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Irish agriculture:
Challenge from the South?

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Irish agriculture is heavily protected and faces a number of challenges in the coming years as supports and subsidies are gradually removed as part of EU agricultural reform. This article suggests that farmers in Ireland and in developing countries have many interests in common and that operating without subsidies within the new EU agricultural policy can be compatible with WTO (World Trade Organisation) rules while meeting the expectations of developing countries from the Doha Development Round.

Introduction

The Doha Development Round of WTO (World Trade Organisation) trade negotiations was launched in November 2001 in Qatar. Its ambitious objectives are summarised in the Doha Declaration. This Declaration gives WTO members the mandate to engage in negotiations on a comprehensive range of issues. These include items on the WTO's "built-in agenda", such as agriculture and services, as well as on environment, industrial tariffs, anti-dumping, fisheries subsidies, regional trade agreements, and dispute settlement. The Declaration foresees possible future negotiations on the so-called Singapore issues of investment, competition policy, transparency in government procurement, and trade facilitation if there is an explicit consensus on the modalities of these negotiations at the next WTO Ministerial Council meeting in Cancun, Mexico. Many developing countries remain deeply suspicious of including these areas in the negotiations. The Doha Ministerial Declaration was accompanied by a Decision on Implementation-related Issues and Concerns that contained almost 50 paragraphs detailing specific areas of WTO rules where developing countries are seeking resolution or re-balancing of commitments entered into in the WTO Uruguay Round completed in 1994.

The Doha Declaration sets a timeframe in which virtually all the linked negotiations, including agriculture, are to end by 1 January 2005. Bringing down barriers to agricultural trade is the key issue of the Doha Round for most WTO members. According to paragraph 14 of the Doha Ministerial Declaration, "modalities for further commitments" in agricultural reform must be agreed by 31 March 2003. These modalities are expected to spell out the broad targets and the formula/approach which will be used in reducing tariffs, domestic support and export competition to ensure that the negotiations will be concluded on schedule by 1 January 2005. Although developing countries have differing interests in these negotiations, they are agreed in seeking substantial improvements in access to the agricultural markets of the industrialised countries, as well as greater limits on the agricultural support policies pursued by these countries.

By the end of 2002, following a year of pre-negotiations in which all the major players have submitted their proposals, the chairperson of the Agriculture Committee will prepare an overview paper which will form the basis for intensified negotiations to produce the modalities document in March 2003. The EU has proposed to continue with the gradual opening of world markets initiated in the Uruguay Round. Other players, including the US and the Cairns group of developed and developing countries, have proposed a more radical harmonisation of trade-distorting support at low levels with a view to its ultimate phasing-out. Whether the EU offer will be sufficient to reach an agreement is, at this stage, unclear. If not, it would not be the first time that agricultural trade issues threaten to de-rail trade policy reforms by the EU of interest to developing countries. An earlier example of the damage caused by the EU's agricultural policy to developing countries was the way in which the EU sugar lobby almost succeeded in scuttling its "everything but arms" initiative designed to improve market access for the agricultural exports of the world's poorest countries. The EU's CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) is a millstone for its negotiating position which undermines its ability to take a leadership role in the current trade negotiations.

Development NGOs throughout the EU have been trying to focus on the agricultural issue. Although it is not part of their mandate to design an EU agricultural policy which is compatible with the demands of developing countries in the WTO, it is clearly important that EU development NGOs are aware of the implications of their demands for farmers in the Union. Perhaps the major contribution which these NGOs can make to moving the debate forward over the next 24 months is to seek to engage fatming interests in debate on the future direction of their industry. This article seeks to highlight the context for this debate in the particular situation of Irish agriculture.

Crucial to understanding this context is the high dependence of Irish agriculture on support. While WTO rules do not prevent governments from providing support to farmers, they do discipline trade-distorting types of support. These disciplines are implemented through ceilings on market access barriers, maximum amounts on export subsidies and upper limits on trade-distorting domestic support policies. Irish agriculture is thus vulnerable to any changes in support policy as a result of new WTO rules. On the other hand, the article also argues that the current policy regime has created its own set of difficulties for Irish farming and that there may be scope for a greater meeting of minds on the dismantling of support than might appear feasible at first sight. The article concludes by putting forward a set of principles which might guide the reform of EU (and Irish) agricultural policy which would be compatible with likely new WTO rules and with the intetests of developing countries. These principles would represent a dramatic break with traditional policy, and there is therefore a need now to address the concerns which would arise in the transition period and subsequently if farmers are to be adequately prepared.

