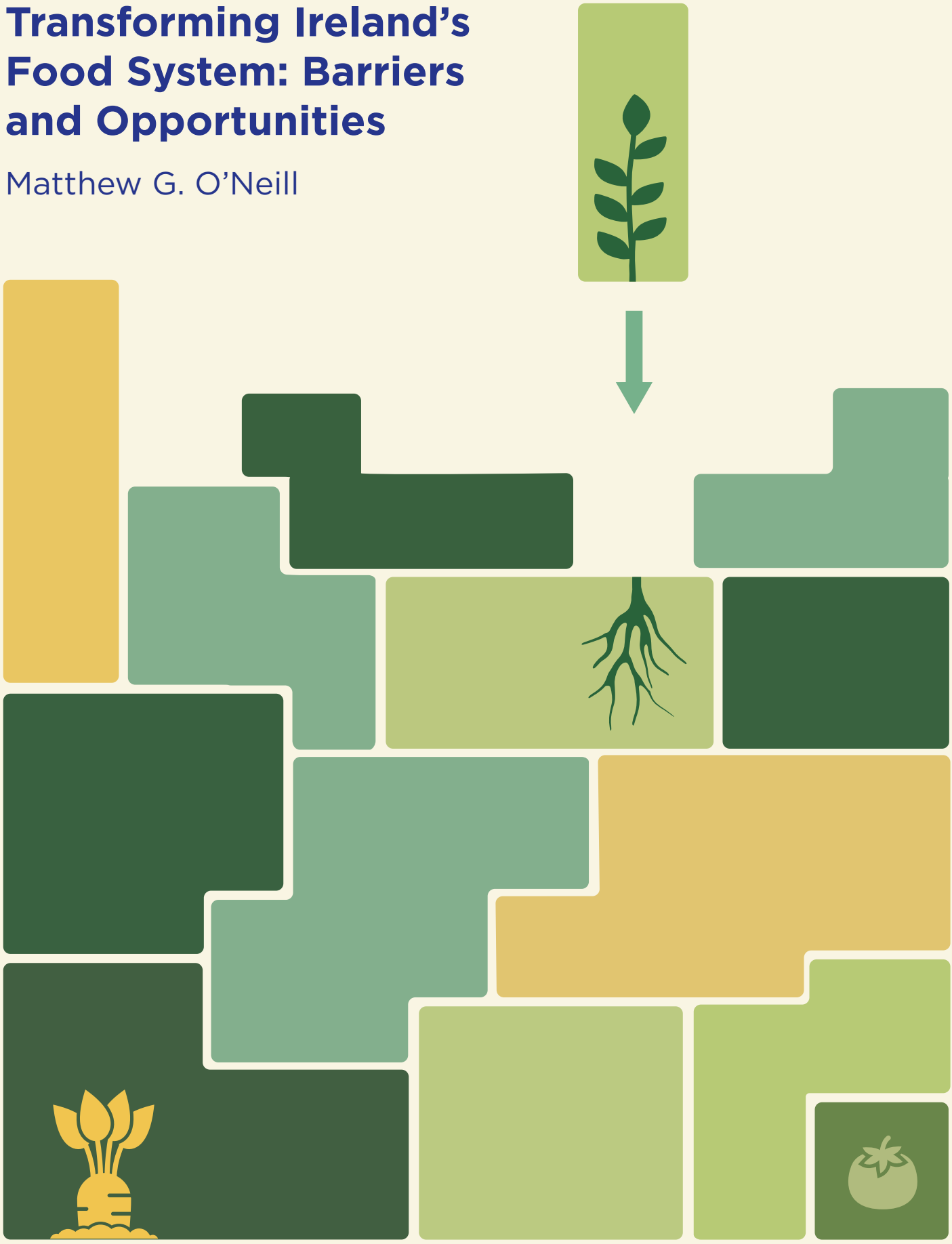
Transforming Ireland's Food System: Barriers and Opportunities

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This report is part of a report series examining how food systems across the EU and the UK could deliver better climate, health and equity outcomes, looking at seven countries (UK, Germany, France, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands and Ireland) and the EU level. It examines the activities of changemakers in Ireland, the barriers they face and the needs they express to overcome them and to seize opportunities that can be identified. The objective is to better align research and funding with action and accelerate food system transformation.

The analysis is grounded in a series of interviews with changemakers all over the country. It is part of a project supported by the Wellcome Trust, in order to better understand how it can strengthen its impact on the food system in Europe** and UK.

You can find more details on the Wellcome Trust Foundation website.

Executive Summary

Ireland's agrifood sector stands as a foundational pillar of the national economy. The sector represents the oldest and largest indigenous exporting industry in the State's history, significantly contributing to employment, GDP and foreign policy. At the same time, the agricultural industry accounts for 37% of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions, which is above the EU average of around 10%, posing a significant challenge for Ireland to meet its 2030 and 2050 national climate targets.

