

MAKING THE CASE FOR CLIMATE TRANSITION IN AGRICULTURE

Lessons from 'Reframing
Food Futures in Ireland'



Briefing Paper
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**Future
Narratives
Lab**

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Executive Summary

Climate transition will require radical change to our land-use, agricultural and food systems. This means mobilising support for action across societies — particularly in countries where these systems play a central economic and cultural role. However, success in doing this will depend on understanding the landscape of beliefs and assumptions that underlie debates, identifying both barriers to and opportunities for change.

This briefing outlines key themes and insights from Reframing Food Futures Ireland, an activity aiming to tackle exactly these questions, hosted by [Future Narratives Lab](#) and [Climate-KIC](#), as part of the latter organisation's [partnership](#) with the Irish Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine¹.

An in-person Narrative Analysis Workshop was held in Dublin on the 12th September 2024, which was followed by an Online Summit on the 29th October 2024. These events brought together a diverse range of participants and perspectives from across Ireland, including farmers, policymakers, environmental advocates, and media.

Collectively nearly 250 people participated, with representatives from organisations such as Studio Saol; Soearth; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); The Sustainable Ireland Coop; Green Restoration Ireland Cooperative Society Ltd; Bord Bia; Agriland Media; Irish Farmers Association; Irish Co-operative Organisation Society (ICOS); Thinkhouse; National Economic and Social Council (NESC); University College Dublin; Hometree; Bioregional Weaving Lab; and the Freshgraze project.

This document captures opportunities as well as the most pressing concerns identified by participants, offering valuable lessons for both Ireland's unique cultural and environmental context, and the many other countries in Europe and beyond navigating similar challenges. Across the exercises and discussions, three key themes emerged, which are summarised below, and then expanded on in subsequent sections:

¹ [Ireland: Systems innovation for the transition to a climate-neutral agri-food sector - Climate-KIC](#)

1. Situating Change in the National Story

A deep-rooted connection to land and farming is part of Irish national culture and identity. Given this reality, efforts to promote new approaches can only be successful through a full understanding of the specific cultural and historical context within which they will be received. In Ireland, the narratives used to sustain the status quo are rooted in resonant collective historical experiences, which must be fully analysed and understood to identify the barriers and sources of tension behind resistance to change, as well as how best to make the case for a sustainable agri-food system. More generally, this kind of contextual analysis is a necessary step in any country where similar efforts are taking place.



2. Farmers at the Forefront

Farmers are at the frontline of changing agricultural practices, tasked with implementing the practical realities of the climate transition on the ground.

Because of this, farmers can often experience feelings of imposition and unfairness due to overbearing expectations and responsibility. Part of an approach to responding to the concerns of farmers is fostering a realistic sense of agency that supports farmer voices taking a lead in sustainable agricultural practices. Understanding the delicate balance between offering agency and empowerment, while sharing responsibility, is a key challenge in building and sustaining farmer support for climate transition.



3. A Creative, Collaborative Challenge

Given the deep-rooted role of culture and the sometimes-unreasonable expectations placed on farmers described in our first two themes, the final theme plots out a way of addressing both. The future of Ireland, and the wider world, depends on imagining and achieving new visions of the agri-food system. While creative, collaborative solutions are already being developed at a local level, these approaches and the scale of the issue must be recognised at a regional and national level too. Long-term thinking is essential, with a cross-generational approach that centres discussions on imagining what it might look like to 'live better'. Ultimately, this requires collective innovation and creativity, and specific practical infrastructure to start this collaborative process.



About the Authors

Future Narratives Lab is a non-profit research and development initiative that partners with organisations tackling complex and entrenched social challenges.

Through narrative analysis and mapping, strategic reframing, and message development & testing, their work helps organisations across Europe and beyond understand the assumptions and belief systems that act as barriers or opportunities for change, enabling them to reach new audiences, improve their strategy and positioning, and ultimately create a more just and equal future.

Climate-KIC is Europe's leading climate innovation agency and community, supporting cities, regions, countries, and industries to meet their climate ambitions through systems innovation and place-based transformations.

