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Influence of European policy on dairy co-operative strategy in Ireland, 1975-1985

Tadgh Quill-Manley

This short paper explores how European agricultural policy, notably the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), significantly influenced the strategic trajectory of dairy co-operatives in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. The CAP sought to stabilise agricultural markets and provide a reasonable standard of living for farmers by implementing measures like fixed pricing and export subsidies that encouraged dairy production within the European Economic Community (EEC). This presented both possibilities and problems for Irish dairy co-operatives. On one hand, the CAP established a conducive climate for development by guaranteeing price stability and market access, allowing Irish dairy co-operatives to expand considerably. On the other, the expansion necessitated structural and operational modifications. Co-operatives needed to upgrade production facilities, adopt more efficient management, and improve marketing to compete in the growing EEC market. The 1984 milk quotas were pivotal, forcing co-operatives and suppliers to adjust output, affecting long-term planning and investment. The interaction of European policy and the global dairy market required Irish co-operatives to adapt strategies to boost efficiency, maintain profitability, and ensure sustainable growth. These proactive steps laid the foundation for the strong global presence of the Irish dairy industry today.

Introduction

The co-operative movement significantly influenced Irish life within the farming industry. Initiated by Sir Horace Plunkett, an MP and then president of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society in the late 1800s, Plunkett's concept expanded farmers' anticipations (Irish Independent, 2009). By 1920, there had existed 1,114 co-operative creameries distributed across the countryside (O'Connor & Kelly, 1980). This expansion of the co-operative movement allowed for member-farmers to collectively own and utilise new technologies through a creamery (Doyle, 2013). However, the demise of several smaller co-operatives had been marked by two distinct phases of commercial rationalisation in the 1960s and 1970s (Irish Independent, 2009). The 192 creamery units listed in the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society's 1966 development plans were consolidated down to 46 by 1978, and further reduced to 35 by 1990 (Breathnach, 2014).

According to Teagasc, the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority, milk production in Ireland was expected to increase significantly after joining the European Economic Community (EEC), and numerous analyses from the 1960s and 1970s advocated for the consolidation

and optimisation of these existing creameries, in order to create more extensive processing facilities (Donnellan et al., 2015). However, some co-operatives opposed merging, due to concerns surrounding potential local unemployment and the relinquishment of authority to their competitors. During this time frame, the rationalisation took place, albeit slower than anticipated, and, by 1973, a total of 52 co-operatives were engaged in dairy processing, a reduction from the 200 creameries in operation a decade prior (Donnellan et al., 2015). One major consequence of rationalisation was that the Dairy Disposal Company, originally founded as a state agency in 1927 to secure faltering commercial creameries and other agricultural enterprises for conversion to co-operative societies, was liquidated in 1978 (Ó Fathartaigh, 2014; Ryan, 2015).

This paper will outline the major changes which took place in this sector, by examining output and production, commercial progression, business methods and structure, and how European Community policy affected its development during the 1970s and 1980s. It also examines reactions to these shifts, including how it adapted to changing policy and conditions, drawing on academic, industry, and media reports.

