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Title	The potential of the co-operative form for farmers' markets in Ireland: Some lessons from the USA and UK
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Publication date	2009-04-01
Original Citation	Moroney, A., Briscoe, R., McCarthy, O., O'Shaughnessy, M., and Ward, M. (2009) 'The potential of the co-operative form for farmers' markets in Ireland: Some lessons from the USA and UK'. Journal of Co-Operative Studies, 42 (1), pp. 4-12.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://ukscs.coop/node/17
Rights	© 2009 UK Society for Co-operative Studies
Download date	2026-11-02 00:17:46
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5086

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The Potential of the Co-operative Form for Farmers' Markets in Ireland - Some Lessons from the USA and UK

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One of the most important developments in small-scale agriculture and in local food retailing in the last decade has been the emergence of a new generation of farmers' markets in countries such as Ireland, the USA, the UK, New Zealand and Australia. Farmers' markets are now a significant alternative source of sales, distribution and marketing for many small scale producers and a valuable source of fresh, local and specialist produce for growing numbers of consumers. This paper presents findings from the initial stages of a large-scale study[1] which seeks to establish how farmers' markets in Ireland can best be structured and organised to increase the competitiveness and sustainability of small farmers and to strengthen farmer influence and control in the marketplace. The research is particularly concerned with examining the potential of formal co-operative structures, which though relatively common in farmers' markets in the US and the UK, remain largely unexplored in an Irish context. While ongoing extensive quantitative and qualitative research on all Irish farmers' markets is the primary focus of the research, field visits to markets and key informants in the US and UK have also been conducted and completed. The findings from the latter research – and more specifically, their potential relevance to Irish farmers' markets at their current stage of development – are the subject of this paper.

Introduction and Background

One of the most important developments in small-scale agriculture and in local food retailing in the last decade has been the emergence of a new generation of farmers' markets in countries such as Ireland, the USA, the UK, New Zealand and Australia. Farmers' markets are now a significant alternative source of sales, distribution and marketing for many small scale producers and a valuable source of fresh, local and specialist produce for growing numbers of consumers. Farmers' markets allow the stallholder to shorten the food chain, reduce 'food miles' and packaging, and sell directly to the consumer, without intermediary or 'middle-man' (Tippins et al 2002). Operating outside the realm of intermediaries such as wholesalers or retailers, allows the stallholder to reassert greater control over production and marketing decisions and to move away from the 'price signal' as the sole arbiter of what is produced (Feagan et al 2004). In fact, it is the very interface with consumers provided by the farmers' market which has been found to facilitate farmers and producers in receiving feedback and suggestions from consumers, in meeting demand for specialist or non-standardised products, and in experimenting with new products at relatively low risk (Griffin and Frongillo 2003; Tippins et al 2002). A number of studies (Hinrichs et al 2004; Feenstra et al 2003) have found that participation in farmers markets has led in many cases to greater innovation and the pursuit of new business development opportunities. Numerous studies have revealed that most stallholders usually really enjoy participating and draw particular benefit from the chance to interact with other stallholders and with customers (Griffin and Frongillo 2003; Baber and Frongillo 2003). For farmers and small producers, meeting with customers, talking to them about the produce and getting positive feedback from previous sales also engenders (or in some cases, restores) a sense of pride and confidence in their work (Griffin and Frongillo 2003).

In tandem with the renewed interest in direct marketing amongst farmers has been a perceptible shift in consumer demand for the kind of retail experience provided by farmers' markets. Consumer studies have revealed that a small, but growing, number of consumers have serious concerns about the origins and traceability of their food, about the ecological impact of the agri-food industry and about the quality and desirability of many of the products of that system (McGarry Wolf et al 2005). Studies of consumers at farmers' markets have revealed multiple and complex motives for attending and purchasing (McGarry Wolf et al 2005; La Trobe 2001). These include the desire to purchase high quality, fresh, local or speciality produce, the wish to buy from and support local farmers/producers and to reduce 'food miles', and the opportunity to have a more fulfilling, sociable and authentic shopping experience than might typically be found in the supermarket aisles.

