setting prices and managing produce, often at the expense of the producer, some had a different experience, where the supermarkets enabled adaptability. Jack, a fruit farmer in Tipperary, found that the supermarket model enhanced his adaptability and enabled resilience by providing a flexible market for his apple juice, while those reliant on farmers markets were left high and dry by market closures. This, however, illustrates the need for people-centred policy making – an approach that seeks to improve communities’ self-reliance through participative approaches - even in a crisis. The decision to close markets is an example of how government policy can erode or roll back resilience of viable business. Luckily, Charlotte, the vegetable farmer in this collection, had the capacity and knowledge necessary to convert to an online business rapidly following market closures. Others in her situation may not have had that ability.

Perhaps the best illustration of the need for people-centred policy making is the challenge for fishers around Ireland, which are illustrated by the first three interviews in this collection. Finding their own proposals for the design of pandemic supports turned down by government, fishers who were already navigating challenging economic circumstances and unfavourable market forces found themselves both grappling with pandemic supports that were not fit for purpose and the closure of their primary export markets due to the pandemic. The three fishermen speak of similar concerns for the future of fishing, with the risk of losing skilled workers to onshore jobs and the mounting challenges forcing others out of the sector completely. They wonder what the long-term impact of this will be on coastal communities around Ireland. Quickly, it becomes clear that the decisions taken in response to the pandemic will have long lasting impacts throughout the country.

These ten interviews could not be considered sufficient to draw concrete policy recommendations to positively shape the gamut of livelihoods they represent. However, what they do illustrate is the importance of **listening to the lived experience of essential workers and designing policy responses accordingly**. It should also give the reader a sense that the system of food production is complex and efforts to support producers and their communities should not shy away from that complexity. Simplistic, one-size-fits-all policy approaches in response to a crisis do not work. Similarly, simplistic discourse on the outcomes for sectors masks complex underlying factors that contribute to these outcomes. The dairy industry appears to have been exceptionally resilient during the crisis while local food systems in places struggled. The factors that contributed to both impacts need to be understood: the initial resilience at the onset of the crisis; the available resources and capacity to adapt; and whether government policy making, particularly emergency policy making, was supportive or damaging to resilience. This analysis will enable policymakers to plan for the recovery and future crises, namely to enhance the capacity of food producers, local economies and communities to adapt and flourish.

Seán McCabe, TASC Senior Researcher

Fishing



Padraig, Fisherman, Cork

I have been a fisherman all my life. I come from an island off the south west coast of Ireland. I left school in 1988 and I went fishing with my father in Baltimore and moved into aquaculture, fish farming, mussels. In the last 4 years due to health reasons I took up a position a leadership position in a producer's organisation representing over fifty vessels and close to 500 people. We advocate in National and European Forums and we are part of advisory councils, focus groups, and we help the department in various groupings and advise our minister.

The fishing industry is a price-taker really for the products that we catch and put on the marketplace. We do not control the market so when there's a fluctuation in the markets we suffer greatly. Almost 90% of what we catch is exported. So when the pandemic damaged the marketplace outside Ireland, it has an immediate effect on us. We share our resource, so other countries come in and catch fish in our waters and take them back to the same marketplace. So who's fish will be put on the counter? Will it be the Irish fish or French fish or Spanish fish in their markets? This is a second problem for us.

COVID has put us in a dire situation to be honest - because of the shutting down of our markets and restaurants and pubs. The pandemic has affected us in that we were asked to continue to work, we were told we were a necessary industry to keep food on the shelves and counters of Europe and at home, and that's what we did. We knew that the prices had collapsed 50% but we continued to do what we were asked to do. Our government and European Union colleagues knew what was happening – Europe adopted measures to create supports, change the rules on how funding was to be provided, changed the state aid rules, to allow member states help our fishermen. Unfortunately, what we proposed, all of industry united, to our government, wasn't implemented.

We proposed a tie up scheme, similar to what was implemented in France, to regulate the marketplace. This was to reduce the amount of fish that would be going on the market, and at the same time giving us the tools to regulate the fishing fleet. Instead of the same guy going out catching all the fish and getting a higher premium while other fishermen are by the pier wall with no income, we wanted to subsidise the guy staying at the pier wall for the first two weeks. The other boats, half the fleet, would go fishing, they would stop up the following two weeks and get the subsidy, and so on and so forth.

That was the plan, but the finances were not provided to make that happen and it failed. So, what is after happening now, in a nutshell, is we have vessels in a critical position. The only reason they are managing to stay in business is the moratorium on the paybacks of funding. The markets have not recovered, they're still at least -40% of where they were this time last year. The moratorium is allowing these boats to continue to fish, to keep their crews going and stuff like that.

Some boats are running into difficulties because if they're not getting even the 60% of the price they should, they are continuing to fish because they have no choice. If they stop then they don't earn, and they're hoping that things will turn around, from week to week. That's the scenario the fishing industry is in at the moment.

I would be afraid of the long-term impact of COVID on the fishing industry - the long term impact it could have on price or causing fishermen packing it in altogether. It's up to the people at the top, like our politicians and European officials, to put in measures to reboot our

industry. It's like the great depressions of before, you have to incentivise and get people back into the workforce and generate it and reboot it.