Output

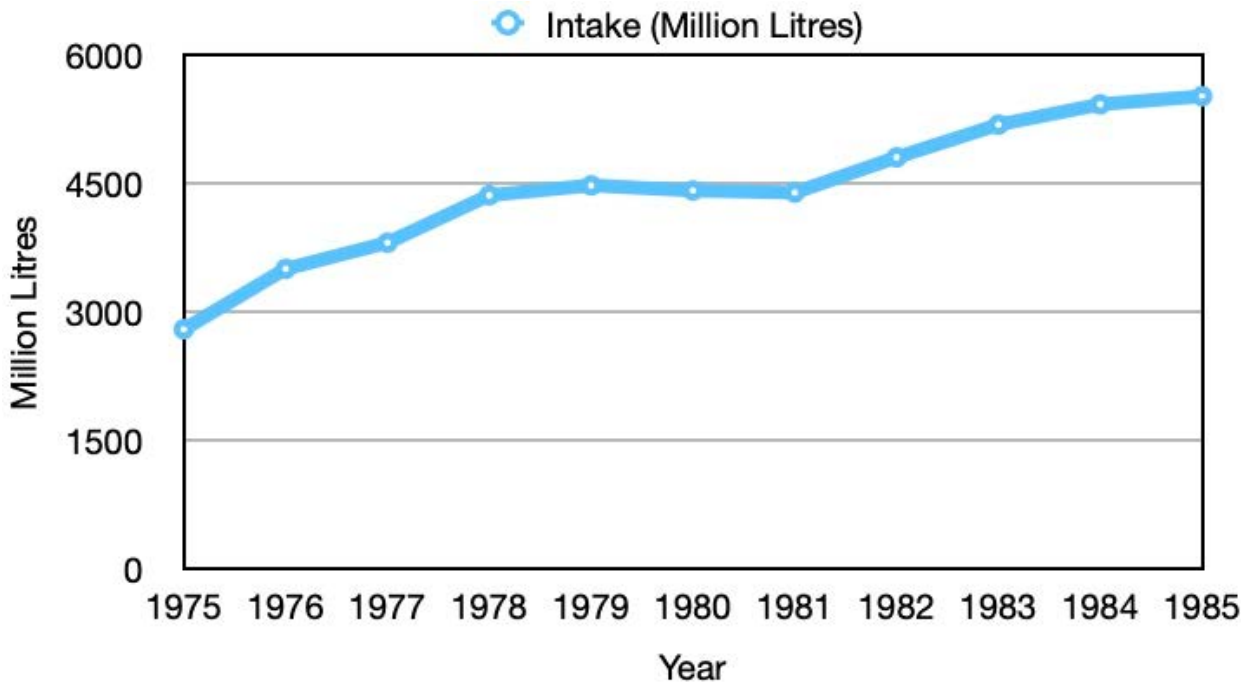
It was forecast that providers with fewer than 20,000 gallons per year would decrease from over 80% of the total, to just over 40% between 1973 and 1988, which aligns with what took place (Keane, 1991). The expected increases in the percentage of total providers represented by higher size categories for 1978, 1983, and 1988, similarly closely aligned with the actual results (Keane, 1991).

Between 1975 and 1985, milk output in Ireland rose from 3.2 billion litres to 5.5 billion litres, representing a 72% increase during that decade (Dillon, 2011, see also Figures 1 and 2). Milk output in Ireland rose, on average, by 5.7% per year, which correlated with a 49% jump in milk yield per unit, and an 11% rise in the bovine population, despite a 47% decline in the overall amount of active dairy farms. The augmentation of milk output was expedited by Ireland's entry into the EEC in 1973, significantly enhancing the commercial value of milk and dairy commodities (Dillon, 2011). At the same time, the average deliveries per cow were 2,600 kg in 1974, with an annual increase of approximately 4% until 1984 (Donnellan et al., 2015).

The co-operatives' aim to secure more raw materials suited producers during this period. Although a large supply usually lowers prices and profits, the EEC dairy market was regulated by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (Nilsson & Gunnarsson, 2000). Tarrant (1980) noted that high-protein feeds quickly increased supply amid slower demand growth. Farmers were caught in a 'technical treadmill,' where falling prices forced constant adoption of new technology, further increasing output and lowering prices. Governments intervened to support farmers' incomes. The Commission used the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund to buy products when prices fell below set minimums. These purchases raised demand and maintained prices, with the bought products stored. This intervention cost, beyond market demand, caused production to exceed what the open market could absorb (Tarrant, 1980).

In these circumstances, the EEC bought milk powder and commercial butter at a set minimum price (Nilsson & Gunnarsson, 2000). This intervention price was unattractive in most member states, so processors sold only what they could not distribute otherwise. Intervention revenue helped earnings but did not provide farmers with a favourable milk price. Ireland, with its low production costs, had different conditions. The intervention price allowed significant gains for suppliers and processors. As a result, the EEC purchased about half of Ireland's milk at the intervention price, then sold these quantities, often at a loss on the global market (Nilsson & Gunnarsson, 2000).