Farmers' markets bring together producers and consumers within a fundamentally different type of relationship than that found in

conventional supply chains, one characterised by high levels of personal interaction, of trust, and of mutual regard (Sage 2007). They are a key element of what Hinrichs et al (2004:31-32) have described as a new 'civic agriculture', one in which farmers and consumers both seek and benefit from a renewed connection between food and place, between farmer and consumer. Co-operatives, and particularly consumer food co-operatives, have long played a significant role is this arena and farmers' markets which operate as producer co-operatives and/or as multi-stakeholder co-operatives have perhaps the greatest potential to build and develop these connections.

There is a growing body of research available on farmers' markets in general, much of it concerned with exploring the overall experience of participation for farmers and small producers. Little research has been published to date on the important issue of the structure and organisation of farmers' markets. This paper presents findings from the initial stages of a large-scale study which seeks to establish how farmers' markets in Ireland can best be structured and organised to increase the competitiveness and sustainability of small farmers and food producers and to strengthen their influence and control in the marketplace (that is, to maximise benefits to farmer/small producer participants). The research is particularly concerned with examining the potential of formal co-operative structures, which though relatively common in farmers' markets in the US and the UK, remain largely unexplored in an Irish context. While ongoing extensive quantitative and qualitative research on all Irish farmers' markets is the primary focus of the research, field visits to markets and key informants in the US and UK have also been conducted and completed. It is the findings from the latter research – and more specifically, their potential relevance to Irish farmers' markets at their current stage of development – that are the subject of this paper.

Farmers' Markets in Ireland

Although the sector has declined somewhat in recent years, rural Ireland has a long tradition of market or fair days and of country markets where people come to sell fresh farm, garden and home produce and handcraft. In more urban areas, daily market stalls selling fruit, vegetables and flowers bought from wholesalers can still be found. A more recent and very significant development has been the growth of a new generation of what are generally known as farmers' markets. These are markets where farmers, growers or producers (usually from a defined local area) sell their own produce direct to the public and they have experienced phenomenal growth in the last decade. It is difficult to arrive at a precise number of markets – new markets are continually appearing (and occasionally disappearing), some markets are seasonal and some are associated with festivals or events – but there are at least 120 running at any one time[2].

Since each farmers' market is a gathering of individual traders, no two agglomerations will ever be exactly the same and precise definition and categorisation of markets is usually difficult (Lawson et al 2008). In Ireland, the farmers' market scene is extremely diverse and categorisation is particularly challenging. Although markets can be categorised in many different ways, such as by degree of formality, or geographical location, or scale, or festive vs economic functions, for the purposes of this discussion, we can categorise Irish farmers' markets according to how they are structured or organised. Though imperfect, the following categorisation is inclusive of the great majority of markets in the country.

- **Farmer/producer-driven markets** are concentrated in, though not exclusive to, the south and west of the country and are typically associated with a strong alternative agri-food network and wider community. These were amongst the first of the new generation markets and are often driven and run by pioneering figures in artisanal foods and are usually run by a stallholder committee. There is typically a strong focus on providing an outlet for smaller or local or artisanal producers.
- **Private markets** are those run by private operators on a for-profit basis and which are largely concentrated in the larger (and wealthier) urban areas and on the East Coast. These markets tend to be large with high stall fees and an affluent consumer base. They usually contain a high proportion of stallholders who are operating at multiple markets and typically provide a wide array of often global produce and some crafts.
- **Participatory markets** are perhaps the most recent phenomenon. They are found in all parts of the country and are difficult to

categorise precisely. These markets are typically founded by and/or engage a wide range of stakeholders such as rural and community development organisations, tourism groups, local authorities, local economic actors, colleges, and so on. Like producer-driven markets, they tend to place a strong emphasis on supporting smaller, local and artisanal producers. They will usually engage the participation of stallholders in decision-making, though the extent to which this happens varies widely.