People will spend money, but you will not spend money if you are afraid that the money you spend, you cannot earn back, so people retract. We have seen that with the austerity measures, it didn't work, so we must change tactics and start spending and giving people confidence to go out and start spending again and enjoying life.

Fishermen are at the bottom of the fishing industry pyramid, but it is a top-heavy pyramid. Without fishermen everything else disappears. But with every new regulation there is a new expense for a fisherman. A new bit of kit, a new bit of technology that a fisherman must have in his boat, not to help him fish, but to help the others monitor that what he is doing is correct. The fisherman foots the bill for whatever it is - a new layer of bureaucracy or something else, somebody pays for those for those people - that has to come from the fishing end because it doesn't come from anywhere else. So the fisherman is carrying all the weight, and eventually you'll put so much pressure on him and increase the pyramid on top of him to such an extent that it will crush him and then everything collapses. That's the danger of what COVID is after doing now.

Look, everybody should know this, a fisherman isn't afraid of much. Nobody in their right mind would do what a fisherman does - When other people are pulling the coat up around their ears and staying indoors looking out at rain and gales lashing against the window, fishermen are going out to sea in order to try and earn a living. If your vessel breaks down, you can't call the AA, you have to start it up yourself, you have to keep your boats in running order on top of an ocean that will swallow you if things go wrong. So I have optimism for the future of our fishermen as long as they're given the tools, because we all need food, and if you want that food to eat, you're going to need to supply the jobs for the fishermen.

We have Brexit facing us, and we're going to lose half our fishing grounds, that's a fact for the Irish fisherman because we only fish in Irish and English waters, we don't fish anywhere else, other countries have to come to our waters. So COVID has put us on the back foot, hopefully we have the skillset to go out there and turn it around as long as we're given a chance. The main thing is that people have to be given the opportunity to live again, and once they live

again they'll start eating fish again, and hopefully they'll be able to appreciate the quality of the food and where it comes from, and pay a little bit more for it when it's there.

You don't see many ads for fishing on the telly, even though Bord Bia has stepped it up. I was speaking to a woman in Spain, and what she said really resonated with me. She said that in Spain, coming into dinner hours and tea time, what you saw on the television was ads for fish, for how nutritious and healthy it was, and it was associating hunger with fish as the cure to that hunger. In the back of their minds when going into a shop these people were looking for the fish first, this is the food that they treasured. That's where it needs to start here, just letting people know.

Fish is a renewable resource. You don't have to feed the fish or breed them. You just have to look at the scientific data that's there, and once you take out what they say you're allowed to take out, that fish replenishes itself on an annual basis.

We're all part of the one family. If you damage the coastal community and the boats are taken out of it, then the next thing to fall is the numbers in the schools, which affects the teachers, which affects the shops, which affects the heritage and that area of our country where people from the city come to visit during the summer. People don't want to be coming down to beautiful scenery but no amenities. If there's no people, there's no services. We have to be cognizant of that too, you know, that everybody's linked. We need to look after each other. We're all in it together.

Ciarán, Fisherman, Galway

We are in the same predicament as everybody else, except that we're classed as essential workers for the first time in our lives. Obviously, fish is food and food needs to come ashore somehow. The only way fish can come ashore is for fishermen to go out and get them. We have been able to keep working throughout. It's not business as usual in so much as there's only so much fish that can be sold, there's a limit because a lot of our fish would be exported, and the fact that Spain and Italy are in the same predicament as ourselves, with no tourists and so on, the volume has gone down big time in those countries, you know.

We've a 27-metre stern trawler, prawns are our main species. Italy is the big market for prawns but when Italy went into lockdown, the markets kind of went rear side up, not

completely but almost. Thankfully, there are no prawns going to waste - if it can't be sold it's not being brought ashore. A lot of it is frozen too. Some stuff is starting to move again, but at a much-reduced price. If the lockdown comes again in these countries, it's not going to be good at all.

Even though the consumer is still paying the same as they were last year, but the price we're getting has changed big time. The profit is pretty much non-existent, it's just the question of survival now. The middleman is creaming it like he always does, but he's creaming it altogether now because he's getting the catch for next to nothing but he's selling it at the same price as he always did.

He's getting away with that because at the end of the day, when you go down to the fishmonger he's not going to have stacks full of fish there that he has to sell, you know what I mean, he's limiting his stock to what he knows he can sell. He's will not reduce the price because then he can't bring it back up or you might say to him you 'you were only charging a euro a kilo last week, how come you're charging 2 now?'.

Most of the fish we eat in Ireland, would you believe it, is imported fish. The bucket fish in Ireland is imported. Because cod is the main species, that's all imported, it comes from big factories in the likes of Norway that gives you the fillet exactly as you want it. So, in other words, when it comes to buying fish in this country, fish is nearly ready for the plate. Irish people do not like to eat fish with their fingers, they like to eat it with a fork, so they're not taking out bones. So we rely on imported fish for the majority of our national market. That means Irish fishermen have to sell abroad.

