

RURAL ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND THE FUTURE RURAL LIVELIHOOD DREAMS OF IRELAND'S YOUTH

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Aims

Focused on generational renewal, this paper presents the ideal livelihoods young people envision for themselves in a rural area. In doing so, it ascertains what facilitates young people to stay in rural areas, or what motivates them to return once they have moved away. The research context explored is the dream future livelihoods of youth who want to live in rural areas of Ireland. Further to this, the paper will use rural economic resilience as a lens to examine the implications of the livelihood dreams of youth on rural economic resilience.

Theoretical approach

Rural economic resilience is used here as a normative analysis framework to examine how the future youth livelihood dreams support or indeed hinder this process. Rural economic resilience can be associated with diversification of the rural economy and the presence of multifunctionality (Wilson, 2010; Steiner and Atterton, 2015; Li, 2022). Fundamental to resilience of any kind is a focus on the interconnections between environment and society with the economy, including the sustainable use of environmental resources (Wilson, 2010; Scott, 2013; Maclean et al., 2014). This paper will also further explore the meaning of rural economic resilience.

Methodology

Capturing the perspective of youth, future studies provides an avenue to explore the necessary conditions to retain youth in and attract youth to rural areas. This paper uses the futures method developed by Kuhmonen et al. (2016) to understand the ideal or 'dream' future of youth. The personal dream future was explored in relation to livelihood, but also accommodation and lifestyle. The obstacles to the dreams are also examined. As part of the Horizon 2020 RURALIZATION project, data was collected in 2020 and participants were asked to look 15 years ahead to 2035. A questionnaire was administered online targeting youth aged 18 to 30. To reflect different rural regions, the data was collected in two region types based on the urban-rural typology - one predominantly rural region (Western region) and one intermediate region (Mid-East region). Two stakeholder



workshops were also conducted to assess the measures and actors needed to realise the dreams. The livelihood results are focused on in this paper, however the analysis also draws on the wider findings. The dimensions are interlinked. For example, aspects of the livelihood are also linked to realising the accommodation and lifestyle dreams (e.g. salary, work-life balance, remote working).

Findings

Existing knowledge indicates the attractiveness of the farming profession is an issue impacting the levels of young people becoming farmers. Particular aspects highlighted are the relatively low income, labour intensity and social status of the profession (Access to Land Network, 2018; Regidor, 2012). However a different narrative also exists with research showing positive features of the profession such as independence and working in a natural environment, with demand among some new entrants driven to get 'back to the land' (Dolci, and Perrin, 2018; EIP-AGRI, 2016; Wilbur, 2014). The preliminary findings emerging from this research also show that the future rural dreams of youth can be linked positively to farm livelihoods and interest in farming is linked to the intention to be a rural dweller. However, significant obstacles stand in the way of this dream, notably issues related to farm viability.

A lack of rural jobs is emphasised in research examining drivers of youth outmigration. Other aspects of the rural job market impacting youth intentions to migrate are the sectors rural jobs exist in and the quality of rural jobs (Bjarnasona and Thorlindsson, 2006; Garcia-Arias et al., 2021). For example, a lack of interest in working in the primary sector and a view that occupational opportunities are stronger elsewhere are identified as predicting an intention to migrate (Bjarnasona and Thorlindsson, 2006). More broadly in relation to rural jobs, the initial findings on the future livelihood dreams of youth show a presence of entrepreneurship and remote work, yet still a relatively narrow range of professions are imagined as part of the future dreams. This raises questions around how the dreams support resilience based on a diversified economy. In addition to this, some of the personal futures show uncertainty around the future career path. More broadly, these findings raise questions around the nature of career ambitions and the scope for measures that support the broadening of livelihood horizons and ambitions of young people in rural areas.

