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Adaptation isn't for farmers: narratives of injustice around climate adaptation in Irish agriculture

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Abstract

Agriculture is widely recognised as one of the most vulnerable sectors to climate change. Despite this vulnerability, adaptation efforts have progressed slowly over the past several decades. Ireland is no exception, with higher temperatures and more variable rainfall impacting farmers and making adaptation necessary. However, despite commitments since 2018, agriculture has made only moderate or limited adaptation progress to date. Through narrative analysis using a justice and just transition lens, this paper explores how the framing of adaptation in rural community narratives portrays adaptation as an unfair burden on farmers. Document analysis, interviews with agricultural professionals, and a workshop revealed four narrative elements that were perceived to contribute to farming and rural communities feeling unjustly treated and resistant to implementing climate adaptation measures. The first is a general narrative of injustice in rural areas compared to urban areas. Second is a narrative that the purpose of climate adaptation is not to help farmers deal with climate impacts, but rather to provide climate mitigation and environmental improvements. Third is a feeling that when the environment wins, farmers lose. Finally, a narrative exists that farmers have been repeatedly asked to change their farming practices at their own expense and at their own risk to achieve larger societal goals. The findings underscore the need for adaptation narratives to take perceptions of justice into account, and to promote narratives that highlight specific benefits to farmers and their families. Such reframing could strengthen farmer engagement and foster greater support for climate adaptation initiatives.

Keywords Climate adaptation · Justice · Policy narratives · Agriculture · Just transition · Ireland

Introduction

Agriculture is widely recognised as one of the most vulnerable sectors to climate change. Despite this high level of vulnerability, adaptation efforts in agriculture were slow to commence and have progressed slowly over the past several decades (Burton and Lim 2005). This slow initiation of adaptation actions in farming has been attributed, at least in part, to mid-1990s predictions that agriculture would be able to adapt fairly easily and cheaply to expected climate changes (Burton and Lim 2005). That earlier belief is no longer widespread, as farmers have begun noticing changes in their local environments and research now predicts significant impacts. In response, farmers are reactively adjusting their practices (Vermeulen et al. 2018). Current adaptation actions in farming generally have included, for example, changing the timing of planting, and changes to crop selection and diversity (Dolšak and Prakash 2018). However, these modifications are unlikely to be sufficient as the climate continues to change over the coming decades (Vermeulen et al. 2018).Vermeulen et al. (2018) examined agricultural adaptation globally, and found that transformative changes in agriculture are rare. They argue that current mental models and how farmers envision the future are not compatible with the scale of change needed. Complementing this perspective, another strand of research examines questions of justice and a just transition in rural areas. In the context of high-income countries, these studies have found that farmers often feel relatively powerless within global food systems, perceive an inequitable distribution of wealth

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and income in agriculture, and believe they are unjustly blamed for climate change and other environmental problems (Kuhmonen and Siltaoja 2022; Puupponen et al. 2022; Fickel 2023; Lunn 2024; D. Brown et al. 2024). Together, these findings highlight that addressing climate change in agriculture requires not only technical adaptation, but also structural transformation that engages with farmers' perceptions of justice, power and responsibility.

Drawing on these findings, this research uses Ireland as a case study to examine justice-related barriers to agricultural climate adaptation. Ireland is currently experiencing climate change through impacts such as extreme weather events, sea level rise, and coastal erosion in line with international trends (C. Murphy et al. 2023). Adaptation to date has been inadequate in many sectors, with costs to the Irish economy, society and environment already being felt (C. Murphy et al. 2023). Sea-level rise is expected to cause economic damages of €2 billion by 2050, and climate-exacerbated river flooding is anticipated to cause €95 million in damage by 2070 (De Bruin, Kyei, and Henry 2024). In the context of agricultural vulnerability, Irish farmers and the sector more generally are highly vulnerable to climate impacts (Murphy et al. 2023). Yet, why these growing impacts have not yet prompted more fundamental adaptation in agriculture remains poorly understood.

This gap in knowledge merits further exploration for several reasons. First, agricultural land comprises approximately 70% of Ireland's landmass (Environmental Protection Agency 2024a), and the agri-food sector employs approximately 7% of the workforce (McConalogue 2022). Moreover, given the success of adaptation in other sectors (e.g., water quality, flooding, biodiversity) is contingent on agricultural adaptation, failing to address barriers to agricultural adaptation undermines other sectors' adaptation efforts. Second, previous studies suggest that Irish rural communities are often unjustly impacted by national policy decisions, with Bresnihan and Brodie (2024) describing them as sacrifice zones for industries linked to foreign investment. However, the specific role of agriculture as a sacrifice industry, and farmers as a sacrifice workforce, in advancing national climate policy and environmental objectives remains underexplored. The Irish agricultural sector therefore offers a useful case study for examining climate adaptation barriers with insights for other high-income countries with large agriculture sectors.

This paper uses narrative analysis to examine how farmers and people working with farmers perceive feelings of injustice in agriculture and how these feelings relate to the slow progress in agricultural climate adaptation. Narratives have been found useful in examining how farmers understand the world and their place in it, and how that impacts their willingness to change in response to various factors, including cultural changes, urban encroachment and technological transitions (Lankester 2012; Rosén et al. 2018; Newell and Taylor 2018; Fiala et al. 2024; Strauser and Stewart 2024). These studies highlight how both farmers' own sense of identity and the identities ascribed to them by others shape their actions and how narratives within agricultural communities serve to justify certain solutions while excluding others.

Scholars have also investigated narratives in rural and farming communities more generally, examining narratives around environmental protection and improvement (Tovey 2009; Moran et al. 2021; Nicholas-Davies et al. 2021), farmer health and masculinity (Lankester 2012; Thomas et al. 2019; Hammersley et al. 2021; Letourneau and Davidson 2022), and farm diversification (Moroney, O'Reilly, and O'Shaughnessy 2016). Common to all of these is the finding that analysing cultural beliefs through narratives is important in understanding rural and farming communities actions. However, narratives that link climate adaptation and perceptions of justice to farmers' willingness to implement adaptation-related changes have yet to be explored.

Finally, scholarship on the interlinkages between a just transition and climate adaptation has expanded since 2020. Much of this work has focused on developing analytical frameworks (Byskov, Hyams, and Oyebode 2021; Juhola et al. 2022), and integrating these ideas into existing approaches, such as political economy (Kus and Jackson 2025), gender studies (Huyer et al. 2020; Orsatti and Dinale 2024), ethics (Byskov, Hyams, Satyal, et al. 2021), transition studies (Kuhl 2021), and social work (Forbes et al. 2024). However, empirical studies that explicitly combine the concepts of adaptation and just transition or justice have so far been limited to examining communities with fossil fuel-based industries (Orsatti and Dinale 2024), an urban context (Byskov, Hyams, and Oyebode 2021; Juhola et al. 2022; Cooper et al. 2023), or those in low-income countries (Huyer et al. 2020; Byskov, Hyams, and Oyebode 2021; Andreucci and Zografos 2022; Lipper and Cavatassi 2024).