But despite the impact, we're always the last in line to get any support, you know what I mean, we just don't get support. They decide to cut our quotas and say you're only allowed to catch so much this year, but there's no compensation for that, it's just "away with you now and do your business".

Prawns are fairly consistent throughout the year. But we wouldn't be out fishing 12 months of the year because you need to go around the coast and our boat's not very suitable for that. So we concentrate more on the deep water. We missed out on our most profitable time of year, same as all fishermen. This time of year is usually quiet then, August and September is a quiet time of year, that's just the way it is every year.

It's just that the whole year has been quiet now this year. The thing about it is when the price of fish goes down, it stays down, you know. It's like when the price of fuel went up, the lorry driver increased the cost of the transport to Spain to cover the fuel, but the price of the fuel came down and then the price of the lorry didn't come down.

When we were selling fish with the old pound long ago, we were getting 2 pound per kilo, and it went to 2 euro a kilo. Like there's a big difference between 2 pound a kilo and 2 euro a kilo. It just stayed at that.

The supermarket is basically controlling everything like, isn't it. If you took even a bottle of Coke, it's only 2 thirds of the size it used to be, the bag of Taytos is only half the size it used to be. The packet is still the same, but what is in it is nearly halved, but you're still paying the same for it, or maybe more. We are being conned left right and centre, in every shape and form. I was getting more money for my fish 25 years ago than what I am today, and the cost of everything 25 years ago bears no resemblance to the cost of everything today. Our food bill today is nearly as dear as our dearest bill back then.

If there was a second lockdown or if other countries went back into lockdown, I could see people leaving fishing, to be honest. Everybody has bills. Fishing is getting more difficult as it is, anyway, but all of this on top of it, it doesn't take much for people to say 'ah here, there's no way to make a living in this, you know.' Can't blame anybody for that either, you know.

Andrew, Fisherman, Kerry

I suppose myself and my colleagues would be hit hard by the pandemic. Since the end of January, it would have been very bad for the East Coast fishermen really. They were the first guys that got hit because their main market is South-East Asia. That just dried up overnight. So there was no problem with the fishing, but it was the market that was gone. On the South Coast and the West Coast it hit them hard as well.

It hit us at a bad time in that traditionally we wouldn't be doing much fishing over the winter, or at least it would be very limited fishing. Some wouldn't really bother at all because of the weather and stuff like that. The season would typically start in March so the pandemic hit at a very bad time. The market would have been restaurants in Ireland and exports all around

Europe. But by March you couldn't get the catch off the street, you couldn't move it. So it wasn't a great time to start fishing, there was kind of no point in it.

A lot of the guys like me, we were stopped. The guys in the East, they were stopped for a bit at the beginning and then they started up again, but the market was volatile. This time last year we were getting €5 a kilo for brown crab and a lot of that would have been exported to China. At the moment, we are getting next to nothing for crab because the Chinese market has gone completely. A lot of it's just being processed and frozen.

From our point of view, the danger is that you won't have that extra bit of more money to get you through the winter and then there's the whole fear of are we going to have a second wave or second outbreak. If the second wave happened elsewhere it could still affect us and cause serious problems.

There weren't really in line for income supports. We looked for a tariff scheme from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. They should introduce a tariff scheme to ease the disaster in fishing but they haven't. There's very little to help us. When you look at the other supports like the wage subsidy scheme, it keeps an awful lot of businesses running but it's not relevant to the fishing sector.

The vast, vast majority of people in the sector are not 'employers' and 'employees' so the wage subsidy scheme is irrelevant to most of us. The other support I can think of is the working capital loans and that kind of stuff. I don't know of anybody who has availed of them.

It's not fair to ask people to take on more debt in order to survive the pandemic. The various supports that they have for businesses now, from what I can gather are only available to businesses that have paid rates. Most small-scale fishing enterprises don't pay rates. The government have said 'fair play to you, good lad, work away'. But the industry has unique changes and needs tailored supports. For example - when you put three guys into a ten-meter boat how do you keep them two meters apart? I'm not happy with it. The government say 'We need cheap food, fish away. Work away lads, but we're not going to help ye.'

There's a real danger for our sector that we are going to become marginalised. If we find ourselves marginalised going forward it will be a difficult winter, whatever we make in fishing is going to go downhill if we don't get supports in the stimulus package. My fear is that you

are going to haemorrhage a lot of people out of our sector but you're not going to recruit, it takes a long time to train someone into fishing.

We went into this crisis with an exceptionally low level of resilience. I think therefore we are going to have to try to build resilience and better management of our fisheries as we emerge from this crisis. Our fisheries are managed from the point of view of stock sustainability, we need to manage them in a way that has economic sustainability as well. I think we need to look at a broader market base, we have been very export orientated. I think this crisis has probably raised a lot of questions about food security and that kind of thing. I think we need to look at a broader market and develop a domestic market in particular. We also need to make sure the right supports are in place to provide a safety net for fishers. We are also nearly an anomaly when it comes to social protection. People probably think that we are saying 'we're different and we're special' – but fishing is!