Irish agriculture dependent on support

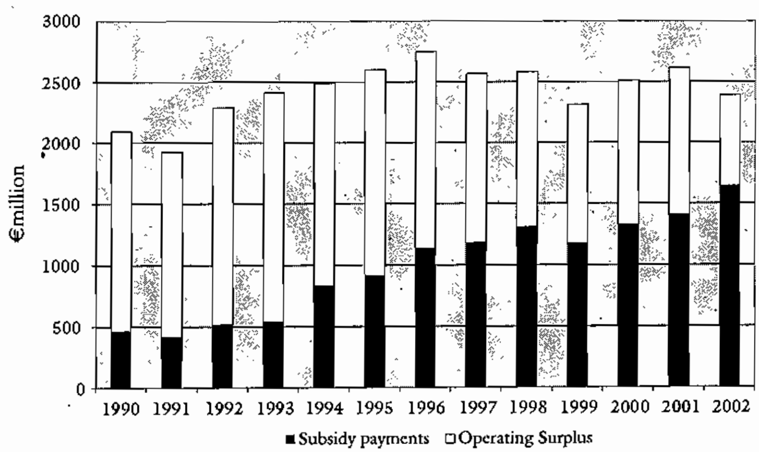
Irish agriculture is currently heavily protected and supported by the mechanisms of the CAP. This occurs in two main ways. First, the market prices which farmers receive are supported by high market access barriers restricting entry of cheaper farm products from more competitive suppliers in third countries. For many farm commodities, the high support prices have led the EU to become an exporter to the world market. In this case, EU market prices are supported by payment of export subsidies which bridge the gap between the high internal market price and the lower world market price. For a number of commodities, buying into intervention by government agencies is another mechanism which puts a floor under market prices. This market price support is financed by consumers in the EU, who pay a higher price for their food than would otherwise be the case.

The second main way in which EU farmers receive support is through direct payments. These were introduced as an instrument of EU farm policy in the mid-1970s as part of a scheme to support farming in less favoured regions. Their importance was significantly extended in the MacSharry reform of the CAP in 1992 and, subsequently, in the Agenda 2000 CAP reform agreed in 1999. Both these reforms brought about some reduction of the high market support prices, but farmers were compensated for the consequential income loss through direct payments. Farmers also receive direct payments for other reasons, for example, if they enrol in an agri-environment scheme or as compensation for losses due to animal disease. The cost of direct payments is met by the government budgets and ultimately by the taxpayer in the EU.

One way of gauging the significance of this support is to express it on a per farmer or per hectare basis. Thus, in the EU, the value of support per full-time farmer has increased from €9,000 annually in 1986-88 to €17,000 annually in 2001. On a per hectare basis, the increase has been from €631 per hectare in 1986-88 to €755 per hectare in 2001 (OECD, 2002). The Irish figures will be higher than this. Irish agriculture is specialised in the production of beef and dairy products, both of which are more highly supported than the average for EU farm production as a whole. Support levels in agriculture are monitored annually by the OECD using the producer support estimate (PSE) indicator. This measures the share of farm revenue generated by public transfers. For example, in 2001, when the average EU PSE percentage was 35% (implying that one-third of farm receipts were due to public transfers), the share of support in the revenue of dairy farmers was 40% and for cattle farmers an incredible 91%.

The growth in the importance of direct payments alone in Irish farm incomes is shown in Figure 1. This Figure underestimates the value of support because it ignores the market price support provided by consumers who must pay higher prices for their food within the EU. Nonetheless, the figures are striking. They show that the value of direct payments to farmers increased from 22% of aggregate income from farming in 1990 (defined as "operating surplus" in the official statistics) to 68% in 2002. Some of these payments, such as agri-environment payments under the Rural Environment Protection Scheme, are made to farmers in recognition of their contribution to supplying valued non-market benefits to society, such as a more varied landscape and habitat. Other payments are made to farmers in less favoured areas of the country which are more marginal for farming, with the purpose of maintaining farming and a viable rural population. As argued below, these types of payments should continue even in a more liberal market environment. But the bulk of the payments are compensation payments paid to farmers simply as income support. Their importance is expected to continue to grow through the middle of this decade as direct payments to dairy farmers begin after 2005 as part of the Agenda 2000 CAP reform package agreed in 1999.