As outlined above, empirical research to date has yet to examine how narratives around justice and just transition influence agricultural climate adaptation. To address this gap, we apply narrative analysis of Ireland's agricultural sector to explore how justice and just transition factors shape farmers' willingness to implement climate adaptation measures. The study therefore aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the narratives around climate adaptation in Irish agriculture?
2. What are the justice implications of these narratives?
3. Do these narratives around justice support or constrain adaptation action by farmers?

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the agricultural literature about climate vulnerability and adaptation, justice and a just transition, and narratives. Each subsection of the literature review summarises the global literature before examining the Irish context. In addition, the subsections on justice and narrative analysis provide theoretical foundations for those analytical tools. The methodology section outlines the data collection and analysis methods, along with an overview of how the narrative policy framework was applied. Following this, we present the results. The synthesis of the narratives and implications section connects the narrative elements of our findings and proposes potential areas of future research. The paper concludes with some final thoughts about our findings.

Literature review

Climate vulnerability and response in agriculture

Despite agriculture being one of the most vulnerable sectors of society to climate change, adaptation has not been a top priority for farmers or the sector as a whole. There are several reasons for this lack of prioritisation. First, early messages suggested that agriculture was highly adaptable and the costs would not be too great (Burton and Lim 2005). Second, weather variability has always impacted agriculture, necessitating constant adaptation, such as changing crops, deciding whether to diversify, and altering the timing of planting (Dolšak and Prakash 2018). However, recent attention has focused on the need for agriculture to undergo more significant changes, and the agriculture sector is now one of the most studied globally in terms of climate adaptation (Berrang-Ford et al. 2021). Much of this research has been about technological solutions such as new fertilisers, pesticides and genetically-modified crop varieties, which are promoted as climate adaptation solutions over other agricultural responses (Chandra, McNamara, and Dargusch 2017; Rosén et al. 2018; Newell and Taylor 2018).

There exists an apparent paradox in studies of agriculture: while the sector has been found to be highly adaptable and resilient to current and past challenges, it is also seen as being highly vulnerable and resistant to adapting to climate change (Burton and Lim 2005). One proposed explanation is that changes in farming practices are implemented only when farmers believe the risk to be urgent, and currently many farmers think their farms will not be severely impacted by climate change (Nicholas-Davies et al. 2021; Ricart et al. 2022). This has prompted research into farmers' risk perceptions, with scholars finding that these risk perceptions are shaped by a variety of factors, including non-climate-related pressures and vulnerabilities, disbelief in anthropogenic climate change, experiences of extreme events, perceptions of their ability to reduce the risk, and cultural influences (Below, Schmid, and Sieber 2015; Morton et al. 2017; Mitter et al. 2019).

Irish agricultural climate adaptation

These patterns are also evident in studies of agricultural adaptation in Ireland. Ireland's 2023 assessment of progress on preparation for agricultural adaptation outlined challenges related to changes in precipitation patterns, heat, and soil health which it connected to changes in productivity, livestock diseases, and soil compaction and degradation (C. Murphy et al. 2023). Despite these challenges, less than half of Irish farmers surveyed considered climate change to be one of their most important challenges (Martin et al. 2025). This apathy to climate action may partly be because State legislation and policies on climate change, including adaptation, emerged only in the last decade. The first legal requirement in Ireland to start planning for adaptation in agriculture was included in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 (Government of Ireland 2018). Ireland's first statutory National Adaptation Framework (NAF), which provides a framework to ensure planning and action on adaptation is prioritised and mainstreamed into policy in local authorities, regions, and key national sectors, was only published in 2018 (Government of Ireland 2018). The NAF was updated in 2024 to reflect "evolving policies, increased knowledge about climate change, and the noticeable rise in both the frequency and severity of climate impacts" (Government of Ireland 2024, p. 14). Despite these requirements, progress on climate adaptation in agriculture in Ireland has been consistently judged to be moderate to limited (Climate Change Advisory Council 2021, 2022, 2023; 2024; 2025).

Climate mitigation has received considerably more attention in national policy in the last decade (C. Murphy et al. 2023), often at the expense of adaptation. In Ireland's agricultural sector, however, adaptation actions are often designed to also serve as mitigation actions, or improve other environmental conditions, such as water quality, biodiversity, or air quality. The agricultural sectoral adaptation plan notes that, "In the agriculture, forest and seafood sector, adaptation and mitigation are more integrated than in other sectors, therefore these actions can and should work in an integrated manner" (Government of Ireland 2019, p. 8). For example, the plan acknowledges that enhancing biodiversity improves ecosystem services and can contribute to both climate change mitigation and adaptation (e.g., carbon sequestration, reducing rainfall runoff, improving air and water quality).

One element of risk perception from the global literature that has not been found in Ireland is a denial of anthropogenic climate change. Surveys of farmers in Ireland have revealed that a majority agreed that climate change is problematic and anthropogenic (Tzemi and Breen 2019; Martin et al. 2025). However, only a minority (approximately 30%) believed animal agriculture was a significant contributor, with many stating that livestock emissions were 'natural' (Tzemi and Breen 2019). This view persists despite evidence to the contrary, with agriculture responsible for approximately 34% of national greenhouse gas emissions in 2023 (Environmental Protection Agency 2024b). Farmer attitudes are at least partially rooted in history; Ireland has long been viewed as a green and healthy place (Bresnihan 2019). Dairy, in particular, has cultivated an environmentally friendly image internationally, with advertisements featuring grass-fed cows on bucolic Irish landscapes (Attorp 2022; Shortall 2022). Although most farms remain small by European standards, their average size is increasing in the dairy industry (Attorp 2022; Bresnihan 2019). In terms of water pollution, farmer perceptions that beef production is too small to have an impact is highlighted by Attorp (2022), yet studies demonstrate its substantial impact. What remains understudied is why Irish farmers, who believe climate change is happening and are starting to experience climate impacts, are slow to implement climate adaptations.

Justice in agricultural transitions

The idea of making the transition away from fossil fuels fair and just originated in the trade union movement (McCauley and Heffron 2018). McCauley and Heffron (2018, 2) define a just transition as "a fair and equitable process of moving towards a post-carbon society." Initially focused on maintaining employment, the concept now extends beyond this to include well-being, dignity, and a sense of purpose for individuals and communities that are impacted by climate transitions (Banerjee and Schuitema 2022). Achieving a just transition to a biodiversity rich, environmentally sustainable, climate neutral and resilient society, where no groups are left behind, is proposed as a key way for climate action to be considered legitimate and acceptable to society (Galgóczi 2022).

Justice can be understood in many ways. A common framework, proposed by Schlosberg (2013), includes distributive (just distribution of costs and benefits), procedural (just processes), and recognitional (just inclusion of different types of knowledge, expertise, and communication styles). In addition, for climate change and the just transition a fourth type of justice is often included: restorative justice, which is the rehabilitation and compensation of those who have been or are being harmed (Banerjee and Schuitema 2022; Krawchenko and Gordon 2021; McCauley and Heffron 2018). For outcomes to be considered fair and just by those impacted, all four dimensions must be experienced.