Livestock



Cian, Beef Farmer, Sligo

The impact of COVID 19 has been strangely positive because I kind of set myself up to be independent from the commodity market, with direct sales and seeds and that kind of thing. There's been a surge in demand for high quality, high nutrition, organic produce, so yeah, I've never been busier and thankfully the chains in my production line, beef mostly, are the local abattoir and the courier service where solid so I was able to carry on as normal, with the higher demand, so it's all good in that respect.

I'm not entirely sure if other farmers have had the same experience, I haven't been listening to the news that much. But yeah, I know there were issues in the market from the beef factory point of view and the marts obviously closed for a while. I think there was a little bit of anxiety and panic in for a time, but I think it levelled out somewhat and a lot of stuff carried on as normal.

I may be wrong, but the agricultural sector was probably not the worst impacted anyway, if at all, and sometimes even better. It may seem trivial but from my view of the social aspect I think there was a newfound appreciation and a value for farmers that emerged during the period, when people realised that these people were on the frontline. Yeah, there seems to be a little spike in positivity in that regard.

There could be long term impacts on rural communities. Yeah, a lot of small businesses obviously, have been hit in a devastating way. Restaurants and food services especially, and a lot of people out of work and all that stuff so yeah of course it's in a bit of bother and the economic impact that I certainly haven't the headspace or the kind of the intelligence to even forecast. Tourism as well and all those things will be negatively impacted. The rural community is quite connected and all those different avenues so if one is affected basically all will be impacted.

Yeah, I think there was a stroke of luck there in things like the dairy industry because we had the facilities to powder milk, so shelf life isn't such an issue. That proved to be quite resilient as opposed to in the UK where they were dumping milk. A higher percentage of the milk was in the liquid milk in the UK and I guess in the States. I'm not advocating for it either, but it was just a stroke of luck that it was resilient to the pandemic.

On a broader scale, I don't know if much will really change. It will be nice to think that people will appreciate local food chains a bit more and the horticulture rise and people will buy locally more. There's talk of that and I think a lot of people have found new avenues to buy food locally and support local producers that sell directly which is hugely valuable to overall resilience in the country for bigger disasters than COVID.

If imports and exports had stopped completely, I think we would have been in huge issues especially around flour and tillage production and stuff like that. I think maybe this scare may have brought up some of these issues and hopefully measures will be put in place, in policy and on the ground and people won't forget too soon. As much as my point about the benefit of powdered milk in this instance, it doesn't feed anyone, it's a food ingredient it's not food. In one way, it's not valid in practice for food security at all. It's valid only from the point of the dairy industry.

Yeah, hopefully the positivity around 'local' will carry on and the economic backlash won't collapse the world and the industry. I don't think we're over everything by any stretch but we'll see. My point, I guess, the drive home, is that the resilience of short food chains and quality, organic food is the future.

Francis, Beef Farmer, Laois

Well, to start off with, for selling cattle say to the factory because of all the restaurants being closed, the markets are not there but like for exporting as well, so the prices are, you're losing between maybe €100-€150 on each animal. Then for anyone selling them in the marts, for the first month or more the marts were closed and there was no outlet to sell them and even now, with the social distance, it's a lot harder. And I suppose, for buying feed and things like that, everything has to be done over the phone now, than going in to Glanbia so like there's a while there, you have to just order all that you want. There's no going in anywhere but at least that has been eased a bit now.

But I suppose for a lot of the older people, like their social life will have been affected a lot because they wouldn't see anyone from one week to the other. For older people all they did was go to mass and maybe the pub on a Saturday night, now that is stopped so, for a while there, they didn't see anyone. Then even the marts, lots of the older farmers, they used to go the mart just for a social occasion, even without doing business. That's what they done every week, you know. The marts are online now and while they have opened them up to a few people that can still go in person, it's going to be the way forward now anyhow online. It's here to stay kind of.

I suppose that, like what I said previously there, there's no social outings for older people and even neighbours that would always stop and be chatting can't. There's no one going into anyone's houses, so there wasn't. It's harder on the rural area because people are a lot more isolated where they live anyhow. So, it's difficult for them and everything was interrupted, even the local link buses that's not going. All of my land would have been in the recommended radius anyhow and you could still go to it when it is part of your work. Any of my business then you would just do it over the phone.

I'd like to see things get back to normal as soon as they can really. To get everywhere open, both marts and getting all these restaurants and getting the export of beef back. Yeah and until that happens again there's going to be a build-up of beef and stock you know, which depresses the price downwards so that is a bit harder for us until this all improves. I suppose a concern is a second wave of COVID.

How many more hits can you get like? Because you know there's not really the COVID payment there for farmers. It's not as easy to get access to, as it is for everyone else, because you're self-employed and you have to show that your income is substantially down. Between that and Brexit, those are the two biggest things that are going to affect farming in the future anyhow.