Together with their partners, they generate, implement and integrate climate solutions by mobilising finance, testing business models, and opening pathways for institutional change and behavioural change. They orchestrate large-scale demonstrations that show what is possible when cycles of innovation and learning are deliberately designed to trigger exponential decarbonisation and build resilient communities.

About the Deep Demonstration Partnership

Agriculture is not only Ireland's largest domestic sector, but it has profound ties to the country's social and cultural fabric. There are approximately 135,000 farms² scattered across the country, with an average size of 33 hectares, with family-run farms often going back many generations.

The agri-food sector is now at a crossroads. On the one hand, it contributes 38%³ to Ireland's overall greenhouse gas emissions. On the other hand, it has embraced the climate transition, pledging⁴ to cut emissions by 25% by 2030, and do its part to reach a climate-neutral economy by 2050, in line with the EU commitments.

A crucial effort in achieving this ambitious, long-term vision is ensuring generational renewal in farming, as recommended by the recent [Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture](#), with Ireland setting up a dedicated commission to examine the complex factors involved⁵.

Among many agri-climate actions, since 2022, Climate-KIC has also been supporting the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to bridge the gap between these ambitious commitments and reality, building on its experience of designing and leading systems change and innovation programmes for fifteen years.

Together with 24 core partner organisations, ranging from farming associations and cooperatives to government agencies and investment funds, Climate-KIC has been applying its '[Deep Demonstration](#)' model of innovation to the entire land, agri-food and bioeconomy value chain.

To date, they have worked with over 500 key actors from both public and private sectors (including farmers, start-ups, educators, and civil society) to develop and deploy a range ('portfolio') of coordinated solutions across **four flagship innovation areas**:

² [European Commission, Ireland CAP Strategic Plan](#)

³ [Environmental Protection Agency \(2024\)](#)

⁴ [Food Vision 2030](#)

⁵ Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (2024), [Minister welcomes the first meeting of Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming](#)

- Diversify incomes through carbon farming and nature credit frameworks;
- Accelerate emission reduction and sustainability in dairy farms;
- Implement circular bioeconomy models at regional or multiple value chains level;
- Vision 2050: re-imagine Ireland's land and agri-food system.

These areas are underpinned by over 280 new and existing activities and projects – stemming from a comprehensive mapping of the agri-food system⁶ and the most promising innovation pathways⁷ identified by the partnership – many of which are being implemented by a lively [community](#) of partners and members at the intersection of farming, innovation, policy and finance.

⁶ EIT Climate-KIC (2023), [Ireland's land and agri-food system map](#)

⁷ EIT Climate-KIC (2023), [Dealing with climate change and sustainability targets: the innovation potential for the Irish agri-food sector](#)

Key Themes

Across the Narrative Analysis Workshop and Online Summit, many topics and themes were discussed. We have attempted to capture as many of these as possible in the Additional Insights section below, but running throughout were three key threads, which we summarise here.

1. Situating Change in the National Story

Pride in Ireland's Food Production

Agriculture is deeply ingrained in Irish national identity, inspired by a rich history and culture in food production. Over two-thirds of Ireland's land is used for agriculture⁸, reflecting a strong tradition in family-run farming enterprises, particularly in dairy and beef production. This vast agricultural productivity is a source of national pride and Ireland is seen as one of the world's leaders in producing high-quality food for domestic and international markets. The Irish landscape of lush green fields and rolling pastures is emblematic of both the land's viability for farming and the nation's enduring connection to the cultural traditions around farming. To its inhabitants, Ireland's agricultural heritage symbolises resilience and a shared cultural legacy, connecting people to the land they live on.

Barriers of Existing Narratives

One particular way that this agricultural pride is articulated and reinforced in Ireland is through the quantity of food that the country exports. Ireland's contribution to the global food system is captured by the common narrative that the country is 'feeding the world'. As a point of pride, this narrative is used as an implicit and powerful rationale for upholding Ireland's current agricultural practices. Ireland's role in global food production is used as a rationale for maintaining the status quo, despite the increasingly urgent environmental crisis that requires a reconsideration of current practices and an openness to change.