In the agricultural and food system context, justice and just transition are understudied concepts that are increasingly being used to understand willingness and resistance to change. Kuhmonen and Siltaoja (2022) state, "questions of power, agency and social justice have received limited research interest in relation to initiatives promoting sustainability and climate mitigation amongst food systems" (p. 344). However, there has been a recent increase in studies looking at justice from several different traditions and perspectives. Food justice and food sovereignty literature has focused mostly on access to food and working conditions in the food sector, but have less engagement with climate change and the just transition concept (de Bruin et al. 2024; Kuhmonen and Siltaoja 2022; Tribaldos and Kortetmäki 2022). The "good farmer" literature has looked at farmers' mental health and capacity to transform, with some recent engagement with climate-related just transition concepts (Hale, Schipanski, and Carolan 2021; Hammersley et al. 2021). Conversely, application of a just transition lens to farming has been recognised as a gap in the literature, with most of the published studies mainly focusing on climate mitigation, not adaptation (Carolan 2020; Blattner 2020; Hale, Schipanski, and Carolan 2021; de Boon et al. 2023).

With roots in the labour movement, many rural residents associate the just transition with urban areas and urban values (D. Brown et al. 2024). This association often causes rural residents to be suspicious of programmes that are proposed by just transition advocates. In Ireland, as elsewhere, this suspicion of urban areas is rooted in a long history of feelings of marginalisation and loss of political and economic power (D. Brown et al. 2024). Many rural residents, especially farmers, feel that urban policymakers have long interfered in farming practices-pushing for intensification since the 1950s-and are now advocating for dramatic changes in farming practices to improve environmental quality and reduce carbon emissions (Hammersley et al. 2023; Mercier et al. 2020). An important element of this is that early just transition discussions focused on industries that were expected to shut down (e.g., coal mining and peat extraction), whereas farming must continue during and after any transition (NESC 2023). Blattner (2020) found that farmers feel they are being asked to make the greatest change toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions, taking out loans, and altering their farming practices, while they believe that urban residents are the primary beneficiaries. This feeling has led to a ubiquitous sense of unfairness regarding their role in meeting national climate mitigation obligations. Meanwhile, other sectors, such as aviation and high-tech industries, are allowed to expand and increase

emissions, and rural residents believe that urban residents are permitted to continue their carbon-intensive lifestyles (Banerjee and Schuitema 2023).

Three main themes are found in studies of justice in agriculture in high income countries: a feeling of relative powerlessness among farmers in comparison to others in food systems, perceptions of an inequitable distribution of income between various actors in food systems, and feelings of being unfairly blamed for climate change and other environmental problems (Kuhmonen and Siltaoja 2022; Puupponen et al. 2022; Fickel 2023; Lunn 2024; D. Brown et al. 2024). These feelings have been linked with the current backlash against climate and environmental regulations, with farmer protests and support for authoritarian political parties being tied to these feelings of injustice (Carolan 2020; Blattner 2020; Lunn 2024; Kabir, De Vries Robbe, and Godinho 2024). There is, however, little research connecting these feelings of injustice with the slow implementation of climate adaptation actions in agriculture.

Justice in Irish agricultural adaptation

In Ireland, wealth in food systems is unevenly distributed, with an estimated 70% of farms not being economically viable. Many farmers, especially beef farmers, subsequently rely on government supports and off-farm income to financially survive (Attorp 2022; Mercier et al. 2020). Recent decades have not improved this situation, as rural areas did not benefit as much as urban areas from the economic boom in Ireland from the mid-1990s until 2008 (Donnellan et al. 2015). However, after the 2008 economic crash the Irish government promoted intensification of agriculture and increased export of dairy products as a way to support the Irish economy (Deckard 2016; Torney 2020). EU incentives have added to this pressure toward intensification in dairy; increased agricultural production has been rewarded and subsidised (Donnellan et al. 2015; Stewart 2023). While many farmers acknowledge that these policies increased profits overall in the sector, it was highly uneven. Those few farmers who intensified their operations benefitted, with most farmers being left behind and currently relying on subsidies to support their livelihoods (Harrahill, Macken-Walsh, and O'Neill 2023).

Concurrently, there are ongoing tensions between farmers and environmentalists. According to interviews conducted by Best and Hochstrasser (2022, 20) environmentalists have described farmers as conservative, 'addicted to fertiliser' and 'blind to the benefits of nature', while farmers described environmentalists as unhelpful, alternative, 'pony-tailed' and aggressive. This tension has hindered environmental progress, as evidenced by the EU Habitats Directive and changes to the Irish derogation on the EU Nitrates Directive, the implementation of which were postponed due to pressure from the farming lobby (Torney and O'Gorman 2019). Farmers believe that regulations and incentive programmes are designed by outsiders from cities in ways that are incompatible with rural and farming culture (Hammersley et al. 2021; Moran et al. 2021). In addition, Stewart (2023) found that Irish farmers perceive themselves being the least powerful in the current food system, with supermarkets and other powerful entities in the food industry dictating prices and retaining most of the profits.

There is growing recognition that farmers will need to transform their current agricultural adaptation practices in the coming decades in response to increasing climate risks (Vermeulen et al. 2018). This will likely have significant justice implications for an already vulnerable group in society. Given they are at the frontline of agricultural adaptation efforts and will experience any (un)just implications of adaptation efforts, understanding agricultural adaptation practices from the perspective of farmers is essential. Without such an understanding, a just transition for farmers may be more difficult to achieve.

Narratives in agriculture

This subsection begins by outlining the theoretical foundations of the narrative analysis methodology. Narrative analysis is a method used to examine how actors make meaning and interpret the world and justify specific solutions to problems (Jones 2014; Shanahan et al. 2018; Fiala et al. 2024). Recent research on justice and the just transition has highlighted the usefulness of narratives to examine individuals' lived experiences as it relates to taking climate action (Borras Jr et al. 2022). Narratives draw attention to specific characters and ways of structuring information (Jones and Song 2014), and shape public opinion and perceptions of risk. Other researchers show the use of policy narratives to influence public policy by strategically promoting preferred solutions (Shanahan et al. 2018). Since people primarily think and communicate through stories, climate information is interpreted within the context of broader narratives they already believe (Jones 2014).

Policy narratives share characteristics with all narratives, such as establishing victims, perpetrators, problems, and consequences (Käkönen et al. 2014), but they also play a key role in determining which solutions are considered. In the context of climate change, policy narratives help individuals make sense of observed changes in weather patterns and organise their thoughts about these changes (Shanahan et al. 2011). Moreover, these stories often guide people toward certain solutions. For example an individualist narrative of the climate problem points towards a market-based solution,

while a moral narrative would suggest wider change in society (Jones 2014).