Brendan, Sheep farmer, Offaly

Basically, COVID-19 would have no direct impact on the farm. The only thing is, there was a lot of implications. All our lambs go through a market through the Offaly Lamb Group. What is after affecting them is, a worker goes down and oversees all the lambs at slaughter. He is currently not allowed to go down or the factory staff. We used to put a 'C' on the lambs, now we have a number '1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10' so every lamb, our thing is number '3' so every lamb that goes down they know that they belong to us. See what was happening was there was lads, maybe they use a purple 'C' this week, they use a red 'C' the next week and there was a pure mix up. But he is not allowed to go in. That's basically the only, you know, it doesn't affect us personally, but it affects the wider sector you know.

Now during the marts of course, there was all sorts of problems with the marts because you couldn't sell cattle and all the rest of it. What's happening is the poor lads socialising can't even go to the pub. And I mean you think of all the guys, just to go in for a pint and have a chat with someone. That's all over. Basically to recap, there's really no impact on the farm because you can get supplies and everything else.

In actual fact it's after being a better Spring for the sheep than a lot of Springs you know. COVID is not after affecting the sheep. Well what's after happening now is the wool. The wool is unsellable at the minute. You just can't sell wool. Well, what do we do with it? We always took it to this guy up in Roscrea, but sure look, what's he going to do with it? Like, there's no market for it. That is one of the things that the COVID thing has impacted because there's no market. It used to go to China, like we have no way of washing wool here in this country. It always has to go to Bradford in England to get all the stains out of it, when it goes into your woolly jumper or whatever it goes into. But sure, I don't know, does as much wool go into, it's all a different type of fabric now they're using, I don't know. But yeah, the wool sales have been affected.

Basically, what you'd like to see is the Irish meat being branded as Irish meat. Like for instance, you go into Aldi or Lidl and you'll see New Zealand lamb. And you see, the difference is with the logo, when you see a logo with a Harp on it, you'll see any product that's there in the fridge, say sausages. That's produced and is actually the produce of Ireland but if you see the product with a flag on it, that's only packaged in Ireland. So it could be whatever sort of chicken, wherever they come from, from Hong Kong or wherever. Do you know? That's basically it but I'd say it's really to be for the Irish product to be branded as Irish. It would be a great thing for us to be branded as Irish and to compete.

There's so much home cooking now that what actually happened was the supermarkets put out all the steaks in a very prominent position, in the aisles and they're for half price. But it's like, you know, they say half price but half price of what like? Do you know what I mean? That's what I'd like to see, that would be the truth, as a marketing thing. For some of the supermarkets saying fifty percent off, but fifty percent of the full price and put down a figure on it. But sure, they're not going to do that.

Michael, Dairy Farmer, Cavan

I farm in a partnership with my mother and my father, we've about a 100 dairy cow herd in East Cavan. The first concern, I suppose when lockdown came, was the processing capacity, because obviously milk is a perishable product if you go more than 2 or 3 days. We were seeing scenes from the UK of milk being thrown out, being dumped, we saw huge amounts of it in the US being thrown out as well, so that was the first kind of concern or worry.

The other thing is my dad is over the age, so he couldn't really be as involved in farming because we had someone working with us, and you can't really expect them to cocoon simultaneously so he had to kind of cocoon for a little while. So it meant that a lot of my job involved the running and getting things. For a little while everything was fairly locked down and a lot of the agri-stores, to be fair, adopted fairly quickly, so it wasn't too bad in terms of supply area.

Thankfully I think there were genuine efforts made in the dairy sector, in the processing capacity, to ensure that there was no problem for us, all we had to do was make sure that we weren't near the people who were collecting the milk. Obviously they were travelling to

different farms. So from that point of view it was pretty good. I would say, because we're involved with the European Young Farmers Federation, by comparison to the issues that they were facing, particularly in the horticulture sector, we were relatively untouched because we don't rely a huge amount on seasonal workers, the labour requirement on the farm is only 2 people, so we were able to manage reasonably well.

It was quite a scary time more than it was anything else. As I say, we don't trade through marts and that, so those weren't a major impact for us, so on the whole dairying was pretty resistant to it. The biggest problem really was the impact on our income because when the food services industry shut down, a lot of high value dairy products were devalued, so the likes of milk packs in airlines and McDonald's and stuff, a lot of the higher value products then became an issue.

Now, it wasn't as much of an issue as it could have been, and was in other countries, because our quality products didn't really get affected at all - skimmed milk powders and other products used in ingredients for food manufacturing weren't really affected, and because there was an uptake in, I suppose, retail sales, a lot of those sort of things compensate it to an extent. We did see a little bit of a dip and now it's starting to come back up again.

There are positives and negatives because of COVID. There's not a lot of people really focusing on the positives, for good reason because it's a disease that's killing people, you know, talking about the positives is a little bit insensitive, but the reality is in the long term there are going to be, if we manage them properly, proper benefits.

First thing I would say, in terms of the rural community, is working from home. If we can get the broadband situation right, the demand on travel and the demand on commuting and the effect that that would have on the local economy if we have less people travelling 2 hours a day to Dublin, doing their shopping outside of the local community, is massive.

From a farming point of view, I know from talking to butchers in particular, the amount of people going in and purchasing higher value product, but also buying local, has been massive. Now, there's an issue for us in a way, because so much of our product is exported anyway, that that doesn't have as big an impact as it would say in the UK, for UK farmers, but it is still a very important thing because it creates a valuable competition, and also gives us a direct link with the consumer.