⁸ [Project MUSE - Land use and environmental quality in Ireland over two decades of contrasting agricultural trends](#)

Unfortunately, as has been pointed out many times, the idea of Ireland ‘feeding the world’ is not entirely accurate: it doesn’t consider the substantial imports needed to produce those exports.⁹ But despite this, the narrative persists in Ireland, with deep roots in national identity that protect it against facts that threaten its story. Such beliefs, especially those with emotional and cultural ties, are often resistant to change, even in the face of compelling counter evidence.

Specific Historical Experience

Part of shifting these narratives involves understanding their connections to Ireland’s specific historical experience. Ireland’s Great Famine from 1845-1852 is a source of lasting trauma that has shaped an enduring sensitivity around food security. The recovery of the country and the subsequent thriving nature of its agri-food production stands out with great significance across this historical backdrop. Thus, a narrative around the importance of ‘feeding the world’ — and by implication providing for the hungry — resonates strongly within Ireland, helping to explain its persistence.

Drawing Inspiration from a Tradition of Change

However, Ireland’s perspective on agriculture and national identity has been reimagined in the past and there’s no reason why it can’t be again. There has been cultural renewal throughout Ireland’s history and the contributions of poets and artists have historically played a pivotal role. Leveraging existing connections to cultural identity presents an opportunity to reinvigorate the narrative around agriculture. Drawing parallels to the Irish revival a century ago — a time marked by significant agricultural transformation — Professor P.J. Mathews, Director of the Creative Futures Academy at University College Dublin, emphasises the importance of dialogue between social organisers and cultural figures, which successfully navigated the nation from the devastation of famine to a secure identity, with agriculture at its core.¹⁰ In this way, historical traditions can be used as a springboard for change.

Understanding this full historical context highlights both the challenges and opportunities of a reframing of the narrative of Ireland’s agricultural sector, one that aligns environmental responsibility and climate transitions with a sense of cultural pride.

⁹ [Ireland - Agricultural Sector](#)

¹⁰ [P.J. Mathews Publications | University College Dublin](#)

Summary Points

- The key role agriculture plays in Ireland's national identity and pride illuminates barriers to environmental reform; however, it can also lead us towards possible opportunities for creating lasting change.
- While Ireland's agricultural traditions symbolise resilience and community, this pride is sometimes articulated through the narrative of 'feeding the world', which can be used to maintain current practices against change.
- Ireland's specific historical experience as a nation that endured famine makes this narrative particularly resonant, highlighting just one example of the importance of understanding the depth of cultural beliefs and identity.
- Farming in Ireland has always adapted and will continue to do so — the focus must shift to innovation and imagination, just as it has in the past, allowing Ireland to emerge as a leader in addressing current agricultural challenges.

2. Farmers at the Forefront

As frontline agents of change, farmers play a vital role in a climate transition, not only in Ireland. Globally, farmers find themselves at the centre of intense debates regarding the future of agriculture. The visible evidence of these discussions is reflected in farmer protests around the world, which, while not always directly related to climate issues, are frequently intertwined with broader concerns about the transition. The sentiments and perspectives of farmers are essential for fostering widespread support for sustainable practices, as they are tasked with implementing these changes in their daily work.

Responsibility and Expectations

The climate transition is often viewed as an issue of broad systemic change; however, in practice, this change requires farmers, particularly, to do things differently. This can lead to farmers to feel they're being uniquely tasked with carrying out all of the changes on the ground. The responsibility of farmers in this transition can often feel like a burden, especially due to the isolated nature of farmers' work, which can take a toll on mental health.

Additionally, the way in which responsibilities have been allocated can produce a notion of 'moving goalposts', where expectations around practices are seen to frequently shift without warning, adding to farmer frustration. While consistency in requirements in practice is key to addressing these concerns of farmers, scientific research, innovation, and, thus, recommendations are likely to continue to evolve; consequently how these shifts in expectations are framed and communicated to farmers is also of great significance.