In the agricultural literature, narrative analysis is being increasingly used to understand how identity and perceptions influence transitions in farming communities due to societal, environmental, and technological shifts (Lankester 2012; Below, Schmid, and Sieber 2015; Lyle 2015; Conway et al. 2016; Rosén et al. 2018; Newell and Taylor 2018; Mitter et al. 2019; Tourangeau et al. 2019; Nicholas-Davies et al. 2021; Paxton 2021; Petersen-Rockney 2022; Ricart et al. 2022; Fiala et al. 2024; Strauser and Stewart 2024). These studies show that farming narratives are continually changing as ideas and experiences drive contestation and repositioning of stories, images, and everyday practices (Lankester 2012). Fiala et al. (2024, 3) state that "identifying narratives is a useful strategy to understand how actors in a public debate construct (causal) relations between ideational elements of food system transitions and to identify shared or competing arguments". However, exploration of narratives within agricultural communities relating to climate adaptation remains understudied, as highlighted by Peterson-Rockney (2022, 2), who states, "empirical research examining how social factors … shape farmers' beliefs, actions, and the risks they perceive with climate change, remains more limited".

There are a few themes from the literature that are particularly relevant to climate adaptation. First, Rosén et al.'s (2018) study of Climate Smart Agriculture narratives shows how the agricultural system has been portrayed as both a victim and villain in climate change discourses, and they state that more research is needed on the equity and fairness implications of agricultural adaptation discourse. Studies of Climate Smart Agriculture have, however, primarily focused on low-income countries. Next, Nicholas-Davies et al. (2021) analysed narratives around resilience capacities, finding that narratives around health and generational succession are considered more important than those around weather and climate when examining adaptation capacity, and stated that there are few qualitative studies examining farm resilience. Further, Paxton (2021) found in Australia that a purely economic framing of climate adaptation can backfire as it fails to engage with farm narratives of toughness and community solidarity in the face of adversity.

Narratives in Irish agriculture

There are several different narrative elements found in the literature about Irish agriculture and rural areas, some connecting clearly to the wider literature. First, scholars have found that farmers in Ireland value hard work, preserving family, autonomy, pitting themselves against the environment, and are focused on maintaining traditional ways of rural life (Hammersley et al. 2021; Moroney, O'Reilly, and O'Shaughnessy 2016). Being a good farmer is important and associated with continuing the family tradition of farming and increasing the productivity of the land (Shortall 2022). A farmer who decreases production, even if it brings environmental benefits, is believed to lose status in the community and be seen as a worse farmer (Hammersley et al. 2023).

Second, these values are seen as aligning with stewardship of the land. Lenihan and Brasier (2009) and Moran et al. (2021) found that farmers in Ireland believed their farming improved biodiversity and was essential to maintaining the traditional beauty of rural Ireland. Although many recognise that larger farms can have a negative impact on environmental quality, there is a widespread belief among farmers that smaller, extensive farms do not (Moran et al. 2021). Even large farms are often perceived to be 'greener' than similar farms in other countries, as Irish farming is seen as low-input and grass-based (Shortall 2022). This perception is especially true for beef farms, with many small-scale beef farmers believing that the land could not be used for any other productive purpose (Attorp 2022; Harrahill, Macken-Walsh, and O'Neill 2023).

Third, Tovey (2009) and Firnhaber et al. (2024) show that farmers resent the dominant societal narrative that rural areas are anti-environmental. Scholars have found that farmers resent programmes that solely focus on financial incentives while ignoring farmer knowledge and skills (Lenihan and Brasier 2009). Instead, rural residents' narratives portray themselves as the only people who understand the countryside, and that they have long advocated for a different type of environmentalism-one based on heritage and land stewardship-that is ignored by urban residents, environmental organisations, and powerful policy makers (Attorp 2022; Mercier et al. 2020; Tovey 2009).

Finally, there are competing narratives regarding the level of influence farming communities have in Irish policy making. Some argue that agricultural lobbyists have long wielded significant power over national politics in Ireland, citing examples such as the agriculture lobby's role in delaying action on the EU Habitats Directive (Torney and O'Gorman 2019) and preventing government actions that would slow growth in the agriculture sector (Attorp 2022). This has been found to delay change and uphold the status quo productivist model of agriculture (Fiala et al. 2024; Kelly, McNally, and Stephens 2024). Others, however, contend that farmers feel ignored in national debates, with their voices discounted and their expertise overlooked (S. P. Murphy, Cannon, and Walsh 2022; Stewart 2023; Tovey 2009). Both narratives may be true, as Bresnihan and Brodie (2024) assert, rural communities in Ireland are both overdeveloped through policies promoting an intensive, productivist

Table 1 List of interviewees

Number	Sector	Role
1	Government department	Mid-level official
2	Semi-state agency	Mid-level official
3	Semi-state agency	Mid-level official
4	Semi-state agency	Researcher
5	Semi-state agency	Mid-level official
6	Lobbying organisation	Lobbyist and farmer
7	Social justice non-governmental organisation (NGO)	Official
8	Government department	Mid-level official
9	Environmental NGO	Official
10	Semi-state agency	Mid-level official and farmer
11	Semi-state agency	Researcher
12	Rural NGO	Official
13	Government agency	Mid-level official and farmer
14	University	Researcher
15	Lobbying organisation	Lobbyist and farmer
16	Lobbying organisation	Lobbyist
17	Government agency	Senior-level official
18	Government agency	Researcher
19	Water NGO	Official
20	Environmental NGO	Official
21	Government department	Researcher
22	Government agency	Mid-level official
23	Environmental NGO	Official
24	Government department	Mid-level official
25	Government agency	Senior-level official
26	Lobbying organisation	Lobbyist and farmer
27	Local government	Mid-level official and farmer

system of agriculture, and underdeveloped through underinvestment in community amenities. This simultaneous experience of overdevelopment and underdevelopment leaves farmers feeling powerless while non-farmers view them as having outsized political power.

Methods

Part of a larger study examining three sectors in Ireland: flood risk management, agriculture, and water quality & water services infrastructure from a political economy perspective, this research consisted of a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and a multi-sector stakeholder workshop (Brawley-Chesworth et al. 2025). A detailed literature review and document analysis focused on political economy studies of the agriculture sector internationally and in Ireland, including research on justice in an agricultural context, climate adaptation research across multiple sectors including agriculture, and barriers to climate adaptation worldwide. This scoping review of the literature was subsequently used to inform the primary data collection.

We conducted 27 interviews with people with knowledge of agricultural adaptation in Ireland (see Table 1). The six interviewees who self-identified as farmers were also employed elsewhere. This is common in Ireland, with 60% of farming households having off-farm employment of either the farmer or spouse in 2023 (Dillon et al. 2024). Interviews were conducted online through Zoom or in-person between October 2023-February 2024 and each lasted approximately one hour. Following these interviews, we organised a workshop in March 2024 to review and validate the initial findings. The workshop brought together 23 participants across various sectors including agriculture. Some participants had been previously interviewed, while others had not but shared similar sectoral and professional backgrounds. Detailed notes were taken during the workshop which we used to corroborate and refine the draft interview findings.

Most of the interviewees were not farmers, but rather worked closely with farmers and had knowledge of agricultural and environmental issues in Ireland. Because of this, the findings of this study are best characterised as agricultural narratives.