I think what COVID really proved, which is actually being turned against us sadly, is the resilience of the food industry. A huge amount of work was put in behind the scenes to keep everything going, both on farm and off farm in processing. Unfortunately, I do know that there are some groups out there who are now using this as an excuse to say that, well, farmers don't actually need the support that they have, and that if we can survive COVID, you know, there's nothing wrong with the farming sector and all this sort of stuff, which is totally wrong. The issues are just not those that are directly affected by the likes of COVID. Now, of course we are beginning to see issues with meat plants that show a vulnerability in the processing sector. COVID has shown a vulnerability in the processing sector.

The marts being shut had a big impact. That was a big shutdown. That had an impact, both on the actual trading of animals, and also on the mental health of farmers, particularly older farmers, and we've seen a rise in social isolation. And not even just older farmers, we're seeing pretty bad signs of declining mental health as a result of isolation and long periods of time of anxiety and stress resulting from COVID. There's very little, unfortunately, that people can do. You can't safely return to a lot of the activities that help people out of that, so the question is just how we change and adapt and grow.

The number one biggest downside is what happens when there's a recession, because it's probably inevitable there's going to be a recession unfortunately. Farming and recessions have a very unusual relationship, in that farming is seen as a stable industry during a recession, and normally experiences a surge in numbers.

So we would have seen at the last recession numbers studying agriculture went up, the numbers involved in farming went up, but at the same time we know that lower spending power means consumers buy less high value product. That has a problem for us when we are trying to add value to some of our exports, so say for instance in organic food, we know that consumption of organic food went down in the last recession in our key markets in the UK. What effect this will have, we don't know.

Also, the consumption of beef in general is displaced by chicken and pork and cheaper products during a recession. What impact that will have on us, we don't know. The impact from the reduction of eating out, where normally there's value added to the likes of our steaks, where we sell a lot of our high cut meat, we don't know the impacts on all of that.

Again, it'll very much depend on what the next steps are, how quickly incomes recover and spending power recovers. I think I would like to see in the long run that people stick with home cooking more, which could benefit farming. But you could also have the rebound effect where no-one wants to cook again for a while, because they've been cooking non-stop for a couple of months.

I think if we can continue some of the steps that we've made to try and improve the sector, we will be more resilient than we were to the last recession, but that really does rely on investment, technological advancements, things like that. If we are able to actually progress them, there could be opportunity in a recession, but again you don't want it to go on very long. And more importantly in some ways, you don't want it to go on very long not only in Ireland, but in the UK, or we need to find new markets for our products very quickly if the UK does suffer as a result of a Brexit/ COVID downturn.

Horticulture



Jack, Apple and Fruit Farmer, Tipperary

COVID-19 has resulted in quite a few changes. We have a farm shop here on our farm, and we also have a campsite which is part of our business, and early on when there was a full lockdown obviously people stopped calling to our farm shop. There was very little traffic on the road and we're kind of in a rural area between two towns.

So we were still selling our 2019 apple harvest at that stage, and we just had to change our sales channel. So we would always be doing some business with supermarkets, and we just directed more apples in that route. We had apples going to Dunnes Stores primarily, normally that would finish at a certain stage and we just extended it for a few more weeks and sold a few more apples than we normally would. So we would consider that we were very lucky to have had that, because if we hadn't and then we had to set it up, that would've taken quite some time and would've been rather difficult.

On the campsite side of things, yeah obviously we cancelled bookings and got plenty of booking cancellations and so on, and as it turned out then we didn't actually open during the summer at all. When we did our risk assessment to try and see whether we could open in a manner that would be safe for the rest of the operations here, the growing and juice making and so on, we weren't quite satisfied that we could do that in a totally safe way. We did do

quite a lot of renovation work during the summertime so that when we do open again, be that late this year or next year, that we will be able to open in a safer manner. That involved changing layouts of toilets, showers, that kind of thing, with reconstruction work and that. So, those are some of the things that affected us.

On the juice side of things, we would sell to independent cafés, and we would sell some cider to pubs as well, and obviously both of those dropped very, very dramatically, when the cafés and so on closed due to lockdown. But to be fair, that's pretty much come back to normal once those places opened again. I was very relieved, or pleasantly surprised, at how many of those places actually I know, of our independent café-type customers, reopened because I was worried that they just wouldn't be able to reopen, that they wouldn't have had the capital or the cash flow or whatever to actually reopen at all.

Overall, I suppose the sales that didn't happen that I wasn't able to replace would have been on the juice side of things, because they weren't really suitable for other outlets, so they just didn't happen. And then they started happening again so that was a temporary fall in turnover for a few months of maybe 30% on that side of things. Which I wouldn't consider too bad given how badly the country was affected in general. On the fruit side of things, we just sent stuff to other places so that didn't really affect the turnover that much, just meant readjusting what we were doing.