Ireland's current situation is not isolated; it highlights a broader European issue. Moreover, there is a growing need to align climate goals and public health obligations by using evidence-based research and developing more sustainable value chains. Ireland has the unique opportunity to harness the latent energy of farmers, researchers, and overall communities to establish a more inclusive and interactive direction. Although food systems transformation is essential for meeting climate and health goals, dietary change remains marginal in the Irish policy debates. As such, this research examines how actors across local, political and market spaces are working to transform Ireland's food system.

This study identifies several barriers facing actors engaged in administering change. First, the influence of dairy and meat interests, highly concentrated supply chains, supportive subsidy and credit regimes make it risky for decision-makers to endorse meaningful dietary and production shifts. Additionally, actors are frequently experiencing capacity and funding gaps which hinder coordination and long-term development. Thirdly, actors acknowledge how despite a growing literature on food systems, there remains an evidence-to-practice gap. Citing the need to make context-specific literature more accessible to develop knowledge that supports the practice of change.

This research establishes several strategic priorities and recommendations based on the need to: validate alternative production models; provide long-term operational funding; bridge innovation and training gaps; and fund connective policy infrastructure. Together, these priorities offer a pathway towards a more inclusive, resilient and sustainable Irish food system that aligns agricultural livelihoods with climate and public health goals.

Key Findings

The power of lobbies and lock-ins: dairy and meat interests, highly concentrated supply chains, and supportive subsidy and credit regimes together make it risky for decision-makers to endorse meaningful dietary and production shifts.

Capacity and funding gaps: many of the most innovative or equity-focused actors operate on short-term project grants, with little core support for coordination.

A persistent evidence–practice gap: change makers describe an abundance of research but a shortage of synthesised, context-specific, accessible knowledge that answers their practical questions about "what works, for whom, at what cost, and who wins or loses".

Introduction

The agri-food sector is Ireland's oldest and largest indigenous exporting industry, and its expansion into new markets has become a crucial component of the Irish economy and, in recent decades, of its foreign policy. The agriculture sector remains a cornerstone of Ireland's economy, serving as both a major employer and a contributor to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Playing a key role in Ireland's economy, the agriculture sector makes up 6% of the country's adjusted Gross National Income (GNI)[1] and employed 173,000 people in 2023. While the agri-food sector is an integral part of the Irish economy, there is increasing awareness of agriculture as a major source of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and nitrogen surpluses, which creates wider challenges such as water pollution and biodiversity loss (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2024).

A symptom of its economic significance, agriculture is Ireland's largest source of GHG emissions, responsible for 37.8% of the nation's total emissions. Emissions from Irish agriculture are primarily methane and nitrous oxide due to ruminant livestock. Dairy farming, while economically robust, produces disproportionately high emissions per hectare compared to other farming systems. Furthermore, the Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF) sector has transitioned from being a carbon sink to a net emissions source, largely due to peatland degradation and reduced afforestation rates.

Ireland's high share of greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture creates a distinctive challenge compared to other EU Member States, where agriculture typically represents around 10% of total emissions. The challenge lies in balancing the sector's economic contribution with the need to meet climate targets, including a 25% relative to 2018 levels in agricultural emissions by 2030 and contributing to climate neutrality by 2050 (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022). Broader understanding of these issues has led to a growing interest and participation of public discussions on food systems in Ireland.

In the Irish context, Ireland's food system is shaped by an agricultural model and policy debate that feature little discussion of dietary change. The Irish agricultural landscape has changed dramatically since 2010 and the introduction of its Food Harvest 2020 policy, which established a blueprint for agricultural policy expansion after the 2008 economic crisis. Problems like environmental impact, market volatility, and farm income that were identified then still challenge the different groups in the agricultural ecosystem today.

Despite relevant policy development, interventions aimed at shifting diets remain marginal even though they are needed for climate and health goals. This research explores the role in which various actors in Ireland are contributing to transforming food systems locally, politically and through markets. Overall, changemakers are working along multiple routes to transform the system. Among those interviewed, actors themselves believe they face entrenched systemic and operational barriers that require better evidence and sustained support to foster collaboration for better organised grassroots capacity.

Achieving success in transforming food systems will require unprecedented cooperation between policymakers, farmers, and other stakeholders, a theme that will be explored further in this research. Systemic change will need to account for environmental imperatives, economic considerations, and food security. Development of the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund and similar instruments may provide important financial mechanisms to support this transition (Department of Finance, 2024). While there are challenges to the implementation of Sustainable Land Management (SLM) practices for improving the environment, including relatively low levels of adoption of policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the agricultural sector is improving its emissions intensity. Moreover, this study affirms that there is a potential for improving emissions further with the support of appropriate financial, policy, and institutional frameworks.

1 Modified Gross National Income (GNI*) is an indicator of the size of the Irish economy that adjusts national income to remove certain effects of globalisation.

1. Looking Back: Overview of National Policy and Food Consumption Context

1.1. Food Consumption in Ireland

The figures used in this section are based on the WT[2] apparent-consumption data set. While these figures contain some uncertainties, they nevertheless provide a useful window into the current state of play in the Irish context.