Analysis was undertaken in several phases. First, the first author transcribed and analysed all interviews using NVivo software, enabling the identification and thematic coding of key themes. This included deductive and inductive coding to account for themes identified in the literature around adaptation barriers (such as competing priorities, uncertainty, etc.) and also emerging themes. At the same time, the data was coded for the elements of justice included in our theoretical framework – distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative. To improve the validity of the findings, the second and third authors conducted a review of the thematic coding of each interview, identifying any missing themes. Quotes included in this article were corrected for grammar. From this coding, significant overlap in the data emerged between feelings of unfairness and injustice and other themes related to the perceptions of the purpose of adaptation, the burden farmers faced in implementing adaptations, and the costs to farmers of adaptation.

Next, we applied a narrative policy framework analysis to refine the findings and reveal how the justice and narrative elements related to each other and influenced preferred solutions. To do this we analysed the data to identify characters (such as villains, victims, and heroes), a setting (which does not need to be spatial), a plot, and a moral of the story (policy solutions) (Shanahan et al. 2018). To conduct this analysis, we examined the previously identified recurring ideas and key terms in our data (Lebel and Lebel 2018), focusing on who interviewees discussed most frequently, the

historical and recent events they referenced, and the solutions they proposed. Once the characters were identified, we determined heroes, villains and victims using the definitions given by Shanahan et al. (2018, p. 343): Heroes are "those who take action with purpose to achieve or oppose a policy solution"; villains are "those who create a harm, or inflicts damage or pain upon a victim or, in other cases as one who opposes the aims of the hero"; and victims are "those who are harmed by a particular action or inaction". Within the narratives, we analysed the plots to understand how interviewees believed farmers framed adaptation, focusing on "what, from what, and for whom" adaptation was designed (Lebel and Lebel 2018, p. 165). Finally, we examined how the narrative storylines we identified related to the four elements of justice and how these influenced proposed solutions and affected the implementation of adaptation.

Results

While there is some recognition of the need to make on-farm changes for the climate, for the participants in this study there was the perception that farmers' feelings of injustice were getting in the way of implementation of adaptation actions. Many of the interviewees in this study were working with farmers to help them see what benefits they could realise from taking climate adaptation actions, but expressed that there was an entrenched belief that adaptation actions were not beneficial to farmers.

Drawing on a narrative analysis approach, in this section we outline four interrelated ways in which elements of the overall 'not for farmers' narrative emerged from the interviews. Two overarching narratives underpin the others: first, general feelings of injustice in rural communities when comparing rural and urban areas in Ireland; and second, the perception that adaptation benefits others while farmers' own adaptation needs are not prioritised. These feed into two additional narratives: that farmers are often disadvantaged when environmental objectives are pursued; and that farmers have historically provided benefits to society while bearing the economic costs. After outlining these narratives, we synthesise them and discuss their implications.

Rural feelings of injustice

It was clear from the interviews, confirmed by studies showing the financial precarity of farming for most Irish farmers (NESC 2023), that farmers feel they are mired in crisis. These feelings are rooted in actions and narratives that predate any sectoral or national discussions on agricultural climate adaptation and provide important context for our study. For example, interviewee 26, a lobbying organisation official and farmer, described the mood of farmers as being "*very low*" and that they "*feel scapegoated*". A semi-state agency mid-level official (interviewee 3) added,

> farmers certainly feel that they are being blamed for a lot of the environmental ills of the country, and then couple that [with] threats to their livelihood and their way of existence and their income, and you could see that a lot of these farmers feel that they're being unfairly targeted.

These quotes suggest that there is a widespread pre-existing feeling of injustice in rural areas and among farmers, portraying farmers as the victims of larger societal forces. From the interviews, two types of injustice were being felt by farmers in Ireland; injustice between large and small farms, and injustice between urban and rural areas. According to interviewees, farmers are experiencing distributional injustice within the farming sector itself. Many interviewees talked about farming being remarkably diverse in Ireland, with larger farms doing well and smaller farms feeling in crisis because of low pay and increases in regulations. These small operations are generally farmed by part-time farmers who operate at a loss or with very low profits, subsidising their farming activities through outside employment. The farm practices are not intensive, and the narrative is that they are therefore less polluting and already sustainable. Despite this, interviewees believed that small farmers have long been expected to make changes to their farms in a similar manner to the larger, more profitable farms. Interviewee 20, an official from an environmental NGO, said about current policies for environmental improvement, "*[they] give no credit to an organic farmer or an extensive farmer who will not have as high efficiency, but will have much less emissions in total*". However, while the differences between farmers was recognised as an injustice within this study, with small farmers being victims and an unfair agri-food system being the villain, the primary perceived injustices related to climate action between urban and rural areas.

The injustices interviewees believed are being experienced by farmers when they compare themselves to urban residents have distributional, procedural and recognitional elements. These injustices predate adaptation demands placed on the sector, and have long constituted an additional burden farmers are forced to bear. These are interwoven into the dominant narrative around climate mitigation and adaptation discussed below. In terms of distribution, the interviewees generally felt that farmers perceive the burden of climate action is being unfairly put onto them so that urban dwellers can continue to live high-emission lifestyles. As proof, interviewees highlight the government's support for increased air travel, which farmers see as primarily

benefiting urban residents and as being less important to society than agriculture. Interviewees believed that farmers see the benefits of the current economy and government policies accruing to those living in cities, with rural areas being left behind. For example, an environmental NGO official (interviewee 23) said, "*Rural communities see that they're going to have to put up with negative impacts*, *but they might not get the same benefits that an urban person would*, *in terms of increased regularity of public transport*, *reduced fares and whatnot*".

Procedurally, there is a belief that elected officials listen more to educated, urban elites. Farmers we interviewed lamented that agriculture no longer has the prominent and powerful voice in politics that it once had. As one lobbying organisation official who was a farmer (interviewee 26) said, "*the problem is that the politicians who support farmers aren't getting listened to*, *aren't effective at getting legislation and policies through*". Some interviewees who were not farmers talked about the agriculture lobby being more powerful than perhaps warranted, but interviewees who were farmers disagreed with this, saying that farmers voices were not included in decisions, and that politicians spoke to and about farmers as a political performance, but made decisions based on urban residents' interests.

A sense of recognitional injustice also emerges from the narratives told by farmers and people who work closely with farmers. As stewards of the land, and those with the closest connection to the impacts of climate change, many farmers believe they have essential knowledge that is being ignored by policymakers. They disputed the science showing the unsustainability of farming practices and the carbon emissions attributed to agriculture in Ireland, and did not feel heard by scientists, bureaucrats, or politicians. Interviewee 6, from a lobbying organisation and a farmer said, "*the vegans and the vegetarians and the anti-GMO [people] have such loud voices and everybody wants to listen to them*, *but. people don't listen to one thing [a farmer representative] says*".

Interviewees noted injustices both between large and small farmers and between urban and rural areas. However, they said the narrative most prevalent in the farming community downplayed the divide between large and small farms and highlighted the divide between urban and rural areas instead. In this narrative, the character of 'farmers' are cast as the victims. Environmentalists, urban dwellers and government officials are portrayed as villains. The setting is rural areas and rural culture. Because the agricultural narrative frames urban dwellers and policymakers who advocate for a just transition and adaptation as outsiders, the solutions they propose are often not seen as a priority by farmers and rural residents.