Figure 1: Intake of domestic cow's milk by milk processors and dairy co-operatives in Ireland 1975-1985



Source: Central Statistics Office (2025a)

Commercial Development

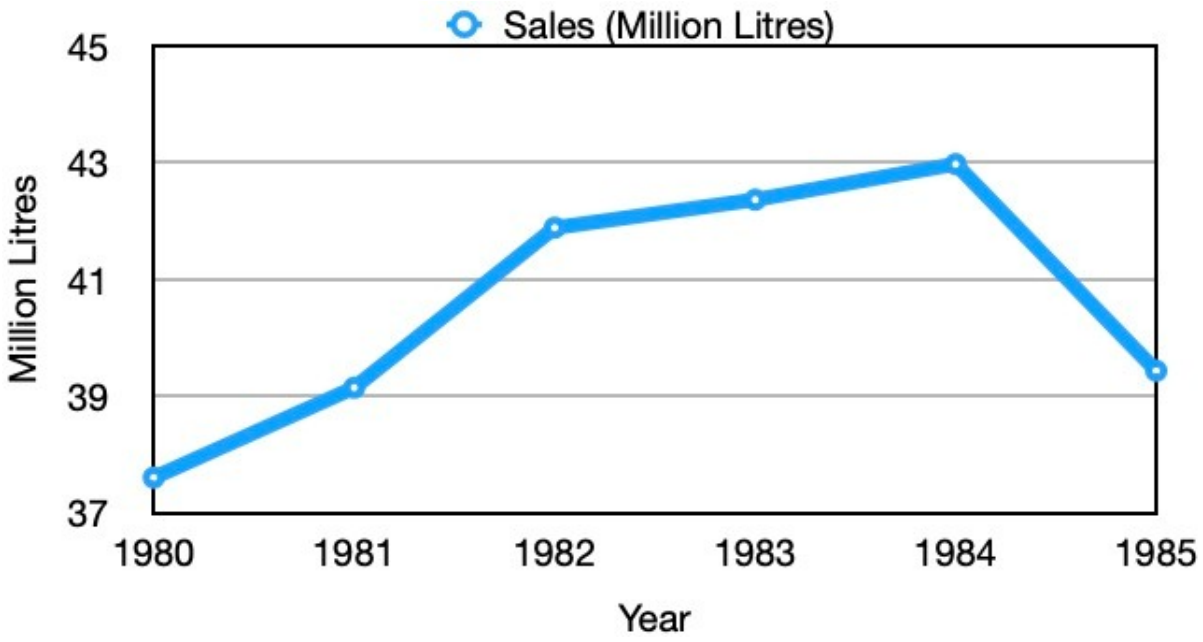
Increased milk intake and sales allowed for dairy co-operatives to develop their commercial operations. In June 1977, Waterford Co-operative Society, a creamery processor, announced a significant rise in turnover for its dairy section for the fiscal year ending 1976 (Waterford News & Star, 1977). The amount was IEP 34,100,000, reflecting an increase of IEP 6,400,000 from 1975. Nevertheless, the organisation pursued financial stability via its share capital and revolving capital fund, a mechanism that guaranteed the direct participation of all suppliers, while also holding profits from annual trade to facilitate vital growth. The excellent standard of the co-operative's milk supply was substantiated by its receipt of four first place awards from the Royal Dublin Society for butter fineness that year (Irish Independent, 1977).

The operating methods utilised by producers and co-operatives changed as a result of ramped-up output. Regarding the period of company rationalisation that occurred in the 1970s, for farmers, the amalgamations resulted in the most commonly noted benefits being the expansion of farm services, and a reduction in operating costs (Kennedy, 1976). While a wide array of disadvantages were noted, no single disadvantage appeared to take precedence. However, a significant number of farmers perceived a decline in local esteem, control, authority, and social interactions. Nonetheless, Kennedy (1976) shows that it was important to note that only 6.2% were willing to accept a price reduction for milk in order to regain autonomy for their former co-operative society. A large portion of farmers expressed confidence in commercial prospects regarding the amalgamated dairy co-operative, although a marginally smaller proportion indicated confidence in their individual futures in agriculture (Kennedy, 1976).