Farmers' Markets in Ireland – where are the co-operatives?

As can be seen from the above categorisation, farmers' markets in Ireland have neither started out as nor evolved into co-operative organisations in the formal or legal sense. Yet from the formation of the Rochdale Co-operative in England in 1844, there is a rich history of co-operation in the distribution of agricultural and food products. In Ireland, agricultural co-operatives have proved to be a highly effective means through which farmers have collectively retained control over decisions relating to production, price and marketing (Ward 2005) and achieved economies of scale which would be beyond the capacity of any farmer acting individually. The co-operative form has been adopted by groups of Irish farmers across a range of sectors – dairying, livestock marts, meat and food processing, farm supplies – often on a large scale and usually firmly within the industrial or productivist model. To date, there has been limited engagement with the co-operative form in the development of farmers' markets, or indeed other forms of direct marketing, although there may be significant benefits to be gained from doing so, such as greater control over the operation and orientation of the market and pricing, quality control and participation costs (Griffin and Frongillo 2003).

However, to focus only on organisational type would be to ignore the essentially co-operative nature of most types of farmers' markets. Most are founded on – and arguably can only achieve long term success through – strong and ongoing co-operation between farmers/producers. At a basic level, markets involve stallholders coming together to offer an assortment of products and services, including the social environment, as demanded by consumers (Lawson et al 2008). It is the very collective nature of the market, the gathering together of a variety of farmers and producers, that appeals to consumers. It is also the collective nature of markets which allows small business operators to pool resources and attempt to overcome resource constraints. Inherent to the farmers' market model is a high level of interdependence amongst stallholders, where the success of the market overall is at least partly dependent on the input of each stallholder and on the relationships between them. Furthermore, in their study of co-operation in New Zealand farmers' markets, Lawson et al (2008) found that over 80% of the traders at the markets were involved in some form of co-operative activity above and beyond basic 'space-sharing', such as selling one another's product, sharing equipment or referring customers. Preliminary results from the present research into Irish farmers' markets support that finding and analysis of the levels and types of informal co-operation amongst stallholders across market types will form a significant component of the final research report.

The approach of this research then is not to differentiate baldly between co-operative and non-co-operative farmers' markets, but to view individual farmers' markets as being placed somewhere on a continuum of co-operation. At one end of the spectrum, we have markets with minimal co-operation, where stallholders merely share the same physical space which is usually provided and organised by an outside person or body. At the other, we have markets with a formal co-operative structure and (we can speculate) high degrees of informal co-operation also. In this paper, we will examine the experiences of markets in the US and the UK which are closer to the latter structure – the learning from their experiences, and of those who are involved in the farmers' market movement at a research, policy or support level can inform the growth and development of farmers' markets in Ireland at this stage in their development.

Research on US Farmers' Markets

The US has experienced similar phenomenal growth and development in farmers' markets in recent years. The latest figures from the United States Department of Agriculture from mid-2008 are that there are 4,685 farmers markets operating in the United States, representing a 6.8% increase from 4,385 farmers markets in 2006[3]. Although little research has been done on the structures of farmers' markets in the US,

it appears that most markets in the US could be described as either farmer/producer-led or participatory according to the classification applied to the Irish situation.

In late 2006, the researcher held a total of 15 meetings with a range of key informants – farmers' market managers and directors, researchers and development workers in the field and staff/directors from support bodies and federations – in both Upstate New York and the Bay Area of California. While the latter area has an extremely well-developed and highly regulated farmers' market sector and a large and affluent consumer base, Upstate New York has geographical, climatic and demographic features closer to those of Ireland.