Adaptation is not prioritised

When asked about adaptation of Irish agriculture, interviewees frequently discussed mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions instead. Sometimes this was intentional, with people saying that adaptation was less important than mitigation, and therefore a focus on mitigation was necessary. For example, a mid-level official at a semi-state agency (interviewee 5) said, "*for a very significant cohort of Irish farmers … reducing greenhouse gas emissions is certainly on their radars. But adaptation? I'm not sure it's featuring all that strongly*". Another interviewee (14), a university researcher said,

> for Ireland, the focus of climate action thus far has largely been on mitigation, particularly from an agricultural perspective. A lot of the discourse and conversations have been around greenhouse gas emissions … and I'm not sure that adaptation and its importance to agriculture has really come onto the agenda.

There are two important elements to these statements that were confirmed by other interviewees, one is that interviewees said that mitigation came onto the agenda first, and so is perceived as a higher priority. The other element is that the interviewees believed that farmers think mitigation is more important. The agriculture sector has been required to map out their mitigation strategies since 2015, with adaptation planning requirements following in 2018 (Government of Ireland 2019), and there are sectoral emissions ceilings established under law in Ireland, but no specific and measurable adaptation metrics (Government of Ireland 2021).

We also found that interviewees' shift in focus to mitigation was sometimes unintentional. For example, one mid-level government agency official who was also a farmer (interviewee 13) said, "*extensive farming systems are much more suitable for*, *or easier to adapt to climate mitigation*". For this interviewee, talking about climate was equivalent to talking about climate mitigation. When asked about adaptation, they assumed that the goal was to change practices to lower greenhouse gas emissions, which this interviewee called "adapt to climate mitigation", rather than to change practices to make the farm itself more resilient to changes in the climate. Similarly, another interviewee, a researcher from a government department (interviewee 21) equated adaptation with adapting farming for carbon storage, a climate mitigation strategy, "*we're adapting our way to farm … to make sure the peatlands are restored. And therefore*, *not only keeping the carbon on the ground*, *but also trying to trap carbon in the future*". For both of these interviewees the purpose of adaptation was to change farming for carbon emissions reductions or carbon storage. This frequently

resulted in interviewees discussing mitigation rather than adapting so that farming itself was sustainable and resilient to changes in the climate.

Other interviewees viewed the goal of adaptation as being about improving environmental conditions, such as water quality, biodiversity, or flood storage rather than for agriculture, which can consequently contribute to climate adaptation efforts. One semi-state agency mid-level official (interviewee 3) said in reference to Teagasc's (a semi-state authority established by law to focus on research and development, education and advice for agriculture in Ireland) climate priorities,

> There are two priorities at the minute. There's [greenhouse gas] emissions on the farm … then water quality. Biodiversity is probably next in the pecking order … and then water retention measures [for farm use] is not on the radar at all, or really only by association with water quality, or biodiversity.

This again shows that, even when asked specifically about agricultural adaptation, many interviewees interpreted that as meaning environmentally-focused improvements, and not equating this with farm-level climate adaptation that would make farming itself sustainable in the long term. Nonetheless, these environmental improvements, if implemented, could improve climate adaptation at the farm level.

This narrative does not fall neatly into any of the established justice categories, as it is not clearly linked to distributive, procedural, recognitional, or restorative justice. However, an important element is farmers' perception of a lack of recognition for their needs when climate mitigation, water quality, biodiversity, and flood storage are promoted over agricultural concerns. From the interviewees' perspective, farmers are portrayed implicitly as both victims and heroes in this narrative, expected to changes their agricultural practices primarily for the benefit of others. Unlike some of the other narratives, this one does not identify any clear villains.

Both of the first two narratives outlined in this section are important for the subsequent two narratives. First, regarding the 'rural feelings of injustice' narrative, the pre-adaptation perceptions of injustice, existing before adaptation appeared on the national policy agenda in 2018, cannot be ignored when analysing narratives around climate adaptation. These perceptions shape farmers' views on who benefits from government policies and actions and who is expected to bear costs or change practices, as discussed below. Second, concerning the 'adaptation is not prioritised' narrative, although we frequently steered the conversations back to climate adaptation during the interviews, the quotes in the sections below illustrate that the interviewees often replied with examples that could be interpreted as either climate or broader environmental mitigation. This does not necessarily mean they were not also referring to climate adaptation. As outlined in the literature review, adaptation actions, such as expanding hedgerows to reduce soil erosion or sheltering livestock from extreme weather, which often serve to improve biodiversity and water quality, while concurrently reducing carbon emissions. Further, feelings of injustice arising from one type of environmental-related action can spill over into other areas. Therefore, even if the following two narratives draw partly on climate mitigation or broader environmental quality aims, we argue that they also impact climate adaptation at the farm level.

When the environment wins, farmers lose

Interviewees talked about a long-standing antagonistic history between farmers and environmentalists which causes farmers to believe any actions promoted as beneficial to the environment must be harmful to farmers. While many interviewees believed farmers think their farming practices are beneficial to the landscape, they expressed that there is a larger societal belief that farming and environmental quality are incompatible. Participants asserted that many farmers see this as unfair. The portrayal of farmers as villains is making them mistrustful of any changes they are asked to make that are associated with environmentalism or the environmental movement. One government agency mid-level official who was also a farmer (interviewee 13) said, "*The perception among farmers is that they [environmentalists and politicians] want them to stop farming*". Another rural non-governmental organisation (NGO) official (interviewee 12) said, "*I think there are concerns and fears that their [farmers] livelihood is going to be gone [due to environmental regulations]*". Both of these interviewees believed climate action, even adaptation measures intended to help farmers cope with climate impacts, was being interpreted by farmers as signalling the end of farming and an effort to push them off the land. In rural discourse, farmers are often portrayed as victims of environmental activism. With this belief that climate action threatens their way of life, convincing farmers to take any steps on climate change, whether mitigative or adaptive, becomes very difficult.

Conversely, politicians and farming organisations' long promotion of the idea that Irish agriculture is sustainable and optimised already portrays farmers as heroes. As one environmental NGO official (interviewee 9) said,

> All I hear from the farming lobby and from Teagasc and from the Department of Agriculture is how wonderful agriculture is …how we are the cherry on the top. We're amazing. So why, then, would anybody

> start thinking about adaptation when what we're doing is so wonderful?

In the sectoral adaptation plan for agriculture, the Minister for agriculture's introduction states, "We have a sustainable agri-food sector which must be protected" (Government of Ireland 2019). As evidenced by our findings, when people think the current farming system is optimised, then any change is a loss. This perception underpins the belief that adaptation actions will be negative for farmers.

As outlined in the literature review, farm-level adaptation actions often also assist with water quality and biodiversity improvement. One semi-state agency mid-level official (interviewee 5) said, "*We're trying to balance food production with a lighter load on the land … that's our ambition*". To this interviewee, food production and the changes being recommended for climate adaptation were incompatible and needed to be balanced against each other. Another semi-state agency mid-level official (interviewee 3) talked about an adaptation initiative for raising water levels incrementally beneath farmlands, "*you're going to have water retention benefits without negatively impacting on your production overly*". The goal of adaptation work for both of these interviewees was to minimise the negative impacts to agriculture when making environmental improvements. In neither case was the goal of adaptation seen as increasing the sustainability or resilience of Irish farming at farm level.