Figure 1: Growth in the relative importance of direct payments in Irish farm income



Source: Central Statistics Office

The rationale for farm support

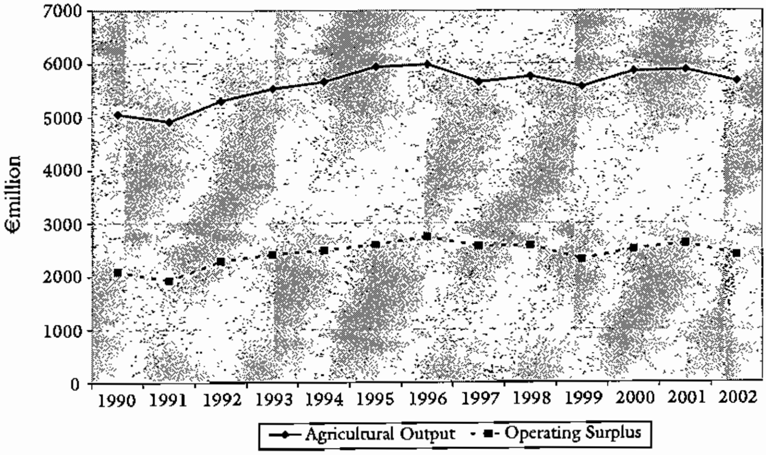
Before examining the consequences of this dependence on protection and subsidy, it is important to understand why this situation has come about. Farming, the production of food and raw materials from the land, was the predominant activity in subsistence societies and still accounts for up to half the labour force in many low income countries today. But as economic growth and development take place, society's wants and preferences diversify away from food. Non-food expenditure assumes a greater and greater importance. At the same time, productivity growth in food production allows the demand for food to be satisfied with a smaller and smaller labour force. Thus, the importance of agriculture declines with economic growth, as does the absolute number of those engaged in farming.

This transformation process is not an easy one. Farming numbers fall mainly because the number of new entrants is smaller than those who leave the sector through retirement or death. Thus farmers tend to be older than the population at large, to have lower levels of education and, as a result, to have lower incomes. Combined with concerns in some countries about ensuring food self-sufficiency and in others with the impact of the fall in agricultural numbers on the viability of rural societies, the perception of a low income problem in agriculture led to substantial government intervention in all European countries in the post-war period. This intervention was intended to transfer income from the increasingly prosperous urban areas to agricultural communities suffering from low living standards, poor housing and poor social amenities. In Ireland, this policy of agricultural support dates back to the 1960s.

The mechanism chosen to raise farm incomes was the simple one of increasing the prices which consumers had to pay for their food. In post-war Europe, which was a net food importer, this was easily done by raising tariffs on imported food. Policymakers did not foresee the impact of the scientific and technical revolution in food production due to better knowledge of plant and animal nutrition, the availability of mechanical power and the development of chemical inputs to combat pests and diseases. Combined with the incentive of high prices and guaranteed markets, Europe's farmers responded and by the mid-1970s structural surpluses of certain products had begun to appear. To stabilise the EU market, policymakers resorted to the simple expedient of getting rid of these surpluses on the world market by subsidising their export or, in some cases, simply piling them up in intervention stores. It was an enormously expensive policy, of course, and to control its growing cost, production controls were introduced which limited the volume of production farmers could either produce at the supported price or the volume which was eligible for support. Today, all the main Irish farm enterprises are subject to production controls or support ceilings which make further growth in agricultural output virtually impossible. These include quotas on milk and sugar output, premium ceilings on cattle and ewe numbers and limits on the cereals area eligible for arable aid. While farmers are not formally prevented from exceeding these limits (except in the case of the quota commodities), the existence of support payments raises the cost of land and other inputs and makes expansion beyond these aggregate limits in practice very difficult.

Counting the cost

Figure 2: Value of agricultural output and income in Ireland, 1990-2001



Source: Central Statistics Office

Despite the heavily protected nature of Irish agriculture, today it faces a serious income crisis. Figure 2 shows that following a steady increase in the value of output in the period up to 1995-96 (output is valued at basic prices which includes subsidies directly linked to production, such as the compensatory payments introduced under the MacSharry and Agenda 2000 reforms), since then the value of output has stagnated. Aggregate income from farming follows a similar trend. These figures are in nominal money values; given the high rates of Irish inflation in the past five years, the real value of this income has been steadily declining. Furthermore, as these were the years of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland when the real value of non-farm incomes was increasing, the gap between farm and non-farm incomes was growing even more rapidly.