Producer-Led Markets - The Benefits and Limitations

Research to date on farmers' markets has uncovered multiple worthy functions. Farmers' markets serve as local sources of fresh produce and artisanal foods, as sites of community interaction, as tourist attractions or as contributors to urban regeneration. Yet farmers' markets are first and foremost a place where local producers make some or all of their living by selling directly to local consumers. The great majority of the key informants in the US considered that the optimum structure for a farmers' market then is to be primarily initiated and run by these local producers and vendors. As a number of commentators put it, "form must follow function" – if the primary function of the market is to provide a sustainable marketplace for local producers, then they should be designed for that use by the people whose livelihoods are at stake. Even in cases where the original impetus for the farmers' market came from another source such as a Chamber of Commerce, church group or community development group, most interviewees felt it was still vital to then proceed by engaging the involvement of the stallholders in the running of the market. As one organiser of a market in Upstate New York put it:

> Whether that structure is a formal co-operative or not is not as important as whether or not it is a producer controlled market, that it functions in a way that serves the farmer first and foremost … the people who make the stuff and sell the stuff.

Most of the participants in this research agreed that it is the perspective of stallholders on aspects such as opening hours, scale, location and balance between different types of stallholders that should be to the forefront. It is the experience of one co-operative extension worker involved with a number of markets in Upstate New York that at the very least,

> you have to keep vendors involved, to get them to weigh in on issues, to air their grievances, to reach compromise.

The involvement of stallholders in the running of markets has been found to cultivate and build willingness and capacity to work together for the benefit of the market overall. It also tempers the overt competitiveness which might otherwise exist between individual small business people sharing the same space. The manager of a very successful co-operative farmers market in Upstate New York commented:

> The vendors [in this market] are very supportive of one another – they realise they are all in this together ... much of this support comes from being a member based co-operative.

Stallholders at this market are required to participate in the governance and/or day-to-day operation of the market. A work-share scheme means that members must do some work for the market – serve on a committee, run a promotion, get involved in the newsletter or carry out inspections – or pay a relatively substantial and fully enforced fine. Overall, the market manager there feels that most stallholders are "very dedicated, with a strong sense of ownership and pride in the market". She queried whether a similar sense of collective responsibility and ownership could be fostered in a private sector market.

In the markets studied, there are, of course, stallholders who wish to simply come and sell at the market without any further participation – as the chairperson of a market in Upstate New York which is governed and managed by a committee of stallholders puts it:

> It's not ideological for most members – their main concern is shifting produce and it's a lot of extra work to be farmer-led or farmer controlled.

However, for most stallholders, there is a

realisation (if perhaps an occasionally grudging one) that it is the member-based structure of the market which allows producers to control and shape the market to meet their needs and which both builds and reinforces the kind of interdependence and co-operation which is one of the factors key to the success of markets.

Exclusively producer-led markets can also demonstrate anti-competitive and protectionist behaviours, where the term 'our market' can have negative as well as positive connotations. As one market manager put it; "people can act badly when their livelihoods are at stake." Similarly, there can be a tendency for cliques to form and particular agendas to rule, where the quality and sustainability of the market overall can be secondary to the interests of particular stallholders. Most of the markets in this study have put in place the kind of robust organisational and governance systems outlined below to guard against these dangers and others.

All of the participants in this study agreed that while a certain level of informality is part of the character of farmers' markets (one of the features that makes them attractive both to producers and consumers), each market nonetheless needs to arrive at a clear and rigorous set of rules and regulations for the running of the market. These rules typically cover aspects of operation such as the proportions of different types of stallholders allowed, attendance requirements, whether re-selling is permitted, the radius from the market from which stallholders are allowed to attend and stallholder work obligations. California has a demanding certification system for its farmers' markets, which in any case regulates many areas of operation, regardless of the proclivities of individual markets. Such a certification system is suited to (and by all accounts works effectively) in a geographical area with abundant year-round produce, an affluent market and relatively high market incomes. The farmers' markets in Upstate New York, which face greater challenges in terms of seasonality, distance from markets and a less affluent and less receptive consumer base, are typically more flexible with regards to some areas of operation, such as allowing some re-selling off-season. All of the participants agreed that whether under the umbrella of an outside certification system or not, each market needs to arrive at, agree, and perhaps most importantly, enforce its own set of rules and regulations. The manager of one large and very successful market in Upstate New York pointed out that it is also important to:

> debate grey areas … and to record decisions and rules and the reasons for them so that there is a greater sense of why things are the way they are.