Part of this conversation is focused on compensating farmers for losses they will incur from taking adaptation actions, a form of restorative justice. Interviewee 21, a researcher from a government department, said,

> We cannot carry on with the way of living that we have … so we change the way that we do things. Rather than give you money for each head of animals that you have … we're going to pay you based on the habitat quality … that kind of change, it compensates people in relation to the losses that they have.

This storyline equates adaptation with losses that must be compensated. The possibility that adaptation actions could directly benefit farmers is excluded under this way of thinking about climate action, even though such actions to improve environmental quality are also intended to sustain farming as climate risks increase.

In summary, there is a narrative within agricultural communities that environmental improvements, even those that support farms in adapting to climate change, harm farmers. Supported by government statements, they view the current model of Irish agriculture as already optimised, with any changes seen as harmful. This narrative relates to recognitional injustice as farmers feel that their actions are misrepresented as harmful to the environment. This perception persists in rural communities despite the overwhelming evidence that agriculture in Ireland is a major contributor to many environmental harms such as water pollution and carbon emissions, due to it being dominated by dairy and beef production, and is itself highly vulnerable to climate change (C. Murphy et al. 2023; Environmental Protection Agency 2024b; 2024c). Research has shown, however, that experiences of injustice cannot simply be dismissed by appealing to scientific facts (Jasanoff 2021). Interviewees in this study believe that farmers feel misunderstood and unjustly blamed for environmental damage, a finding consistent with other research on European farmers (Puupponen et al. 2022). Because of this sense of unjust blame, farmers are portrayed as both heroes and victims, while environmentalists and politicians are cast as villains, thereby echoing earlier findings about the rural-urban divide.

History of farmers providing benefits to society

Finally, study participants said that promotion of climate adaptation is perceived by farmers as being a continuation of a longer history of asking farmers to make individual sacrifices for the greater good of society. Interviewees' perception is that farmers are being asked to sacrifice profits, livelihood, and their way of life for societal benefit. Interviewees indicated that would be hard enough to implement if asking for a sacrifice from farmers was something new. However, in their opinions, this is not the case. For instance, to help Ireland recover from the economic recession of the 2000s the Irish government incentivised farmers to increase their animal stocking rates, which resulted in additional farmer debt and expansion, specifically livestock farming operations, locking them into livestock intensification and increasing their debt burden. This has increased precarity and lowered the adaptive capacity of numerous Irish farms. In 2010 the Government published Food Harvest 2020 that had, among other goals, "Increasing the value of primary output in the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector by €1.5 billion", including an increase of milk production of 50% while simultaneously reducing the number of farms, thereby intensifying production (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 2009). This policy shift has resulted in greater financial difficulties for farmers. Interviewee 15, a lobbying organisation official and a farmer, stated:

> [Farmers] were told to go at a certain [higher] stocking rate. Some of that advice is now out of date from a climate point of view, and Teagasc are now issuing new advice, and some people are going well you know, damn you, or stronger language … I've invested half a million or [€]800,000 on my farm, and now you're

> telling me I won't be able to recoup that in the way I had thought, or worse still, I'd have to roll back on some of my strategy completely.

Similarly, interviewee 4, a researcher with a semi-state agency, said,

> I spent 10 years telling [farmers] they need to expand because we needed them for the economy, and now we tell them they're responsible for climate change and they need to cut cow numbers. Which essentially, what this means for this sector specifically is, they won't be able to make their [loan] repayments.

Both quotes highlight that farmers who followed policy advice, incurring debt to support the broader Irish economy and society, are now being told to reverse course and reduce their operations, despite not yet having paid off the costs of their earlier expansion. This is a case of distributional injustice because farmers were asked to expand their operations and incur greater debt, for the supposed greater good of society. While some may have increased their incomes to offset this debt, recent environmental policy changes have made such payback less likely, thereby reducing their resilience and capacity to adapt to climate change. Consequently, this narrative suggests that farmers' wealth and income are being unjustly redistributed to society. Farming communities were asked to become heroes for Irish society during a time of economic hardship, yet now feel victimised by public officials and shifting policies.

Synthesis of the narratives and implications

Rural narratives of justice and a just transition, along with the four interrelated themes identified in this study regarding how farmers talk about climate adaptation, are rooted in the perception that adaptation offers them little direct benefit. Interviewees described farmers being in crisis, viewed adaptation as being driven by motives unrelated to farm sustainability, emphasised that environmental efforts often harm farmers, and highlighted a historic reliance on Irish farmers adapting their practices for the greater good of society.

Examining the four related themes in the findings reveals all four categories of injustice in agricultural narratives in Ireland around climate adaptation. Distributional injustice emerges in narratives of unfair distribution of benefits and burdens of climate action between urban and rural areas and in the recent expectation that farmers would revive the economy after the 2000s recession. Procedural injustice is experienced when rural residents and farmers feel excluded from equal access to meaningful participation in decision-making processes related to environmental policies. Recognitional injustice appears in narratives which highlight the rural-urban divide, the prioritisation of environmental protection over farmers' needs, and farmers' perception that their actions are being misrepresented as harmful to the environment. These injustices have led to a call for restorative justice via compensation for any environmental and adaptation actions farmers take.

These narratives contribute to a sense among farmers that they are being treated unjustly both in general and specifically in relation to climate adaptation initiatives. In this synthesis section we analyse those themes and resulting feelings of injustice using a narrative policy framework. The purpose of this exercise is to establish what policy narrative the interviewees believe predominates among Irish farmers and how that impacts their willingness to take action for climate adaptation. The second part of this section outlines recommendations for reframing narratives and potential future areas of research.

The overall narrative: 'Not for farmers'

Drawing on agriculture narratives of climate adaptation presented in this study, farmers are portrayed as both heroes and victims. Such narratives create a tension between farmers and environmentalists/government officials, who are perceived as the agents pushing for changes. Whilst they are not necessarily always cast as villains, their actions compel farmers to respond, often by defending rural and farming livelihoods.

The setting in this narrative is the long history of farmers in Ireland sacrificing for the good of the country while getting very little in return. Historically, Irish people are known to have a deep connection to the land and rural life, with even most urban dwellers in Ireland having a family connection to farming that goes back only one or two generations. Farming activities are regarded as beneficial to maintaining the Irish landscape and rural culture is upheld as the real Ireland (Attorp 2022). Combined with recent experiences of farming precarity and the relative decline in prosperity in rural Ireland compared to urban areas, this context creates an environment of mistrust and suspicion towards outsiders who recommend changes to farming practices.

In the context of narrative analysis, a plot can be structured as a change (a) of what, (b) from what, (c) for whom/what (Lebel and Lebel 2018). In the case of Irish farming, adaptation is being interpreted as a narrative of farmers changing (a) their farming practices from (b) an already sustainable and optimised farming system (c) for wider Irish society by improvements to water quality, biodiversity, flood control, and the reduction of greenhouse gas

emissions. Nowhere in that storyline is there any benefit to the farmers themselves, such as helping them adapt to climate change, unless it is added at the end as compensation for a loss they are assumed to inevitably incur.