The trend in family farm income is not so severe as these figures might imply because there was a reduction in the number of farmers during this period, so that the same aggregate income from farming was shared among fewer farm households. Also, many farm families now have at least one family member working off the farm, so that the level of family farm income is no longer a reliable guide to their household income. A further source of income during this period has been the sale of sites for housing. One estimate suggests that the value of sites for one-off rural housing could be worth up to a further 20 per cent of the reported income from farming activity (Clinch, Convery and Walsh, 2002). Nonetheless, despite these qualifications about the growing importance of non-farm income sources to farm households, the outlook for Irish farm incomes in the remainder of this decade is not a bright one.

There are three main reasons for this. First, direct payments now account for over half of income from farming activity, but these payments are not index-linked. If inflation were to continue at 5 per cent annually, for example, the real value of these payments would halve within 8 years. Given the likely constraints on increasing the EU budget in the period up to the end of the Agenda 2000 financial perspective in 2006 and after that as the costs of absorbing the new member states grows, it is unlikely there will be a change to index-linking. Second, the various supply control measures in place mean that the traditional strategy used by farmers in the face of a price-cost squeeze, to increase their scale of production, is no longer so easy. Farmers who wish to expand in dairying, beef, sheep or tillage production must acquire premium rights or quota rights and must pay to do so. This means that much of the hoped-for benefit of expansion is eaten up by the costs of so doing. Third, farmers are facing higher environmental standards under the polluter pays principle as well as demands for higher animal welfare standards, both of which will raise the level of their costs of production without a commensurate increase in returns.

But the difficulties and paradoxes created by the current CAP rules and regulations go well beyond a gloomy income situation. In the case of the principal farming systems, the value of direct payments now exceeds the actual income the farmer gets from farming activity. Simply giving farmers the payments they currently get and asking them to stop farming would save hundreds of millions of euro per year. Farmers are now losing money in the production of cattle and sheep in order to keep animals to qualify for direct payments – a crazy waste of resources. This has been recognised in the proposals from Mr Fischler, the EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, in his Mid-Term Review of the CAP published in July 2002 (Commission, 2002). He has proposed to pay each farmer the same level of direct payments as he or she received in a reference year without linking these payments to production. The purpose of this proposal is mainly to ensure that this income support would not be trade-distorting and thus would not be disciplined by future WTO rules. But he also explicitly recognises that ir would improve the income efficiency of these payments in that a higher proportion would go to actually improving farm incomes on many farms.

The need to control overall EU production levels has led to an intrusive and inefficient system of production quotas at farm level. Quotas prevent Irish farmers from producing what they are good at, for example, our best dairy farmers are forced into dual enterprise systems producing beef and dairy which represents an inefficient use of our pasture resource. Quotas also inhibit the entry of younger farmers and the expansion of more enterprising farmers, thus lowering the overall efficient use of our natural resources.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the system of quotas and supply controls is undermining the long term productivity and efficiency of Irish agriculture. Productivity growth in Irish agriculture appears to be slowing down and thus over time its ability to compete on world markets is being undermined. Milk yields which were growing steadily until the 1990s have now levelled off, despite still being low in absolute terms compared to those achieved elsewhere. Beef productivity is also falling (Harte, 2002). Total productivity growth which averaged 2.3% per annum between 1984 and 1990 has fallen to less than 1.5% per annum after 1990 (Matthews, 2000, O'Neill and Matthews, 2001). Farmers' awareness of Ireland's increasing loss of competitive advantage, of course, makes them even more reluctant to contemplate producing at world market prices, even though it is the support system which has been put in place which is largely responsible for this failure.

The ultimate irony is that a support system intended to support the income of working farmers has the effect of driving up the price of fixed resources such as quota rights and land. Land prices have rocketed in recent years despite stagnant farm incomes. Payments for quota rights mean that the benefit of higher farm prices is passed back to those who are leaving the industry, and do not remain with working farmers.

A further way in which the system damages farming is that it disconnects farmers from what should be their principal market, the consumer. When 100% or more of income comes from direct payments, which are paid regardless of the quality of what is produced, farmers have less interest in quality production or in responding to consumer needs. The carcase quality of Irish beef output has regressed in the past decade, not improved. More than 30% of Irish beef is produced beyond the age of 30 months when, in the light of BSE, this should be the normal age of slaughter. Very little headway is being made in promoting organic farming – this can hardly be a surprise when a farmer gets exactly the same direct payment for a traditionally-reared animal as for one raised using organic methods. Not only is there no incentive to search for alternative market outlets, but alternative enterprises and land uses are directly discouraged by the high support provided for CAP products. Forestry, for example, can only compete because it receives subsidies which, if anything, are greater than those provided to agriculture.