Looking around here and talking to farmers, I don't have beef cattle anymore although I used to have them years ago, but talking to people like that, when the restaurants and so on closed, the prime cuts weren't being sold at good prices anymore because those with no milk sold into the restaurant, and people were buying the normal cheaper cuts I suppose for home. This meant that the factories put more downward pressure on prices and that had a knock on effect for the farming sector in general. And of course that knocks on to feed prices for farmers who produce feed for our cattle.

So I'd say across the board farmers were affected by it, although I probably wouldn't say as dramatically as what happened in some other parts of the economy obviously. But I know people who are making cheese, doing things like that, and exporting it, and the export market just stopped completely for a number of months when the supermarkets were trying to figure out, you know, how to optimise their supply chains with what they would

consider, I suppose, more mainstream-type products, so there was and will continue to be, I'd say, a knock on effect for the farming sector, yeah.

I suppose we need to look at our resilience, in a way, like it was really surprising because, you know, I was talking to some friends of mine who would have been doing the very 'local food system' type thing, so they would have been selling via farmers markets and that kind of thing, and of course they all closed during the lockdown as well and those guys were left without a market.

Ordinarily, you would expect if there was some sort of disruption, that a local supply chain would be more resilient, but it was the reverse that happened because of how the crisis was managed. It was the supermarkets that picked up all the extra business, so the guys who were involved in the local food supply chains and that were badly affected, they were the guys who would have been supplying the restaurants, the guys who would have been supplying farmers markets, and it was the big producers that were supplying the supermarkets, they couldn't keep up with the demand for stuff, so that was very unexpected, you know. There's a lesson in that in making our local food production chains more resilient and supporting them more concretely.

This pandemic is one example of something going wrong and it's led to a certain set of impacts, and it demonstrates that you really can't tell what's around the corner, with impacts, and who it might affect less badly and who it might affect more badly. Even if you had predicted that we might have a pandemic-type situation, you probably wouldn't have predicted the way it favoured some businesses and the way it disfavoured others. This has as much to do with the supports that are put in place, I think, as anything inherent to the businesses.

Charlotte, Vegetable Farmer, Dublin

What we mainly do is organic vegetables and organic salads. We sell generally in Dublin through 3 markets and then we have our farm shop which was open pre-COVID every Friday and Saturday. Then when COVID happened, markets all shut down. There's always a good few restaurants and cafés on our list. So when COVID happened, we just literally had to change overnight.

We'd heard rumours about everything shutting down on the Friday, and by Sunday night when my daughters had put us up online, so that people could do what was a very crude click & collect. We've got a company now who helped us get a proper website up and running, and a proper click & collect, and they've got to pay online before they come, and we basically just changed our business overnight. We went from selling at 3 markets and 2 days in the farm shop to basically 5 days in the farm shop. So we'd open from Wednesday to Sunday, and people just ordered and collected the next day or whatever, we do need time to pick and pack and that.

We have a very loyal customer base. Extremely loyal. We're in markets 23 or 24 years. So a lot of people who know what we do were not going to be pawned off by going to Tesco or going to Lidl to get stuff there. Our stuff is grown and sold in Ireland, as it should be. Going to the supermarkets all you're getting is foreign produce. So people who have shopped with us over that many years were not going to change to supermarkets no matter what. You were allowed to do your food shopping so they chose to come out to us, which is what they did, and they stayed with us right throughout the 6 week lockdown.

We had always intended doing the farm shop maybe a couple of extra days, but we're now open from Wednesday to Saturday, so let's just say things moved on a couple of years before we actually intended on doing it. There's people beside us who never knew what we did and then all of a sudden everybody was googling where to shop and where you can get stuff, and then word of mouth as well. Our customer base is built because everybody wanted to buy local and Irish and fresh, so it was good that way.

We're pretty unique in that we retail our own produce. A lot of farming friends and that, they are still in the cereal business, they do potatoes, they do supermarkets, and that's a totally different business altogether. Like the business we're in and other organic farms like us, they had all changed, they had opened up their farm shop for more days and that, implementing social distancing, they'd all gone that way. Now we've all gone back to our markets, because people still find it more convenient to go to the markets, but in our instance we have not changed our farm shop since we've gone back, we're still open the extra few days that we were open.

I think it's opened people's eyes to what can be grown in Ireland and what you actually can get in Ireland without the supermarkets telling you that you can't, or you can get strawberries in December and January. They're getting to really taste flavour, and all of a sudden, they realise how much actually can be grown in this country. Like, for us, with the help of a few polytunnels we can keep salads growing the whole year round, I think a lot of farmers who do what we do have gone that way. Friends of mine are actually putting up an extra couple of tunnels because they realise that, you know, you can grow salads the whole year round now because they've been watching us. It's good. It's good that people support Irish farmers because the money stays in the Irish economy, and it just moves around the economy, which is better than leaving the country, you know.

There's a lot that can be done, but it's not going to get done. Agriculture is way down on the government's list, and horticulture is non-existent. They hardly ever do anything for horticulture at all. What we have done over the years, we've done by ourselves, we've never had any assistance from government departments or anything at all, we have just ploughed on. The department of agriculture are not geared towards organic horticulture and farmers, they're geared towards the beef farmers and the dairy farmers. But definitely not horticulture and definitely not organic. They don't care about us. People want good food, and there's a lot of people out there now who do know their food, and are not interested in being pawned off with stuff that the supermarket brings in. They're going for flavour and taste, and they don't want uniform size, and that's how we have always marketed ourselves - flavour and taste. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as the man says, it's not always going to be beautiful but it's bloody tasty and that's what people are going for nowadays, and it's good for you, you know. And the fact there are no pesticides or anything at all on there.