In 2000, the apparent-consumption of the average Irish citizen was approximately 95kg of meat. Recently, estimates showed the average Irish citizen's apparent-consumption is approximately 98-99kg of meat. This places Ireland above the majority of the EU in terms of availability of animal protein. Ireland is a net meat exporter. Therefore, the meat supply is high, and prices are low compared to countries that do not produce as much meat.

Dairy, and especially milk, have seen the most dramatic increase in apparent-consumption, with per capita[3] milk supply jumping by about 46% since 2010, from 223kg to 324kg per person in 2023. This is more than double the average increase seen across the EU27, underlining Ireland's position as a dairy powerhouse in Europe. This expansion has turned dairy into a central economic engine, with strong export growth but also very high apparent availability for Irish consumers.

In contrast, the combined supply of fruit and vegetables in Ireland has slipped slightly, falling from 298kg per person in 2010 to 293kg in 2023, a decline of 1.8%, despite public health messages encouraging higher intake. Although Ireland's absolute per capita supply of fruit and vegetables remains higher than the EU average of 292kg versus 238kg, this stagnation further affirms concerns about meeting dietary guidelines of at least 400g per day (World Health Organization, 2018, p. 2). Combined with rising food prices and deprivation indicators, there is a risk that lower income households may cut back on fresh produce first, deepening nutritional gaps even when national supply appears relatively high.

Taken together, the apparent consumption data indicates that Ireland's food system continues to deliver high and growing availability of animal-source foods, while the supply of fruit and vegetables has stagnated. This demonstrates that current policies are not supporting a balanced diet, further reinforcing a structural imbalance in the Irish diet, in which production and export strengths in meat and dairy are not matched by sufficient or resilient provision of fresh produce. This structural imbalance in the Irish diet has implications for nutrition, equity, and dietary resilience.

1.2. Evolution of Food Policy in Ireland

1.2.1. Evolution of food and agri-food policy in Ireland since 2010

Irish policies explicitly designed to shape nutritional intake, dietary patterns, and food security are characterised by a limited and fragmented policy landscape. This research identifies that there is a gap between agricultural production strategy and nutritional policy, for example, when production targets focus on dairy and meat while fruit and vegetable supply is left behind.

In 2010, the Irish Government published its Food Harvest 2020 strategy. This strategy detailed a revised agricultural policy. This revision was a response by the Irish Government to the Irish economy's severe contraction post-2008. The strategy set a number of production targets for various foodstuffs. These targets included a stipulation to increase Irish dairy production by 50% by the year 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2010).

Moreover, the policy ignored the demand aspect of food security. Concentrating on the supply side of food security raised competition and marked distortions in Irish agricultural markets. This situation established a policy contradiction between food production and climate goals. This contradiction is the basis for many of the issues surrounding Irish

2 The Wellcome Trust (officially known as Wellcome) is a politically and financially independent global charitable foundation based in London.

3 Per capita food supply is the quantity of food available for human consumption divided by the population. It is a national average, not a measure of individual dietary intake.

food and agriculture policy today.

In 2015, the Irish Government introduced the Food Wise 2025 strategy. The policy proposed "sustainable intensification" and emphasised the leveraging of Ireland's environmental approach to attract international buyers. While the strategy introduced Irelands ten-year strategic plan for the agri-food, fisheries, and forestry sectors, it was more effective in advertising Ireland's position as an exporter (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2015).

As such, the strategy shows the production-diet disconnect and highlights how agricultural policy as well as food and nutrition policy often run on almost separate tracks. Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025 are fundamentally supply-side strategies. While the more recent Food Vision 2030 does fall into this category it does so to a lesser extent, as it distinctively aims to develop an approach to food-systems.

Food Vision 2030 was launched in 2021, incorporating the Government of Ireland's Climate commitments, including the target of a climate-neutral food system by 2050. The strategy is the first to make a direct connection with food, health, and the environment for Ireland and is a leading framework for other countries. It makes it clear that Ireland sees that its future competitive advantage lies in being able to demonstrate the highest standards of sustainability (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2021).

While Food Vision 2030 does not set specific dietary targets, it does support one main diet-related policy: the Food Product Reformulation Roadmap 2021–2025, which highlighted the importance of reducing salt, sugar, saturated fat, and calories in processed foods (Obesity Policy Implementation Oversight Group Reformulation Sub-Group, 2021).

The most direct state intervention in dietary patterns is the expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme, which provides meals to Irish primary schoolchildren. Beyond school meals, food security policy is defined primarily by the 2024 Food Poverty Action Plan, which frames food poverty as an affordability and access issue rooted in inadequate income rather than a food system problem (Department of Social Protection, 2023; Food Poverty Working Group, 2024).