What direction for Irish farm policy?

Faced with this difficult income situation, the natural reaction of Irish farmers is to call for increased support or protection. Thus this autumn we have seen Irish farmers block the import of grain from the Black Sea area, protest about the import of beef from Argentina and complain about imports of poultrymeat from some Asian countries. Dairy farmers have lobbied in Brussels for higher export refunds as the solution to their income problems.

While these demands appear justified from the short run perspective of Irish farmers, it is not acceptable to solve the income problems of farmers at home by shifting the problem to farmers in other countries, including developing countries. This is precisely the purpose of formulating WTO rules in this area.

EU food self-sufficiency approach

For some commentators, the main criticism of EU farm policy is that it leads to subsidised exports. A number of NGOs are attracted to a view that countries should be permitted to maintain or raise tariffs to ensure domestic food self-sufficiency.[1] While this demand is part of some developing countries' proposals for a development box or food security box in the Doha agricultural negotiations, it has no merit when applied to the situation of developed countries or regions such as the EU. Of course, supporting local food producers is highly desirable. A number of food retailers have recognised that consumers do want to have a more personal relationship with their food suppliers. Fresh produce is now often accompanied by the name (and photograph!) of the producer and consumers still prefer to buy meat from their local butcher while the EU is encouraging regional food specialties by introducing legally protected designations of origin.

However, this consumer-led approach to food marketing which seeks to promote local food production in a positive way is in direct contrast to producer-led attempts to restrict consumer choice and the availability of imported foods. Tariff protection inevitably skews the benefits of support in favour of the very largest producers who have most to sell. This is the paradox in Oxfam's support for retention of EU milk quota system at the EU self-sufficiency level. Because tariff support is received anonymously through the market place, there is no opportunity to require compliance with desired social objectives as a condition for receiving this support. From the point of view of developing counrries, restricting market access for products in which they have a comparative advantage is just as pernicious as dumping surplus EU products in their local markets. The problems faced by Egyptian onion growers, Moroccan citrus producers, Botswanan cattle farmers, Malawian tobacco growers, or Central American sugar producers are problems of market access, not just export competition. The importance of opening market access as well as disciplining export subsidies is fully recognised in the WTO negotiations.

Nor is food self-sufficiency a feasible strategy in an Irish context. For climatic reasons, Irish agriculture is dominated by grassland products, and cattle and dairy products in particular. We need to export 70-90% of our production of these commodities and, while the EU market will absorb some of these exports, third country markets are also important. The potential growth of third country markets, particularly in developing countries, driven by agriculture-led growth is in fact an opportunity for Irish farmers, not a threat, but because of the complex network of subsidies currently in place, this opportunity is not perceived as such.

Embracing the opportunities of globalisation

An alternative strategy is to embrace the opportunities created by globalisation while retaining the right to intervene to correct obvious market failures and distortions. The success of the Irish food processing industry on a global scale, operating without the constraints of a regulated policy, underlines the potential which exists. For this potential to be realised, Irish agricultural policy should be based on the following four principles:

- Farmers should receive for their products the prices which consumers are prepared to pay in open markets. This provides the greatest incentives for farmers to innovate, to seek out remunerative new markets, to further improve levels of food quality, and to respond to consumer preferences. It would dispense with the need for the whole bureaucratic apparatus of controls and inspections which is stifling enterprise in Irish agriculture and discouraging the brightest potential new entrants from entering the industry. There will still be a need for a safety-net intervention system of price support to protect farmers against market collapse, but this should be based on a moving average of past market prices to guard against any tendency to protectionism.
- Farming should be treated as an activity where farmers are expected to comply with society's current norms regarding food safety, environmental care and animal welfare. There is nothing in the business of farming which justifies exempting farmers from the general principles that they should not pollute the environment, produce unsafe food or treat animals badly. Where society sets these standards higher than current farm practice, there may be a case for transitional assistance to help farmers to comply with these standards, but high

standards, in themselves, are not an argument for continued and persistent support.