Realistic Agency

One approach that could respond to farmers' feelings of uncertainty around expectations is increasing farmer agency. A major part of achieving this is practical: giving farmers power and a voice. However, it is also important to get beyond the individual, into the collective. Support from others is essential to real agency and, rather than approaches involving farmers alone, we must consider those involving farmers *with* others, including consumers and beyond (which will be expanded upon in the third theme below). This fostering of realistic agency thus requires consideration of a full spectrum of viewpoints: How do farmers see the climate transition? How do people see farmers in the climate transition? How does everyone see their current and future role in the transition together?

Foregrounding Leadership

Ultimately, successfully centering farmers in the conversation around a climate transition in agriculture is about leadership. This includes showcasing and celebrating the farmers that are using innovation and creativity to embrace change and address environmental concerns. Farmers should be given the conceptual and practical tools required to change their practices, and part of this involves foregrounding those that are taking the lead in these areas. However, this involves striking a delicate balance: farmers should be made the heroes, but should not be expected to carry all of the weight on their shoulders. Giving examples, connecting to traditions, evoking pride and recognising farmer contributions are all viable avenues for foregrounding farmer leadership.

Summary Points

- Farmers are often at the frontlines of change, meaning they must be considered as key players in the conversations surrounding any kind of agricultural transition.
- The sense of unfair and ever-changing expectations, as well as the heavy responsibility, placed on farmers is a source of tension in the transition to sustainable agriculture, emphasising that consistency of practices and the framing of new expectations is important.
- Striking a balance between granting farmers agency and not expecting them to shoulder the entire burden of the transition is critical and involves support from other individuals and groups involved in the agri-food system.
- Foregrounding farmer leadership within the climate transition can be one approach to ensuring farmers are at the forefront of the conversation, backed-up and supported by others.
- Ultimately, the way farmers perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others plays a vital role in this discussion.

3. A Creative, Collaborative Challenge

While highlighting the unique contributions of farmers is critical, the responsibility for sustainable agriculture cannot fall solely on them; it's a challenge that demands broad societal involvement. With this in mind, our third theme explores the kinds of perspectives and ambition that will be necessary for this to happen.

A National, Creative Collaboration

The climate transition will require societal-level transformation, affecting agricultural practices themselves, as well as the cultural foundations that deeply tie agriculture to Irish national identity and history. Recognising the scale of this challenge means acknowledging the vast effort required — not just on a technical level, but culturally.

The gravity of the issue must be met by creative action at a national level, recognised as such across government and wider society. Bringing together diverse perspectives to tackle the challenge through creative collaboration at a national level is a necessary part of the process of driving a genuine collective movement toward a sustainable future.

At the workshop, we learned about one of these cultural collaborations through the example of [Hometree](#). Hometree does inspiring work in the west of Ireland and exemplifies what this collective action can look like in practice: bringing farmers, artists, and creatives together to reflect on Ireland's evolving landscape and the role of forestry in a sustainable future.

Multi-Generational Visions

The scale and complexity of the agricultural system in Ireland, as elsewhere, means that the necessary changes will be a long-term effort, requiring sustained planning as well as imaginative visions for the future. The timescales involved, as well as the realities of farmer demographics, make it particularly important to value, centre, and uplift the voices of the youth and of future generations. Only by including these perspectives in the conversation can we effectively plan and move past today's norms to imagine solutions that address both immediate and enduring challenges, while taking into consideration everyone implementing and living with those changes.

One of the main pillars of the Irish Literary Revival was a focus on 'living better', addressing questions of why we live and what we value, and urging consideration of the lives we want to lead. Taking this narrative into today, we can see its use in shifting the narrative from one of consumption to one that centres on true well-being, fulfilment, and connection for future generations. Engaging imaginations around what

aligns with the idea of ‘living better’ can inspire collective and cross-generational aspiration for a sustainable and fulfilling future.