Finally, the 2025 Programme for Government sets out the agreed policy measures to be pursued by the governing coalition for the next parliamentary period. It commits to sustained action to tackle the climate crisis, recommitting to the 2030 and 2050 targets in the Climate Act, and proposes to set ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 (Government of Ireland, 2025). It also states it will continue to publish the annual Climate Action Plan (Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021; Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2025). Under the heading 'Supporting a Sustainable Transition in Agriculture', the programme acknowledges the special economic and social role of agriculture and the distinct characteristics of biogenic methane[4], and pledges to support the progress made to date by farmers and industry in reducing emissions.

Taken together, these policy developments illustrate a persistent structural separation between agricultural production strategy, climate policy, and nutritional or food security objectives in Ireland. Agri-food policies have changed in discourse over time but have continued to display a similar export- and supply-driven policy structure with few policy tools for influencing food, diet, or domestically produced food.

1.2.2 How the Food Issues have Gradually Emerged

As a result, there has been much missing in the governance of food, including policies to tackle food insecurity in the domestic realm and policies to encourage healthier diets. As such, an increasing number of equity movements, grassroots and civil society organisations have tried to address these policy gaps. In the following section, the progression of the food debate in Ireland will be explored to identify how food has become part of the public debate.

Key civil society coalitions have formed to advocate for more transformative food system change. The Environmental Pillar, established in 2009 as a coalition of 32 national environmental Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), has become increasingly engaged in agricultural and food policy advocacy. In April 2021, the Environmental Pillar, alongside

4 Biogenic methane is methane generated through biological processes, including those associated with livestock digestion and the decomposition of organic material. "Biogenic" describes its origin; it should not be used as a synonym for climate-neutral.

the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition and the Sustainable Water Network, published "Towards a New Agricultural and Food Policy for Ireland", a position paper containing ten priority recommendations focused on aligning agriculture with ecological limits and environmental commitments (Environmental Pillar, Stop Climate Chaos and Sustainable Water Network, 2021). The objectives of the proposals were to decrease the import of basic foods and increase Irish food production from Irish agriculture rather than a focus on exports.

There are also examples of movements emerging at the grassroots level. *Talamh Beo*, which is a network of farmers and those involved in the land, are now the only members of *La Via Campesina* in Ireland. *La Via Campesina* is a network of more than 180 organisations from 82 countries which advocates for agroecology[5], regeneration in agriculture, food, energy and fibre autonomy (O'Connell, 2025). Community-supported agriculture networks, including CSA Network Ireland (established 2015) and initiatives like Cloughjordan Community Farm, represent growing grassroots alternatives emphasising local, sustainable food production.

While not absent from policy discourse before 2022, food poverty and household food insecurity have become increasingly prominent policy issues (Barnardos, 2024, pp. 6–7). The Barnardo's 2024 report on food insecurity drew significant media and policy attention, highlighting that food poverty had shifted from a chronic issue affecting vulnerable populations to an acute crisis affecting broad swaths of working-class families (RTÉ, 2024).

This shift has generated nascent policy responses. Child welfare organisations have called for the expansion of school meal programs to secondary schools pilot programmes to address out-of-term hunger, and additional supports to low-income families (Barnardos, 2024, p. 11). Although the Government has responded with increased funding for school meals programs and introduced targeted welfare payments, civil society organisations argue these responses remain insufficient given the scale of need.

In Ireland, agri-food policy has evolved rhetorically towards sustainability and food-systems thinking. However, it remains largely supply-driven, with limited instruments to shape diets or domestic food provision. This misalignment between production strategy, health objectives, and food security has allowed food issues to enter public debate, not through coherent, state-led food policy integration, but through civil society advocacy, grassroots initiatives, and rising food insecurity.

2. Overview of the Main Groups and Individuals Driving Change in the Field Organized by their Roles and Approaches

2.1 Strategies and the use of research among Irish Actors

Thirteen people were interviewed as part of this study, including: three economic actors from across the food chain; three representatives of the civil society and not-for-profit organisations; three government and policy actors; two financial and funder organisations; and two experts actively engaged in food systems change. The interviews reflect the participants' experiences, perceptions and overall assessments of the agri-food sector. The analysis presented here aims to reflect these accounts and relate them to the wider policy and research context.

This sample included several of the key organisations described earlier in the national landscape, such as *Talamh Beo* alongside prominent co-operatives, local food initiatives, and public health or policy actors. This ensured that the interviews reflected the main strands of debate and practice in Irish agrifood and diet shift discussions. Most interviewees have actively taken part in efforts to shape the agri-food system in Ireland, though each has, of course, approached that change from different positions. Those from policy-facing organisations and academic institutions offered a strategically focused approach in which they contributed to national frameworks and advisory panels and processes such as Food Vision 2030, health and obesity policy, and the climate advisory committee. Interestingly, co-ops, local authorities and civil society organisations were very similar in their outlook and had an on-the-ground approach to creating change. (Please see Table 2.1 for a full interviewee breakdown).