The very process of arriving at and enforcing rules and regulations has been found to be essential in ensuring that "everyone knows where they stand", that there is a sense of fairness and mutual respect between stallholders, and that consumers are reassured of the integrity of the market.

Many of the markets included in this study grapple with governance issues that are common to many member-based organisations, such as recruiting suitable board members, ensuring board turnover, achieving the right balance between management and governance, etc. However, most have put in place the kind of robust governance structures and rules which can help to moderate these issues, such as mandatory turnover for positions on the Board, open elections for Board members, clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, work-share schemes and the opening of Board seats to non-stallholders who may have much to contribute.

Benefits of a Formal Co-operative Structure

Are there any benefits to adopting a formal co-operative structure over a more informal producer-led structure which usually has a largely co-operative ethos and approach? Most of the markets visited in this study started off operating at a small scale, with virtually no assets, minimal management and a relatively simple committee-type governance structure. However, as the markets grew in scale and complexity, the need for a more formal legal and operational structure increased. The markets included in this study which have adopted a co-operative structure have found that it ensures that each market has a Board that is elected and accountable to members, which sets and enforce rules, appoints and is responsible for staff and is required to think long-term and strategically. Many of the markets have also found that being a non-profit co-operative has increased both their eligibility and credibility when making grant applications and seeking donations and has allowed them to have charitable status and some tax exemptions.

Legally, co-operative status means the exposure to risk associated with increasing scale and asset accumulation is group based rather than individually based. For a number of the markets in this study, becoming a co-operative allowed them to raise money for capital expansion or other development through membership fees or by selling preferred stock. Although some pay a dividend to members, most share the perspective of a very successful market in California that "amounts to individuals were small compared to what could be achieved with the money put together" and what profits there are usually go back into market development or reserves.

Associations of Markets – the Regional Approach

One of the most interesting markets visited in the course of this research was in fact a regional association of markets in the Bay Area of California. This association is governed by a board comprising representatives of over 40 certified farmers' markets in more than 35 Bay Area communities. The Board is predominately made up of farmers/producers but has dedicated places for other key stakeholders and those with needed skill-sets. It is largely concerned with the overall vision and direction of the association rather than its day-to-day management and has developed 5 and 10 year plans. This Board in turn employs a CEO and a large full time staff to carry out the day-to-day functions of market management, such as market set-up, promotions and liaising with stallholders. The association also runs an extensive marketing and education department that works to educate the community about healthy eating and sustainable agriculture including nutrition, food preparation and storage, food safety, farm production, and food security. Such a model has significant potential for county-wide or regional groupings of markets in Ireland, allowing markets to be producer-led but not overly burdensome and with the obvious benefits of professional management and organisation.

The Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Although the producer-led market may be the optimum model, the markets included in this research can and do benefit from the perspective and participation of other stakeholders and interested parties, although the level of participation varied widely. At a very simple level, a number of markets have 'Friends of the Market' schemes which allow consumers and local citizens to contribute financially and otherwise to the development of the market, often in return for free email updates, merchandise, raffle tickets, etc. Some markets have consumer boards or panels which advise the overall Board of the consumer perspective. As one director of a market in Upstate New York put it:

> You need to keep vendors and customers happy – anyone who sets a market up needs to keep this in mind ... a solely farmer-led co-operative can sometimes forget that.