Building Creative Infrastructure

For the creative collaborations required to take place, it will require more than imagination and enthusiasm — infrastructure needs to be built to support and sustain them. Feedback from the Narrative Analysis Workshop highlighted the desire for a new network or community to share resources, collaborate, and build momentum to address these challenges at the scale needed. Participants in the Online Summit also voiced their desire to connect with people in the climate and agriculture space to build connections and partnerships. Given the resources committed to the climate transition as a whole, and the crucial role that creative collaboration can play in supporting it, a collective effort to design and find funding for a platform for ongoing collaboration seems a necessary and urgent next step.

Summary Points

- Creativity and imagination play an indispensable role in all system change and transition work, and the climate transition in Ireland is no exception. Alongside the necessary practical changes, a creative, collaborative effort at a national scale is needed, bringing together diverse voices, skills and disciplines.
- Cross-generational input is key in creating long-term visions around what the future of agriculture could look like and what it truly means to ‘live better’.
- Recognising culture and imagination as central to this journey is critical in this collective reimagining of Ireland's (and Europe's) agricultural future. This vision will only thrive with tangible infrastructure such as networks, communities, and spaces for ongoing collaboration to take place.
- Overall, our hope is that this Reframing Food Futures project spawns a multitude of projects and collaborations designed to bring together diverse perspectives to confront the cultural dimensions of this challenge, and explore innovative paths forward.

Additional Insights

While there were three main themes that were extracted from the Narrative Analysis Workshop to build upon during the Online Summit, there were several other topics of conversation that arose. Many of these additional takeaways were both constructive to the ongoing dialogue and provided insight into the various and diverse narratives that exist surrounding the agri-food system in Ireland. Participants particularly engaged in a critical examination of the narrative challenges and opportunities of local and global food systems, highlighting the necessity of balancing sustainability with productivity. As the workshop progressed, participants envisioned a long-term outlook for Ireland's sustainable food systems, emphasising the need for innovative solutions that integrate scientific advancements with cultural values.

1. Narrative Challenges

There are several key narrative challenges surrounding food security and supply chains, particularly the tension between local and global approaches. Participants critically examined Ireland's role in global food production, questioning the common narrative of 'feeding the world' and underscoring the importance of prioritising resilient local food systems over yielding to global market pressures. This focus on local systems emphasises a shift toward food security that serves Irish communities first, building sustainable practices from the ground up. Additionally, the group challenged prevailing perceptions of sustainability as a burden, instead emphasising that sustainability and productivity must go hand-in-hand. Balancing environmental stewardship with agricultural output is not only feasible but essential to ensuring long-term resilience in Ireland's food systems.

2. Opportunities

There are also several narrative opportunities for advancing sustainable agriculture in Ireland. Participants emphasised the potential to promote narratives centred on healthy, sustainably produced food through collaboration with chefs and restaurants. This collaboration could create a ripple effect, encouraging consumers to prioritise local and sustainable food sources. Additionally, the importance of narratives that focus on building community and fostering a sense of agency for farmers would allow for a more inclusive dialogue around sustainability between policymakers and key stakeholders (e.g., farmers, consumers).

3. Long-Term Outlook

Discussions extended to envisioning Ireland's role in sustainable food systems by 2030 and beyond, emphasising the need for innovative, long-term solutions that bridge scientific advancements with cultural values.

Knowledge and innovation play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. Sharing ideas and connecting people – farmers, foresters, researchers, advisors, and rural communities – will be key to finding practical, lasting solutions. For example, [Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan](#) supports initiatives like [Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems](#) (AKIS), which foster collaboration and knowledge exchange. Efforts like this are essential in a long-term outlook because they promote innovation in agriculture, forestry, and land use while also supporting biodiversity and climate goals.

Reframing Food Futures: Dublin Workshop and Online Summit

1. Overview

The one-day collaborative Narrative Analysis Workshop was facilitated by Caroline Hickson and held at Airfield Estate in Dublin, Ireland on 12th September 2024. It convened a diverse group of stakeholders from various sectors including agriculture, environmental advocacy, policymaking, and media to analyse the beliefs and assumptions shaping Ireland's sustainable food and farming future. Expert speakers shared insights and participants engaged in interactive debates and exercises. Discussions reflected deep engagement and a shared commitment to rethinking narratives around Ireland's approach to food production and sustainability.