- Where Irish society wants to encourage and promote particular environmental goods which would not otherwise be produced, this should be done through targeted environmental payments. These are likely to be limited in scale and geographical area, and should as far as possible be linked to the production of the desired environmental benefit. Targeted payments would produce much greater environmental benefits than paying farmers twice the world market price for their cattle (through both price support and direct payments) and then limiting their stocking densities in the hope that this is going to lead to an improved rural environment. Continuing direct payments will also be justified in marginal farming areas if it were felt desirable to maintain farming activity in these areas, though reversion to very low intensity grazing in a more natural environment may well be the preferred option of many Irish people, particularly in more upland regions.
- The maintenance of viable populations in rural areas is also a desirable objective, but this objective should be pursued through a sensible rural policy and not through agricultural policy. This means, above all, a coherent national spatial strategy which encourages the development of a viable urban infrastructure in rural areas. Other rural policies such as transport, housing, infrastructure provision and rural planning are much more important to the long-term future of rural areas than paying farmers 50% more than the world market price for their milk. Problems of rural poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion, and particularly their impact on women, must also be addressed by targeted policies. As was recognised in the 1999 White Paper on Rural Development, competitiveness and economic efficiency will not, in themselves, address problems of poverty and social exclusion (Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 1999). Conversely, however, agricultural policy is only rarely the appropriate instrument to tackle issues of isolation, inequality, lack of participation, lack of employment and lack of income in rural areas.

To these four principles we add a fifth principle on how to manage the transition from the current chaotic framework for agricultural support to one more sensibly designed:

- To avoid any loss of income to those farmers who are currently engaged in farming, existing direct payments and price supports (which are currently linked either to the amount of production or to the use of particular inputs such as land) should be converted into annuities and paid directly to the farmer, regardless of whether he or she continues in farming or not. However, new entrants would not be eligible for these personal payments and would make their decision on whether to enter farming on the basis of their expected returns at world market prices. A weakness of the current Fischler reform proposal is that there is no exit strategy. Direct payments are linked to the land rather than to the farmer. Area-based payments are inevitably capitalised into the value of the land and will continue to act as a barrier to new entrants or farmers wishing to expand.

The implications of farming without subsidies

It is clear that Irish agriculture would look very different in a world without subsidies compared to at present. Input use would fall (relieving stress on the environment), labour use would fall, there would be fewer farms and these farms would be much bigger. (Size is, of course, relative; while average farm size would increase compared to the past, it would remain much smaller than the average size of what in the US are still considered family farms and also smaller than many production units which characterise farming in the candidate countries for EU accession.) Overall production would probably not be greatly affected in the medium term, and thus employment and throughput in the food industry overall would not be affected.

Clearly, farmers would need to be assisted to adjust to this new situation, and the transition would need to be phased. A much more radical approach to structural adjustment policy would be required to prepare for this eventuality, with the promise that once this adjustment has taken place, the only limit to the expansion of Irish agriculture is the ingenuity and skills of farmers themselves. Measures would need to be initiated to promote a more competitive agricultural sector, by putting in place the research, the training and the marketing infrastructure which will enable Irish producers to show what they are capable of in competing against the world. Policymakers and farmers need to be weaned off the idea that agricultural policy is about the defence of subsidies and protection. It is about providing Irish farmers with the framework, opportunities and supports necessary to competitively produce safe, high quality food in an environmentally sustainable manner for markets prepared to pay for it. There is a strong case for the establishment of a farming commission to examine the implications of farming without subsidies and to prepare a strategy to guide Irish agriculture in the difficult transition phase. Such a forum should be sought by development NGOs as an opportunity to make their contribution on how EU agricultural policy could be made coherent with the Union's development co-operation objectives and developing countries' expectations of the outcome of the Doha Development Round.

Footnote

1 In the case of some NGOs, this emphasis is more implicit than explicit and the argument is often confused. For example, the main demand by Oxfam in its recent critique of EU dairy policy was for a cut in EU dairy quotas to eliminate subsidised dairy exports (Oxfam, 2002). It calls for the maintenance of high milk prices inside the EU and the retention of the EU milk quota system at the level of EU self-sufficiency on the grounds that this would help to safeguard the position of small scale producers. This argument is put forward despite the evidence in its own report that the current quota regime has failed utterly to protect small scale dairy farmers, and despite its recognition that only more targeted measures can assist low income producers in less favoured farming areas. Another example is the position of the European Environmental Bureau in its recent report on further reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (EEB, 2002). While explicitly calling for the abolition of export subsidies, and while calling in the summary for the phasing out of price support and other support directly related to production, the report does not directly address the need to remove tariff protection to improve market access.

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