The transition by milk suppliers to bulk collection of milk periodically was an element of a broader farm modernisation procedure, accelerated by new European Community farm improvement initiatives. A study conducted between 1974 and 1975 among farmers in south-east Co. Tipperary revealed that those utilising bulk collection preferred the merging of co-operatives (Jenkins, 2015). Regional amendments, including the closure of branch creameries, and the transition to bulk milk collection, reflected a trend in the direction of

integrated manufacturing at localised levels. The increasing globalisation of the industry, the enhanced convergence of national economies, and the formation of international economic systems like the EU had necessitated unprecedented efficiency measures (Jenkins, 2015). By 1980, nearly all dairy farmers had adopted the bulk-tank method for the storage and direct collection of milk from farms, in response to heightened production volumes. The regular excursion to the local creamery, which had been integral to the lives of dairy farmers for decades, had become obsolete. For example, once milk quotas were implemented in 1984, Waterford Co-op was processing nearly four times the amount of milk it processed in 1970 (Breathnach, 2004).

Figure 2: Dairy milk sales for human consumption in Ireland, 1980-1985



Source: Central Statistics Office (2025b)

According to a policy paper published by the now defunct state body, Forfás (2007), transitions in the Irish co-operative industry were characterised by an overhaul in organisational and business procedures to enhance financing and to operate more vigorously within increasingly deregulated markets. This encompassed the establishment of totally or partially owned capital-based subsidiaries, a strategy used by major dairy co-operatives in the 1980s. To finance growth, co-operatives possessed two options: raising money from members, or borrowing from financial institutions. The first source of funding was inadequate, while the latter was too costly, due to elevated borrowing rates from banks in the 1980s. Dairy co-operatives commenced the adoption of the 'PLC path,' through which holdings inside the co-operative society were converted into equity via publicly limited corporations (Forfás, 2007).

Milk Poaching

From 1980, the growth in milk production was decelerating, despite dairy co-operatives having spent substantial capital in processing equipment, and they became increasingly anxious for additional fresh produce. Media reports from this time suggest that this led to the phenomenon of "poaching" of dairy providers by several co-operatives (Fanning, 1980; Irish Farmers Journal, 1983). For example, in 1983, Shannonside Milk Products had finalised agreements with around 80 Co. Limerick-based suppliers from Kerry Co-op to secure four million gallons of milk for processing and sale in the Connacht region (Irish Farmers Journal, 1983). The three co-operatives owning Shannonside, comprised of Mid-West, NCF, and Kiltoghert, had explained that this move was in response to Kerry Co-op's decision to transfer milk out of Connacht after acquiring the Galway Milk Company. According to the other co-operatives, Kerry had broken

their earlier commitment that no milk would be removed from that region. The 80 suppliers involved were part of the West Limerick Milk Producers' Co-op, and had been in conflict with Kerry Group. The Irish Farmers Journal (1983) indicated that Shannonside had offered these suppliers quotas, with an additional four pence per gallon for milk produced in November, December, and January.

Writing in the *Irish Independent*, Aengus Fanning (1980) described how a dairy co-operative often attracted numerous significant, proficient dairy producers from an adjacent co-operative. A dairy co-operative society that lost its most prominent suppliers in this manner not only incurred a reduction in milk output, but also faced an alarming increase in operating costs per gallon of collected milk. Later a more advanced form of milk poaching emerged. A liquid milk dairy for the domestic milk market would perform preliminary "poaching". Such a dairy, having lured some dairy farmers from their existing co-operative by providing an above-average milk price, was subsequently confronted with an oversupply of milk. However, it would thereafter sell the milk to a separate creamery at an elevated price, therefore functioning as a milk broker, and deriving substantial profit from the trade of milk (Fanning, 1980).