Some markets have a dedicated number of seats on the overall Board for relevant and influential stakeholders, such as consumers or community representatives or local business leaders or support agencies. Two of the markets in this study, both of which are in California, appoint people with needed skill-sets to their boards. One association of farmers' markets in California have had a dietician, a lawyer and an accountant on their board at various times. A director of a market in Upstate New York has found that "a multi-stakeholder committee is by far the best ... [it] gives a diversity of opinion and the consumer perspective." She also suggested that "long-term, you need the support of the business community and the community in general", a view echoed by a number of participants in this research. The manager of one market in California spoke of the need to:

> make people [the local community] feel that it is really their market ... you have to build social capital so that you can draw upon it when you need it.

A number of participants in this study spoke of the need for the boards of larger farmers' markets in particular to be more entrepreneurial and more strategic in their thinking and more focused on long-term planning rather than the minutiae of the day-to-day running of the market, to move in effect from being purely working boards to governance boards. A market manager from one market in Upstate New York speculated that bringing in an outside perspective might stimulate that process in a board who currently micro-manage her work and who are perhaps overly protective of 'their' market. Making the transition from a 'working

board' to a 'governance board' represents a real change of function and requires a different set of skills and competencies, which may not necessarily be found amongst existing board members. The manager of an association of farmers' markets in California also suggested that the board needs not just a good mix of both farmers/stallholders and other stakeholders, but a good mix of those who have vision and those who are very practical and grounded, of those who will initiate change and those who bring continuity.

Research on UK Farmers' Markets

The UK has also experienced significant growth in the number of farmers' markets in the last decade. There are now approximately 500 farmers' markets and over half of these are certified by FARMA, the National Farmers' Retail & Markets Association which independently assesses and certifies farmers' markets according to a set of recommended criteria[4]. Although little research has been done on the structures of UK farmers' markets, it appears that most could be described as participatory or farmer/producer-led if we employ the categorisation arrived at for Irish farmers' markets. The research carried out by the research team to date in the UK is more limited than that in the US and comprises interviews with a small number of key informants.

With extensive experience of working with farmers and producers and farmers' markets for over 25 years, FARMA have found that a more co-operative structure works particularly well for farmers' markets. It is their experience that being a part of an association of members with similar goals encourages the kind of co-operation for mutual benefit that has been found to be so central to successful markets. They have found that there is, for example, usually greater willingness to share information and experience with other members within a co-operative structure. It is FARMA's experience that operating as a co-operative puts in place both the structure and the relationships which can drive markets forward and which encourage markets to be more strategic in their thinking, more commercially aware and ultimately, more sustainable. Individual markets and groups of markets which have adopted this structure have also been found to develop an energy and a persona beyond the early pioneers and the people involved in it in the here and now.

The Plunkett Foundation[5], which is working with FARMA on a joint project to support farmers' markets as co-operative enterprises, agree with this assessment that the co-operative or social enterprise is the most promising model for many farmers' markets in the UK at their current stage of development. They contend that many are currently dependent on local authority staff support (which will not necessarily continue in the long term) or on the (voluntary) work of early enthusiasts, or are being quietly taken over by private operators. In order to remain vibrant and sustainable going forward, it is the producers whose livelihoods are at stake who should ultimately be running the markets, though they could also benefit from the involvement of consumers, local stakeholders and indeed staff in the governance of the market.

From the perspective of this research, the most interesting development in UK farmers' markets is the ongoing joint project of FARMA and the Plunkett Foundation alluded to above. With a budget of £600,000 made available from the Making Local Food Work project funded under the Big Lottery Fund, this project offers a package of support, advice and training to farmers' markets who want to work together. It involves producing a model of co-operative enterprise, piloting this model with an initial four farmers' market groups and then supporting a further sixteen markets groups. Both FARMA and the Plunkett Foundation feel that the greatest potential lies in groups of markets forming themselves into co-operatives, whereby the functions necessary to facilitate growth and development (market management, marketing, PR, etc) can be carried out by paid staff answerable to a board made up of representatives of all of the markets in that group. This is very much the model of the Thames Valley Farmers' Market Co-operative, for example and of a number of markets encountered in the US research.