The Online Summit, held on 29th October 2024, aimed to build on the insights from the in-person Dublin workshop, expanding the discussion to a wider audience. The event highlighted key findings on Ireland's agricultural challenges and opportunities in the context of climate resilience, exploring the role of cultural narratives, farmer perspectives, and collaborative solutions in driving climate transitions. The summit involved an expert panel discussion with Ailbhe Gerrard (Sustainable farmer and owner of Brookfield Farm); Professor P.J. Mathews (Director of the Creative Futures Academy at University College Dublin); and Laura Costello (Head of Sustainability & Planet Services at Thinkhouse).

2. Objectives

The objectives of the workshop were to map and analyse the landscape of beliefs and assumptions underlying the debates around a sustainable future for food and farming in Ireland. Involved in this was assessing the range of views and perspectives on the transition to a sustainable agri-food sector in Ireland and analysing these views to understand the values, beliefs and stories they connect to, and how they present barriers and opportunities. The goal was to use this knowledge to create ideas for narrative approaches that can overcome divides and show a positive way forward.



The workshop agenda included structured sessions to:

1. Understand cultural landscapes influencing the transition to a climate-neutral agri-food sector
2. Explore how diverse values and worldviews impact support or resistance to change
3. Identify barriers, opportunities, and plan next steps for collaboration

The Online Summit was designed to summarise the topics discussed during the in-person Narrative Analysis Workshop in Dublin and expand upon the main themes through a panel discussion with experts. The online format allowed the findings of the workshop to reach a wider audience, bringing new perspectives and ideas to the workshop's findings.



The objectives of the summit were to

1. Share knowledge from the Dublin workshop and build upon the three key themes that arose
2. Hear from experts on the narrative landscape in Ireland surrounding sustainable future for food and farming
3. Discuss the application of these learnings to both the wider field and the European context

Summary & Next Steps

The Reframing Food Futures Narrative Analysis Workshop and Online Summit have underscored both the opportunities and challenges in shaping the narratives around Ireland's agri-food system as it transitions toward a climate neutral agricultural sector. Participants explored how deeply rooted cultural ties to the land and farming influence public perceptions and policy, the necessary central role of farmers in the climate transition, and the requirement of innovative, collaborative, and creative national approaches across sectors and generations.

Climate-KIC: A 2050 vision for the Irish agri-food sector

One of Climate-KIC's areas of focus is re-imagining the future of Ireland's land and agri-food systems for 2050, with the objective to create a long-term, ambitious vision to guide existing initiatives in the right direction, to explore sustainable opportunities for the sector, to align with policy processes – such as the [Land Use Review](#) and [Generational Renewal](#) – and to attract investment.

Over 2024, extensive dialogue and consultation with groups representative of a variety of Irish demographics – farmers, industry, academia, creative sectors – is helping Climate-KIC to develop concrete scenarios for 2050, offering opportunities for new engagement strategies towards the public and supporting ongoing modelling efforts by Teagasc and other partners. This comprehensive framework will also help guide the development of other innovation areas, from carbon farming to dairy to circular bioeconomy.

If you're interested in collaborating or connecting with a community of innovators in the regenerative agriculture and climate space, please contact stewart.gee@climate-kic.org, and make sure to subscribe for updates [here](#).

Future Narratives Lab: Reframing Food Futures

For Future Narratives Lab, this means continuing to keep the wider Reframing Food Futures project alive. We are eager to form new partnerships and connections to bring together key stakeholders operating in the agricultural and climate space, in Ireland and beyond. If you are interested in connecting and being part of the next Reframing Food Futures workshop and summit, please contact daniel@futurenarrativeslab.org. To keep up to date with our other work, subscribe on the bottom of our homepage [here](#).