Aspects of succeeding in the 'milk war' included dairy co-operatives implementing a profitable winter scheme for farmers which, by 1982, had elicited significant attention at the farm level. Laurena Cahill (1982) outlines how these programmes offered incentives to providers who supplied milk during the off-season. More than 200 vendors participated in the original Virginia offering, intended to provide ingredients for the production of Bailey's cream liquor, which utilised 26 million gallons of milk in 1981. This deal, which was similar to those provided by the Avonmore and Wexford creameries, offered an additional 18p per gallon over the standard creamery pricing. Approximately 40% of the total deliveries occurred between October and March. Cahill (1982) notes that the aforementioned plans were perhaps most financially advantageous, generating a gross benefit of £2,880 for a provider supplying 40,000 gallons per year, dependent upon a farmer owning, for example, 50 cows, each producing 800 gallons. Farmers who failed to meet the objectives nevertheless obtained off-season rewards of up to 15p per gallon (Cahill, 1982). Against this backdrop, milk prices increased from 16p per gallon to 64p in 1980, and to 92p by 1985 (Clancy & Wright, 2013).

Levies

Schemes to reduce milk production, regarded as a contentious matter in Ireland, were devised in the late 1970s, and, in 1976, the Irish Farmers' Association was the only state member of COPA, the EEC-wide farmers' organisation, that was against the implementation of an impending milk levy (Irish Farmers Journal, 1976). In 1978, the legitimacy of the 0.9p per gallon co-responsibility fee enforced on Irish milk producers by the EEC Council of Ministers in September 1977 was contested at the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg. The imposition of such a fee was believed to contravene the articles and principles of the Treaty of Rome. It was suggested that, if allowed to continue, it would cost Irish farmers £7.5 million per year (Irish Farmers Journal, 1978). In 1979, in reaction to a proposition for dairy farmers to contribute a revised 'co-responsibility levy' for the destruction of excess produce, the Irish Co-operative Organisation Society president and Independent MEP, T. J. Maher, contested the notion that farmers in the Common Market were responsible for the infamous 'butter mountains' of the era (Fanning, 1979). Maher contended that there had been no domestic excess-production inside the EEC; rather, it was generated due to stockpiles of vegetable oils for margarine production and butter imports to Britain from New Zealand (Fanning, 1979).

In pursuit of adapting the CAP within a sensible long-term structure, the European Commission proposed several measures, the most significant one for Ireland was the implementation of a milk super-levy (O'Connor, 1984). The plan included the imposition of a fee of about 70p per gallon on all milk supplies above those recorded in 1981, to be enacted in the 1984-85 budget. The implementation of this tax scheme was projected to provide savings of 1,300 million ECU overall. Writing at the time, O'Connor (1984) argued that, due to the selected base year, 130

million ECU would be generated from Ireland. The Irish dairy industry would thus be required to provide 10% of the Community's savings, while generating less than 5% of the Community's aggregate milk. However, the document also noted that, given that Ireland's milk production constituted less than 5% of that in the Community overall, an Irish exemption from the tax would have left a minimal impact on total milk supply (O'Connor, 1984). On 2 April 1984, after years of substantial surplus output of milk and dairy-based goods, the CAP implemented a regime of milk quotas. Beginning in 1984, each EU Member State possessed two categories of quotas: one established the greatest volume of milk supplied to dairies, while the other set the limit for direct sales at farm level. If milk levels exceeded the established criteria, a charge was imposed on the producers concerned (Eurostat, n.d.).

In response, Denis Murphy, chief executive of the Ballyclough Co-operative Society, asserted that meticulous attention ought to be given to the management of the planned milk charge in Ireland, given that the group had grown its milk supply by seven million gallons (Irish Farmers Journal, 1984). Although approximately 2,500 suppliers enhanced output by a mean of 15%, the other 4,000 suppliers, in fact, diminished their production by 13%, being the equivalent of three million gallons. He expressed his intention for the organisation to transform into a specialist dairy co-operative, specialising on effectiveness, marketing, and the production of agricultural goods. Stephen O'Connor, chief executive of the Waterford Co-operative Society, suggested that the objective for the industry should be to enhance the milk content in goods, so yielding more profits and aligning milk prices more closely with their objectives (Irish Farmers Journal, 1984).