Discussion and Conclusions

Though still at a relatively early stage in their growth and development, farmers' markets in Ireland have an increasing role in providing direct outlets for farmers and small producers to sell their produce, build their income and develop their overall businesses. They have also provided consumers with access to fresh local produce and a forum in which to build relationships with the people who grow or make

their food. Markets have also contributed to urban regeneration, helped build community interaction in suburban areas, contributed to the tourism mix and helped revive local shopping in towns and villages.

To date, farmers' markets in Ireland have developed very rapidly, in quite an ad-hoc fashion, through a variety of arrangements and with minimal regulation. This seems an appropriate stage at which to examine which structure or model of organisation maximises benefits to farmers and small producers, is most sustainable in the long-term and creates the best markets for consumers and other stakeholders. There are two significant lessons from the US and UK research which can be applied to Irish farmers' markets at their current stage of development.

Some level of interdependence and collaboration is surely intrinsic to all farmers' markets and it can be argued that the majority of markets are co-operative in nature and character, if not in formal structure. Most are founded on – and arguably can only achieve long term success through – strong and ongoing co-operation between stallholders seeking to maximise mutual benefit. It is clear from the US and UK research that there are significant benefits in adopting a structure and model of organisation that is essentially farmer/producer-led and that is located towards the 'formal co-operative' end of the continuum of co-operation outlined earlier in this paper. Such a structure recognises the essential purpose of markets (to provide a forum for farmers and producers to sell to consumers); strengthens farmer/producer control in the marketplace; and builds and reinforces interdependence, co-operation and a sense of ownership which are all key to the success of markets. However, it is also apparent from our research in the UK and US that producer-led markets can benefit hugely from the meaningful input of other stakeholders such as consumers, local business people, local authorities, and so on. Arriving at and enforcing a set of rules and regulations for the management and governance of the market which are locally relevant, fair and beneficial to the market overall and not just individual stallholders or cliques, are also key to the long-term success of farmer/producer-led markets.

Markets in Ireland tend to be small both in scale and in terms of their return to stallholders. To make an adequate income, most stallholders need to attend multiple markets. At the same time, individual markets may not be making the kind of income where they could justify employing anyone except on a part-time basis. Co-operatives and mutual-benefit associations at local or regional level have enabled farmers and small producers to overcome these types of resource and scale constraints in other areas of Irish agriculture such as dairying and meat and food processing. Drawing on this experience, there is significant potential for farmers' markets at this stage in their development to overcome some of their particular constraints by forming regional or county-wide associations of farmers' markets. Such associations or co-operatives would allow markets to be essentially producer-led but not overly burdensome to busy stallholders, while offering the benefits of professional management and organisation. At a minimum, there is significant potential for groups of markets to work together informally at local or regional level, sharing the costs of advertising, materials and equipment, collectively building the farmers' market brand and benefiting from one another's experience. This collaboration could extend as far as forming local or regional associations or co-operatives with a representative board and a professional staff. Such co-operation may evolve naturally over time but is certainly something which those involved in the development of the farmers' market sector could further encourage through the kind of hard and soft supports currently provided in the UK by the FARMA/Plunkett Foundation Project.

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Notes

1 This study is being conducted by the authors of this article and is funded by the Irish Department of Agriculture and Food under the Research Stimulus Fund. It will also form the basis of a PhD thesis to be submitted by the principal researcher, Aisling Moroney.

2 Figures from the Farmers' Market List from the website of the Irish Food Board, An Bord Bia , February 2009 www.bordbia.ie.

3 Figures from the website of the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets.

4 FARMA defines a farmers' market as one in which farmers, growers or producers from a defined local area are present in person to sell their own produce, direct to the public. All products sold should have been grown, reared, caught, brewed, pickled, baked, smoked or processed by the stallholder www.farma.org.uk.

5 The Plunkett Foundation is an educational charity, based near Oxford in the UK, which supports the development of rural group enterprise world-wide. It promotes and implements economic self-help solutions to rural problems www.plunkett.co.uk.