Agri-cultural change

Leadership, diversification, justice

By Holly Cairns

Should farmers be more worried about climate action or climate change?

The answer is obvious. Yet, when I posed this question on Twitter recently, I received messages from farmers who are terrified of climate action. Why is that? Why, in the face of a catastrophe in the sector, are some more concerned with the solution than the problem?

Too often climate policy in Ireland, especially on agriculture, is reduced to glitzy announcements and glossy plans that ultimately lack substance. We have already failed to meet our 2020 emissions-reduction targets and are on course to miss our 2030 goals too. Are we failing? Or, are we being failed by government and vested interests?

Any meaningful climate action in Ireland has to include the agri-food sector. Unlike for many of our European neighbours, agriculture is Ireland's largest contributor to emissions at 34%.

Current government approaches, supported by large agri-business, focus on efficiencies over reductions, which do not work and will not work. We need an organised system of efficiencies and reductions in emissions if we are to come anywhere close to reaching our 2030 targets. There are three considerations which need to inform these changes.

First, clear leadership on coherent, science-based policies. Instead of supporting farmers through inevitable change, what we get from Irish politics is damaging rhetoric - farmers pitted against environmentalists and a disproportionate focus on people's personal responsibility. Recently, the former Minister for Agriculture, Michael Creed, described a seven-percent emissions target as 'the altar of political expediency'. This came after Tánaiste Simon Coveney said reducing emissions could "decimate" Irish farms.

Not only do their comments represent the government's inability to innovatively deal with the issue, they also contribute to a false narrative which gives rise to uncertainty and fear in rural Ireland. Our argi-food sector is the result of policy choices. CAP and other payments shape how I, and other farmers, farm. Some of these schemes require me to damage the landscape that the future of the industry depends on. There is no reason why all schemes and payments cannot be meaningfully focused on promoting practices that address the climate and biodiversity crises.

Second, diversifying the sector. Agricultural policies need to support different sizes and types of farms to ensure they are economically viable. Approaches geared towards very large farms and agri-businesses will only further the demise of small farms and increase depopulation. Rural communities and small producers will benefit from schemes that reward diversification. The current emergency has highlighted the vulnerability of our food systems. As a net importer of seafood, milk, fruit and vegetables we need the Department of Agriculture to make strategic investments to secure our food sovereignty. Also, moving away from nitrogen fertilisers and a rye-grass monoculture is imperative to improve biodiversity and help reach our afforestation goals, with their carbon sequestration benefits.

Third, immediate action for a just transition. Changes to the way we farm are complex but necessary - and the fairness of the transition is therefore of huge importance. We cannot allow these changes to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of small farmers and local communities. The principles of just transition have to be embedded in our agricultural and environmental policies to ensure equity and encourage sustainable new practices.

Action is required immediately. The five years, since the signing of the Paris Agreement, have been squandered on shallow gestures and obsessions with efficiencies instead of achievements. We are wasting time we do not have. If we do not act, in the next 50 years areas that are currently home to a third of the world's population will become uninhabitable. This will ravage food production systems globally and accelerate migration. We are morally and pragmatically obliged to act, and act now.

Imagine an Ireland where we could make the necessary changes. Where the government, agri-food mega-businesses, agricultural organisations, and rural communities could work together with a unified purpose to achieve environmentally and socially sustainable agriculture. The type of farming we can all be proud of. The type of farming that endures for the next generation.

The narrative from government, that reducing emissions will negatively reshape Irish agriculture and undermine farmers' livelihoods, results in a resistance to climate action from the very communities that will be most severely affected by climate change. Continuing to pass the problem to the next generation is no longer an option. Change must start now.

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