Given those feelings of injustice, what is the moral of this story and what solution emerges as the most sensible? One solution is to "*leave me alone*", as interviewee 20 from an environmental NGO characterised farmers' feelings of frustration with perceived interference from non-farmers. However, as farmers are already experiencing the impacts of climate change, some interviewees did not support the 'do nothing' solution. The main solution proposed by most of the participants in the study was to "*compensate the farmers*" (interviewee 21, a government department researcher). If the benefit is for the greater good of society, and farmers are going to bear the burden, then compensation becomes a logical solution. This reasoning is particularly relevant in the setting outlined above, where farmers have made sacrifices for the greater good in the past, and are unwilling or unable to do so again. Importantly, this narrative does not point to solutions where farmers are proactive in adaptation in a way that will promote their own long-term farm-level resilience to the changing climate. It also overlooks the emotional and cultural aspects of farming lifestyles that researchers have found are important to Irish farmers (S. P. Murphy, Cannon, and Walsh 2022); these include a strong preference for autonomy in their work, a desire for stability, and a deep attachment to community and their traditional way of life (Rieple and Snijders 2018). Even with financial incentives or compensation for losses, the 'pay the farmer' solution does not fully address feelings of injustice around the loss of rural culture and farmers' connections to the land.

Reframing narratives

Our findings therefore raise the question: is it possible to change the narrative? There are other narratives that exist alongside the one we have highlighted. Interviewees working with farmers highlighted that they felt they were beginning to have some success with implementing adaptation actions, explaining that other narratives can be successfully introduced through individual conversations with farmers. For example, some interviewees recommended talking to individual farmers about what will help their farm be successful in the long term. As a semi-state agency mid-level official who was also a farmer (interviewee 10) said, "*you have to get down with the individual farms and you have to look at what's happening on this farm here*". Similarly, a water NGO official (interviewee 19) said,

> rather than trying to deal with some of those national [organisations], deal with the individuals on the ground … they don't want to be causing something that's a problem for their local community. … Some of them will just say, I do not want to talk to you, but most of them will engage, and then listen.

These individual conversations can work to encourage action despite the overall negative narrative around climate adaptation. The results therefore highlight the need for adaptation narratives that are farm-specific, catering to farmers' individual needs. Such narratives include recognising that while climate adaptation undertaken at a farm level may provide broader societal benefits, it is crucial to reframe adaptation as a strategy for improving farmer livelihoods, thereby fostering improved farmer engagement and support for climate adaptation (D. Brown et al. 2024).

While we did not find any research from other parts of the world that looks at this specific type of narrative around justice and climate adaptation, other narrative analysis studies of farms and food systems show parallels with the findings in Ireland. These include adaptation taking a lower priority than other agricultural challenges globally (Dolšak and Prakash 2018), narratives around misunderstandings of farmer motivations in seven EU countries (C. Brown et al. 2021), feelings of injustice in implementation of climate policies in three European countries (D. Brown et al. 2024), and the continued promotion of productivist systems of agriculture in the EU slowing climate adaptation (Cuadros-Casanova et al. 2023). Specifically, D. Brown et al. (2024) found that farmers in Scotland, France, and Czechia perceived climate mitigation efforts as exacerbating long-felt injustices, such as uneven access to land, disproportionate burdens on rural areas compared to urban centres, political marginalisation, and an unfair portrayal of rural residents as anti-environmental.

These findings therefore suggest that similar justice-related narratives may emerge in other contexts. For instance, similar pressures are evident in other European countries (e.g., the Netherlands, France, Spain) to adapt agricultural practices in the context of climate change. Farmers and lobby groups have strongly resisted such pressures, framing them as an unjust imposition by external actors, such as policymakers, that threaten farm livelihoods. Given the shared influence of the EU Common Agricultural Policy across all Member States, the issues highlighted in this study are likely to arise elsewhere in Europe. Further research in other European countries would therefore be helpful to determine whether similar narratives have emerged.

Another promising avenue for future research could explore how agricultural narratives could be changed to become more positive toward the types of adaptations climate change is sure to necessitate in agriculture. While there is research about how societal changes alter farm narratives

(for example, Ní Laoire 2002; Sheridan et al. 2023; Strauser and Stewart 2024), we did not find studies examining ways to proactively change farmer narratives. More research into this area could be helpful, particularly given the largely critical narrative framings encountered in our study. Shifting narratives to emphasise the benefits farm-level climate adaptation can provide farmers themselves will be an essential for advancing a just transition. Policymakers and farmer advisory services should prioritise such positive reframing.

Conclusion

Despite clear signs that the climate is changing in Ireland, and globally, in ways that will be detrimental to farmers and make their current farming practices challenging to sustain in the long term, Irish agriculture is not undergoing transformative changes to its practices. While numerous reasons exist for this lack of adequate adaptation, a key factor is the narrative around agricultural adaptation explored in this paper. Narratives matter, because they shape how actors make meaning and justify specific solutions to problems (Jones 2014; Shanahan et al. 2018), and current narratives do not initiate or support proactive adaptation action.

Context also matters for understanding how justice is experienced. Drawing on Schlosberg's (2013) framework, this study reveals how all four dimensions of injustice-distributive, procedural, recognitional, and restorative-manifest in agricultural narratives around climate adaptation. Past actions by the state and wider society influence how people living in rural areas interpret current actions. First, participants in the research frequently spoke about how past policies pushing farmers to intensify production influence their decisions around adaptation today. Second, participants talked about how the perceived historic and current neglect of rural infrastructure and communities influenced their interpretation of current discussions of a just transition of Irish agriculture. Third, because policies and support for mitigation actions came first, interviewees believe farmers see mitigation as more important and, because resources are limited, they will prioritise mitigation over adaptation even when adaptation could benefit them.

A final lesson is that justice is always in the eye of the beholder, confirming that for outcomes to be considered fair by those impacted, all four dimensions must be experienced (Banerjee and Schuitema 2023). An action that may seem just or even overly generous from an urban perspective may be interpreted as unjust to a rural resident. An example of this is the different interpretations of the power of the agricultural lobby in Ireland. While some interviewees said these lobbyists had too much power, others felt that agricultural interests were sidelined and ignored by policy makers. This is a reflection of the different interpretations of how much influence was fair and just, echoing the broader literature on rural feelings of simultaneous overdevelopment and underdevelopment (Bresnihan and Brodie 2024).

Regardless of the extent to which agricultural interests are receiving sufficient attention, this research demonstrates that farmers are less likely to undertake climate action when they perceive unfair treatment. This aligns with the broader just transition scholarship which emphasises that climate action must be seen as legitimate and acceptable to society (Galgóczi 2022). In Ireland and beyond, it is imperative to ensure that adaptation policies and programmes do more to integrate the distributional, procedural, recognitional, and restorative elements of justice. Such integration is needed to foster a just transition and encourage greater participation of farmers in this transition. Addressing the perceptions of unfairness is key to supporting farm-level adaptation and reducing losses to farm livelihoods caused by climate change.

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