In May 1985, J. J. McAuliffe, head of the Domestic Banking Division at Allied Irish Banks, reported that disputes amongst co-operatives had intensified, owing to a constrained milk supply, itself resulting from the new levy system (Norton, 1985). This had been driving milk prices higher. This would be beneficial to producers in the near run, he claimed, nonetheless, the long-term ramifications for co-operatives would significantly impact the industry's foundation. Despite the co-operatives' attempts to create new and value-added goods, dependence on intervention goods continued. McAuliffe also highlighted that one major consequence of the new milk quota system was a significant surge in beef supply, leading to a collapse in beef prices for producers (Norton, 1985).

By 1987, milk quotas in Ireland could be traded via the letting and sale of a milk quota. This quota exchange was restricted within dairy co-operatives, and set quota prices were established by the Department of Food and Agriculture (Hennessy et al., 2008). Despite the introduction of the quota system, increased production persisted into the twenty first century. By 2015, Irish dairy producers tended to have the same number of cows as in 1975; nevertheless, there were 128,000 fewer dairy farms performing this activity (Moran, 2015). The shifting reality of rural Ireland was that technology and breeding enabled fewer hands to perform ever more labour.

Since the implementation of quotas in the mid-1980s, Ireland's capacity to expand its dairy business has been greatly constrained. The effects of the milk quota are clear. As illustrated in a paper by the Irish Co-operative Organisation Society (2011), aggregate Irish milk production increased twofold between 1965 and 1985. However, the implementation of quotas in the mid-1980s halted the development and advancement of the Irish dairy business. The growth of the Irish dairy sector significantly decelerated, beginning in 1985.

Industry Pressures

In 1985, the European Commission's proposed introduction of a milk cessation scheme was deemed disastrous for dairy co-operatives, according to the Irish Creamery & Milk Suppliers Association (ICMSA) (Limerick Leader, 1985). The goal was to acquire 3% of the quota from each member state. This would lead to a perpetual decrease of approximately 35 million gallons in Ireland. The ICMSA forecasted that this development would lead to the dissolution

of a medium-sized co-operative society, citing Nenagh and Killeshandra as examples, along with several organisations in West Cork. A substantial number of jobs would be eradicated, and the remaining suppliers would face increased costs, with reduced capacity exacerbating the ongoing milk 'wars.' The ICMSA clarified, however, that it had no reservations on the concept of a national cessation scheme, contingent upon the condition that the released quota be utilised primarily within the respective areas of co-operatives for reorganisation and unique circumstances (Limerick Leader, 1985).

A milk cessation scheme was planned for farmers affected by animal disease, health issues, and financial difficulties. Major agricultural associations supported a scheme administered by dairy co-operatives, with societies acting as intermediaries managing a central pool. All co-operatives had to participate for the European Commission to approve it. Each co-operative would receive milk based on its share of the national pool. A challenge was differing milk costs among co-operatives. The original scheme proposed 17 million gallons, including 3.9 million from producers who stopped before April 1984 (Irish Farmers Journal, 1985). In November 1985, Minister Austin Deasy said co-operatives and the Department of Agriculture were considering a new cessation plan after the 1984 programme, but any new scheme would need sector funding as no extra government money was available (Deasy, 1985).

Conclusion

To summarise, European policies from 1975 to 1985 significantly influenced the Irish dairy co-operative industry. The Common Agricultural Policy provided crucial financial support through subsidies and price guarantees, stabilising the industry and encouraging development. The 1984 milk quota system was pivotal, limiting output to control surpluses and forcing smaller co-operatives to adapt. During this period, co-operatives began modernising and consolidating to remain competitive in the new European markets. As Irish dairy co-operatives adjusted, European integration gradually shaped the sector's framework, laying the groundwork for future growth and adaptability. This period shows how European integration transformed national sectors, highlighting the link between regional policies and local economies, especially in the co-operative movement. Adaptability was vital for the sector's survival, helping it overcome challenges and prepare for sustained growth in a globalised market. It underscores the importance of transnational management in handling agrarian transition, economic flexibility, and sector resilience amid global forces.

The Author

Tadgh Quill-Manley is a board member of the Society for Co-operative Studies in Ireland. He is currently studying Law at the King's Inns, Ireland and is a BA (Hons) graduate in Economics & Philosophy from University College Cork. He holds the CIP, QFA, CUA/CUC/CUG (Credit Union Operations), and PTP financial qualifications.

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