The analysis situates these actors within the the three routes to transformation identified in the EU–UK typology: the

5 Agroecology is an approach to food and farming that applies ecological and social principles to develop environmentally sustainable and socially equitable food systems.

local route, the policy route, and the market route.

The local route operates through community-led initiatives, grassroots movements, and place-based action. Change

emerges from civil society organisations, local food networks, and citizen engagement. This route emphasises participation, democratic governance, and social values over scale or standardisation. Its primary actors include community organisations, local activists, and grassroots networks.

The policy route operates through state-led regulation, agricultural policy, and public institutions. Change is mandated through legislative frameworks (e.g., Common Agricultural Policy), implemented by government departments, and enforced through compliance mechanisms. The state acts as the primary agent of change, with farmers and food businesses responding to policy signals. Primary actors of the policy route include government departments, elected representatives, and regulatory bodies.

The market route operates through business innovation, private investment, and consumer demand. Change is driven by entrepreneurs developing new products or business models, corporate sustainability strategies, and market differentiation. Success depends on profitability, scalability, and competitive advantage rather than regulatory compliance. Primary actors in this regard include businesses, co-operatives, start-ups, and investors.

Across all interviews conducted for this research, it is clear that every actor sees themselves and their work as connected to the process of change, often through more than one route. Although they did not necessarily share the same theory of change, they each see they have a role to play within it, rather than thinking or operating in a vacuum. It should be noted that most Irish actors do not operate exclusively within a single route. Instead, they combine routes pragmatically, depending on their position within the system, available resources, and perceived opportunities for impact.

Table 2.1 Breakdown of Interview Participants by Route and Actor Type (n = 13)

ROUTE	INTERVIEWEE TYPE	GENERIC DESCRIPTION OF ACTOR ROLE	NO. OF INTERVIEWS
Local route	Community food initiative lead	Involved in place-based food production, access, and community engagement.	3
Local route	Grassroots or volunteer organiser	Coordinates local participation, skills sharing, and food-related activities.	2
Local route	Community-linked researcher or practitioner	Works at the interface of research and local food practice.	1
Policy route	Government or public-sector official	Involved in food, agriculture, health, or sustainability policy design or delivery.	3
Policy route	Policy advisor or institutional stakeholder	Provides strategic advice or supports policy implementation.	1
Market route	Farmer or producer representative	Engaged in commercial or semi-commercial food production.	2
Market route	Agri-food or enterprise stakeholder	Involved in processing, market development, or business support.	1
Market route	Grassroots or volunteer organiser	Would have limited engagement using policy to change the marketplace.	Crossover

2.2 The Local Route

In Ireland, a variety of localised groups spanning food and health aim to create an impact at the local level. These include

community food initiative leaders, grassroots and voluntary organisations, university-based community researchers, health and food practitioners, and food partnerships serving disadvantaged communities. These activities are achieved through a location-based approach, for example, through community gardens, localised healthy eating campaigns, or food group meet-ups. These actors take a pragmatic approach: they recognise the need for systemic change but focus on what can be achieved locally, even when progress is slow.

2.2.1 Local initiatives as pragmatic spaces for food health and equity action

Interviewees conveyed their view that it is possible to act on a local scale through actions such as community gardens, food partnerships, CSA schemes, and local health initiatives – and that these operate as "proofs of concept" for demonstrating alternative practices at a manageable scale (CSA Network Ireland, established 2015). These actors are often motivated by equity and access concerns and adopt a pragmatic theory of change that prioritises achievable goals at local level. Importantly, their work frequently feeds back into the policy route, either by providing concrete examples for policymakers or by using existing policy frameworks as leverage when engaging with local authorities.

2.2.2 Evidence needs and place-based learning in the local route

Interviewees valued examples from other countries showing what best practice looks like. They also welcome any frameworks or policies that could support them in working with local government at county and city council level. They also stressed the need for evidence that is easy to communicate to local political actors as well as to communities.

Community gardens as well as place-based farming initiatives formed an important part of the discussion around local routes. For instance, the example of a community partnership farm in Cork demonstrated how the local route can generate tangible shifts in food culture as well as participation and access to healthy foods that wider national policy can struggle to achieve.

2.2.3 Community-scale impacts and barriers to scaling

Success within the local route is measured by community participation, social cohesion, local food security, and ecosystem health rather than scalability or profitability. The interviews indicate that the local route in Ireland is systematically isolated from scale mechanisms. Local impact is significant, and can include community engagement, skills transfer, food culture shifts, and biodiversity improvements. But scaling[6] beyond the community, requires either policy route support (land access, regulatory frameworks, institutional procurement) or market route pathways (commercial viability, investment capital). When both are blocked or inaccessible, local route impact remains locally bound. However, it should be noted that success very much depends on sustained community commitment, an often-precarious reliance on volunteer effort, and can often be underfunded.

2.2.4 Health as motivation without institutional anchoring

Local-route actors consistently described health as a central motivation for their activities but highlighted significant barriers to formally connecting health objectives with agri-food and diet policy. Local actors noted that while projects frequently link food access, nutrition, and wellbeing in practice, health considerations are rarely embedded in agricultural or food procurement decision-making at the local level.