We were beef farmers years and years ago, we got out of beef farming quite simply because we just couldn't make money. We had a young family at the time and we just couldn't make money. Same as the cereals, even though it was subsidised, it wasn't adding up in our books. We were paying everything out to the seed merchants and to the spray merchants and that and you know, one spray failed oh now we have to try this one but it's twice as expensive. We had always grown potatoes and cabbage thirty odd years ago, but it was a case of 'why are we spraying this?'

So we stopped spraying and we just started using chicken manure or whatever, you know, farmyard manure that we had ourselves and then we joined the market and started diversifying completely into vegetables. The amount of veg growers in Ireland that just grow and sell their own produce, without buying in, without importing at all, are very few on the ground, and the support you get is zilch. The support we get is from our customers who come in week in, week out, windy or not windy, drenched to the skin because of these COVID rules that they have to stand 2 metres apart and are left in queues all the time, and they still stand there and wait. They're just amazing, like. They appreciate what we're doing and they just keep coming back to us, week in, week out. They're the ones I would give full credit to, but the government has certainly never done anything for horticulture in general.

Pat, Greengrocer, Carlow

I started in 1986, and I have a greengrocer and florist. The building was a pub years ago belonging to my great grand-uncle. So we have a greengrocers in there at the moment, and it's going very well, but the COVID did change that. All small shops are struggling and we're down to two small shops in Callan. Nearly every house was a shop over the years. Now the supermarkets have taken over hugely.

So where I am, next door there is the butcher, and down the street opposite there's one small little shop with a little bit of everything, and they're the only three shops, the rest of them are garages and supermarkets, and we've a load of chemists and banks. But when COVID started first, if I go back to Patrick's Day, and then up to probably the end of June or the beginning of July, it was absolutely manic because everybody was at home, nobody could travel more than a couple of miles up and down the road, so it was brilliant, and the weather was powerful.

We did really, really well. And then when mid-summer came people would say 'well, when did you open back up?' and I'd say 'I never closed'. We were going strong 6 days a week, you know, it was unbelievable. We were dropping outside or you could choose at the door, it was kind of a new thing. But when it all opened back up and people were back at work, you know, you've an awful lot of people working in Kilkenny, Clonmel, Waterford, and they obviously do part of their shopping over there, you know, if you had all them back home it'd be brilliant.

Then you've some commuting long distances, you know, some people are going to Dublin from Callan, believe it or not, which is crazy. I was on to a girl the other day now and she was one of the ones that used to come in during lockdown and she goes up and down to Wexford, which is no joke, it's grand in the summer but every winter it's mad.

So when everything opened up it was all back to normal again. But I never sold as much fruit and veg in all of my life as I did during lockdown! The flower side went down, but the fruit and veg went up. The top 3 things were potatoes, carrots, and cooking apples. The Department of Agriculture did a survey during COVID and that came back that the best seller was cooking apples. Everyone is baking and cooking at home, isn't it amazing, people are going back to basics.

Then there were a few people, they live in these new estates, and it was like they had discovered Callan. There's a huge amount of estates of new houses, and an awful lot of them wouldn't even go up the street. You'd notice them now even on a Saturday, they come back and buy their bits and pieces which is great.

A lot of the people I know now are starting to grow stuff themselves, which is a new thing, a lot of them have been at home and they've discovered their garden for the first time. Obviously, if everyone does that, I'll be affected, but I suppose it's good for the young people to learn that things don't come out of a bag all the time.

So there's been a bit of that, which is going to be way better next year I'd say when people see what can be done. Like you walk into your garden and get fresh fruit and vegetables, it's brilliant. I've never heard of as many people digging up their lawn and sowing stuff as I have this year. I think people will stick at that for years to come. We couldn't get seeds, you couldn't get seeds this year for flowers or fruit or veg for love nor money. You couldn't even get them from England, because they were in the same situation. People would have paid any money for them in the end. It's amazing, another year you couldn't get rid of them.

Education will be key, incorporating it into schools teachings. You have people now who would never ever have seen a pea in their lives, or even a hen. It's something that could be done, the schools mightn't jump at it straight away, but it's something. You hear of people going to the ploughing matches and they are just amazed, and then they don't see it again for another 12 months.

There needs to be more courses and supports for horticulture, to get the numbers back up. We had fallen away but I think people are back into it. I don't think we'll have greengrocers back on the street of every town though. You have the likes of Aldi and Lidl giving stuff away for nothing. And people don't care if it comes from the moon, if they see it for 10 cents and it's in the greengrocers for 20 cents, that kills it. I have stuff being delivered every day, you'll always get fresh food from the greengrocers. But people are struggling and you can't blame them for buying the discounted stuff.



www.tasc.ie

contact@tasc.ie