This limits the ability of health-oriented initiatives to scale, as funding streams, governance structures and performance indicators tend to prioritise environmental or economic outcomes rather than health impacts. Several interviewees also pointed to capacity constraints within local authorities, noting that public health teams and food or agriculture officers often work in parallel rather than collaboratively, resulting in fragmented interventions and missed opportunities to align local food systems with preventative health goals. Though the impact may be significant in the local context, it does not automatically scale outside of this, and more research in this area is needed.

6 Extending an initiative's reach, adoption, or institutional support beyond its original setting.

2.2.5 Conclusion: strong local outcomes without systemic integration

The local route generates genuine transformation at community level, through shifts in food culture, skills transfer, ecological improvement, and democratic participation. However, these gains often remain separate from broader policy or market-driven changes. Thes examples above demonstrate a level of embeddedness that contrasts with the policy route's reliance on top-down targets and policy frameworks, or to the market route's focus on product innovation and retail change.

2.3 The Policy Route

Civil servants, policy advisors, institutional stakeholders, and university researchers are the dominant actors of the policy route. The actors interviewed in this study operate at the Member State level as well as the supranational level. In terms of how they conduct research, these actors draw on reports published by relevant organisations and use relevant statistical information to reinforce their position on the various targets and measures related to the agri-food sector in Ireland. Interestingly, a food-systems framing recurred throughout the interviews with these actors.

2.3.1 Food systems framing and perceived policy capture[7]

Interviewees expressed concern around the current use of policy mechanisms. In particular, there is a sense that these are often captured and dominated by dairy export interests and co-operatives. It was apparent from the interviews that civil society actors felt that the government implementation of the policy had been reframed to align with existing industry structures rather than challenge them.

2.3.2 Fragmented governance between agriculture, health and climate / Health in policy; acknowledged but weakly operationalised

One cross-cutting barrier for all actors was that that agriculture policy operates independently of health policy. Fragmented governance structures were repeatedly cited by interviewees as a key reason for the diet-focused transformation lagging behind. These silos make it hard to coordinate decisions or direct funding toward health priorities. Respondents with experience of national policy processes described persistent silos between departments responsible for agriculture, health, and climate, with health actors often marginal to the development of agri-food strategies. Health evidence was frequently characterised as supportive rather than directive, and several interviewees noted that diet-related health outcomes struggle to gain traction alongside dominant policy priorities such as export growth, farm incomes, and emissions accounting.

2.3.3 Academic roles, research distance and co-production limits

Most actors interviewed said they still find research distant and hard to access, and that it often is not written in a way that fits their needs as they try to build a theory of change[8].

2.3.4 Policy reversals, risk aversion and blocked innovation

For policy route actors, repeated policy reversals create barriers for innovative or forward-looking policy design, and can raise concerns about reputation, career security, and institutional accountability. Policy reversals undermine the foundational mechanism of the policy route itself: when signals are inconsistent, farmers do not invest (thereby blocking the market route), and civil servants become increasingly risk-averse (thereby constraining policy reform). Policy reversals also emerged as a significant barrier for people wishing to enter the policy route, with particular implications for grassroots and voluntary organisations as well as university-based researchers seeking to engage constructively in policy discussions. In this way, policy inconsistency becomes self-defeating and becomes a barrier for others to become part of the conversation.

7 The disproportionate influence of particular interests over policy design or implementation.

8 A theory of change explains how an intervention is expected to produce particular outcomes, including the assumptions linking activities to those outcomes.

2.4 The Market Route

In Ireland, the market route is mainly driven by co-operatives, as they offer a pathway for actors such as farmers, producing organisations, and agri-food enterprises. These actors use research mainly for business support and strategic planning. This can incorporate how they respond to Irish or EU laws and schemes, such as impacts on soil health and water quality, and how they can support their members. In this space, some have partnered with utilities on different European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs) or pilot projects to examine methods of resource efficiency in the context of climate change.

2.4.1 Co-operatives, pilots and incremental market change

Interviewees described their engagement with pilot projects and EIPs as an incremental, efficiency-oriented pathway to change, while also revealing constraints related to finance, skills, and market access when attempting to scale beyond pilots. With respect to health and diets, these actors influence diets indirectly by shaping what is produced, how it is produced, and what enters supply chains. Support for diversification, local food systems, and shorter supply chains create enabling conditions for healthier and less processed food environments, even if dietary change is not always explicitly articulated as the primary goal.

2.4.2 The "valley of death" between pilot success and scale

Interviewees noted that the market route in Ireland faces a specific structural barrier called the "Valley of Death", which separates pilot success from commercial scale. In other words, pilots can demonstrate viability, but commercialisation requires capital and risk management that market actors cannot access alone. Interviewees argued that the policy route either provides insufficient support or makes support conditional on alignment with incumbent interests. Evidence from farmers' representative groups highlighted the financial barriers for small-scale diversification in relation to plant-based diets. They noted that farmers attempting market route diversification face costs and regulatory requirements that existing policy commitments have so far failed to address despite official recognition of the challenges stemming from Food Vision 2030 (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2021).

2.4.3 Policy-market misalignment and incumbent advantage

There is a perception that the current policy frameworks and access to market routes favour only incumbent agricultural models (such as dairy exports and commodity beef), at the expense of alternative market innovations. In the Irish context, the market route cannot generate its own profitability when the policy route subsidises competitor business models. For the market route to be a viable option, it would require either policy support for alternative innovations or removal of policy support for incumbent models.

2.4.4 Market incentives and the limits of health-led change

Interviewees engaging through the market route highlighted misaligned economic incentives as a key barrier to integrating health considerations into agri-food systems. While several actors noted growing consumer interest in healthier and more sustainable diets, they emphasised that existing market structures continue to prioritise price competitiveness, scale, and efficiency over nutritional quality. Market actors also observed that health benefits are often externalised[9], meaning that the long-term savings associated with improved diets are not captured within food pricing or business models. As a result, interviewees argued that market-led approaches alone are insufficient to drive health-oriented dietary change without stronger policy frameworks.

9 Health benefits whose value is not reflected in the financial returns received by the producers or businesses generating them.

3. Looking Forward: Barriers and Opportunities, and What's Needed to Overcome or Seize them

The interviews reveal that food systems change-makers in Ireland face multiple interconnected barriers. Rather than viewing barriers and strategies separately, stakeholders consistently demonstrate that their approaches to overcoming obstacles are integral to their change-making activities. This section characterises both the perceived barriers and the strategies employed to address them, while building forward-looking recommendations for research funders and policymakers.

3.1. Barriers Actors Cannot Easily Overcome

The polarised nature of food and agriculture discussions in the media creates divisions that undermine progress. While individuals can challenge media narratives, changing the broader discourse requires a coordinated effort and political will that many actors currently lack.

The average farmer is 59 years old, meaning that the average farmer may be approaching retirement and less likely to introduce changes to their working practices. Environmental requirements demand significant investment at a time when farmers may also face reduced pension savings and disincentives to transfer farms. Addressing this structural barrier requires coordinated policy across multiple domains (pensions, succession planning, environmental transitions) that individual organisations cannot address.

Older farmers facing retirement, depleted savings, and uncertainty about successors are understandably risk-averse, which in turn locks land, infrastructure, and skills into existing high-emission, export-oriented models built around beef and dairy. At the same time, younger and often more equity-minded entrants are struggling to access land, capital, and decision-making spaces, making it harder for agroecological, local food, or short supply chain initiatives to reach the scale needed to shift food environments.

Multiple stakeholders identified a "valley of death"[10] where academic work does nottranslate into practice[11]. Actors are critical of the prolonged time it takes to conduct research, while policy needs are immediate. While individual actors are seen as capable of building bridges, the underlying structures of academic and practice worlds remain misaligned. However, some researchers occupy deliberate "connector" roles, translating complex findings into accessible guidance, showing that even within misaligned structures and research can become a practical resource for transformation.

3.2. Barriers that Changemakers Can Address and Their Strategies

Multiple actors identified fundamental gaps in the understanding of food systems. Rural youth advocates noted that limitations on time and energy as well as the pressing demands of these issues make it hard for farmers to fully engage with food systems concepts. Furthermore, small-scale producers face severe infrastructure barriers. With improved infrastructure, producers could transition from subsistence-level operations to viable livelihoods, so that people experience dignity from sustainable practices.

3.3 Forward-Looking Priorities

Ireland's food system transition will stall unless funding simultaneously tests credible alternatives on the ground, strengthens the people and organisations driving change, and closes the gap between ideas and implementation. The three themes below outline where targeted investment could have the greatest leverage.

First, actors across all three routes expressed frustration at the lack of Ireland-specific evidence. This gap makes alternative pathways appear speculative or risky compared with the well-documented incumbent livestock model. Further research and policy development should validate pathways and improve understanding of changemakers'

10 The stage at which a promising pilot struggles to secure the finance, infrastructure or institutional support needed for wider implementation.

11 The disconnect between the production of research and its use in practical decision-making or implementation.

contexts.
Second, more attention should be paid to farm-level agroecological research on Irish conditions. More research is needed into how investment should support long-term, whole-farm trials that compare agroecological and diversified systems with conventional livestock-intensive models on Irish soils and under Irish climate and market conditions. Trials should assess farm income, labour, risk, biodiversity, emissions, and diet-relevant outputs. This would provide farmers, co-operatives and policymakers with tested business models and transition pathways that they can adopt, rather than theoretical benefits alone.

Third, funding should support historical and political economy analysis of how Ireland's export-oriented dairy and beef model became locked in. This work should identify[12] mechanisms such as debt, processor contracts, capital grants, and advisory incentives, and map which actors gain and lose under different transition scenarios, providing a realistic basis for designing exit strategies, compensation schemes and new incentives.

3.4. Empowering Actors and Enabling Collaboration

Given limited capacity and strong incumbents, funding must lift key Irish changemakers out of survival mode and pay for the time needed to work across silos. In order to empower actors and enable collaboration, there is a need for multi-year core support for volunteer-led and equity-focused groups as well as dedicated resources for cross-sector collaboration.

To do so, funders should provide stable, three- to five-year operational funding to grassroots organisations so they can retain staff, plan strategically, and participate consistently in national debates rather than relying on short-term project grants. This would enable them to document lived experience, co-design interventions with researchers, and advocate for policies that reflect social determinants of diet and food poverty, not only individual "lifestyle" change.

Additionally, there is a need for funded structured programs that pay for coordination time, facilitation, and joint work-plans between agriculture, health, environment, business and local government actors (for example, linking Teagasc, HSE or Healthy Cities, local authorities, co-operatives and community food initiatives). This could take the form of multi-stake-holder "food transition labs" in a few counties, with small implementation budgets and embedded evaluators, which would aim to move the debate on from fragmented pilots to joined-up territorial strategies on diets, emissions and equity.

3.5. Bridging the Implementation and Cultural Gap

Finally, funding should focus on turning promising ideas into mainstream practice and shifting narratives that currently pit farmers, health advocates, and environmentalists against one another.

To do this, there is a need to bridge the "valley of death" for promising innovations by supporting a portfolio of Irish demonstration projects that take already tested practices from pilot to commercial or institutional scale. This means financing the less captivating topics that interviewees repeatedly identify as missing: processing and storage infrastructure, route-to-market arrangements, advisory support, and the transaction costs of aligning farm, processor and retailer timelines.

Education and training also require reform. Funding and co-development should support changes in agricultural colleges, business schools, nutrition training, and public health curricula so that future practitioners learn about agroecology, diet-related planetary health, food poverty, and political economy rather than only production or individual behaviour change. This should include practice-based modules (on farm placements with innovative producers, community food projects, local authority food planning) and communication skills for working with media and communities.

Furthermore, it is imperative to transform media representation and communication strategies. This can be achieved by investing in partnerships between researchers, farmer organisations, community groups and Irish media outlets to develop narratives that recognise both farmers' stewardship and the need for dietary and production shifts. Measures could include training for journalists on food systems literacy, support for local storytelling around successful transitions, and experimentation with message framing that reduces urban–rural and "health vs farming" polarisation while making policy debates legible to the wider public.

12 The way existing investments, contracts, infrastructure, and institutions make it difficult to move away from established production models.

Conclusion

Ireland's food system stands at a critical juncture. This research has shown, through interviews and policy analysis, how a highly productive, export-oriented agrifood model underpins national income and rural livelihoods. Now, this model collides with binding climate targets, ecological limits, and growing concerns about diet-related ill-health and food poverty. Despite successive strategies and efficiency gains, absolute agricultural emissions remain off track, while the dominant policy debate continues to treat production and consumption as separate worlds rather than parts of a single food system.

Despite this, routes through which actors seek to deliver this shift are diverse and under strain. The policy route remains central, but it is held back by institutions that favour established agrifood interests and concentrate agenda-setting power. This makes governments especially sensitive to backlash from farmers and industry actors. The market route offers some useful tools but often stalls at small efficiency improvements and voluntary pledges, especially when bigger change lacks a clear business case. The local route provides tangible proof-of-concept through community food projects, CSAs, food partnerships, and municipal initiatives, but these remain precarious, under-resourced and difficult to scale or connect to national policy.

The priorities outlined in the report respond directly to these realities. Funding farm-level agroecological research in Irish conditions and retrospective political economy analysis can validate alternative production models and clarify where transition costs and benefits fall, making policy debates less speculative and more transparent. Multiyear operational support for grassroots and equity-oriented organisations, coupled with resourced cross-sectoral collaboration, can move diverse actors from reactive firefighting to strategic alliance building. Bridging the "valley of death" for promising innovations, reforming education and training, and investing in media and communication strategies can turn scattered pilots into visible, culturally resonant pathways that farmers, consumers and politicians can recognise themselves in.

Taken together, these proposals suggest a shift in how research and philanthropy support policy and funding decisions in Ireland's food system. Rather than adding more isolated projects to an already crowded landscape, the task is to back pathways: sequences of evidence generation, demonstration, coalition building and narrative work that progressively align agricultural, health, climate and social objectives. This means supporting co-produced, action-oriented research; funding the connective tissue between local experiments and national policy; and being explicit about power, trade-offs and justice, not only efficiency.

Ireland's experience also carries wider lessons for Europe. It shows how difficult it is to reorient a successful agri export model towards healthier and more sustainable diets, but also how much latent energy exists among farmers, community organisers, public health practitioners, researchers, and progressive businesses when they are given the resources and recognition to act together.

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