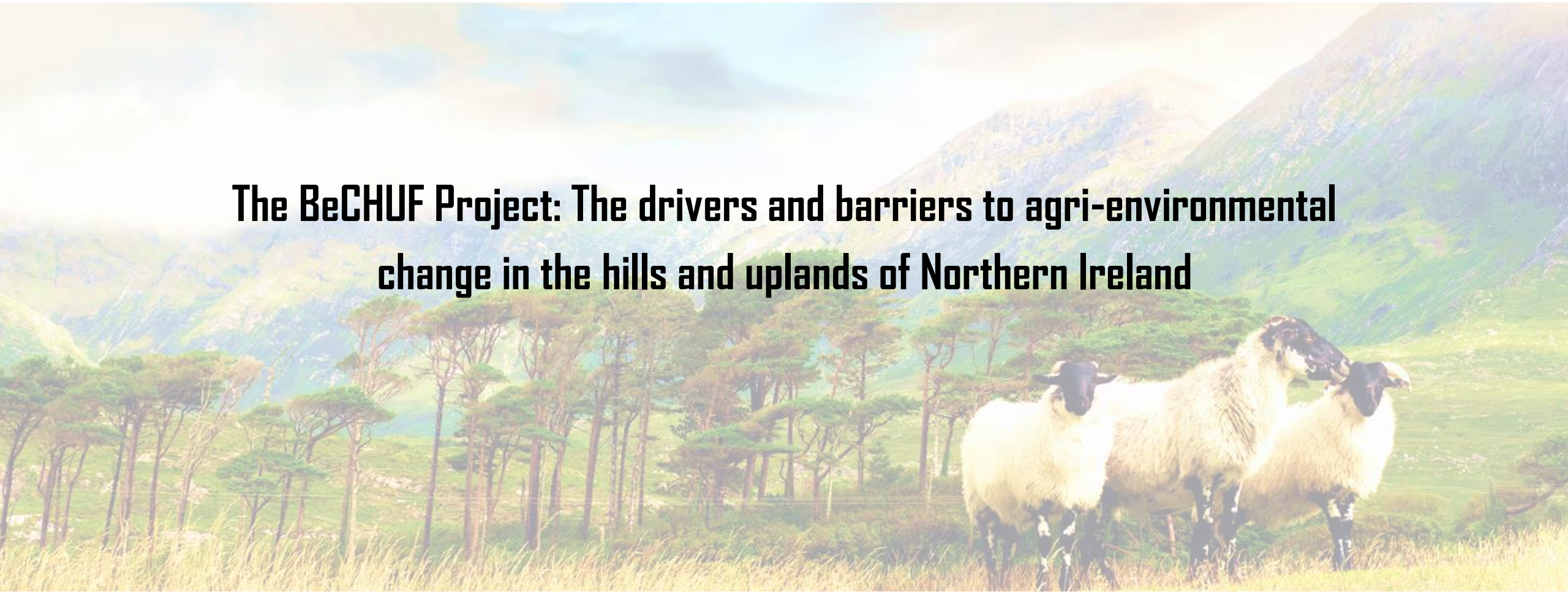

The BeCHUF Project: The drivers and barriers to agri-environmental change in the hills and uplands of Northern Ireland

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Background

- Previous studies have identified multiple factors impacting on farmers adopting more environmentally-aligned methods:

  - economic viability/production-first mindset
  - farmer/farm characteristics
  - tension with Government agencies and other stakeholders (e.g. NGOs)
  - the design of agri-environmental schemes (action or results based)

Our research focus

- Attitudes towards environmental actions among beef and sheep farmers in the hills and uplands of Northern Ireland

- The role of AES and particularly results-based schemes, with a focus on peatland regeneration

Northern Ireland context

- **Peat-rich** (24.6%) – more so than other UK regions and RoI – but is very significantly affected by peatland degradation (86%) (Pike, 2021)
- Various iterations of a **Countryside Management Scheme,** an **Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme** and most recently the **Environmental Farming Scheme**
- A new Farming with Nature programme was piloted in 2023 and various carbon/sustainability payments are planned for the years ahead e.g., Farming for Carbon and Beef Sustainability (DAERA, 2022a)
- Northern Ireland recently published a **new Peatland Strategy** (DAERA, 2022b) – which makes the exploration of farm-level interventions aimed at peatland conservation and management particularly timely

Methodology

- A multi-stage qualitative methodology
- Data collection took place between March 2022 and January 2023
- 11 group discussions across three stages, involving 20 stakeholders and 61 farmers
  - Stage 1 – 20 stakeholders (online)
  - Stage 2 – 6 farmer focus groups
  - Stage 3 – 2 farmer focus groups facilitated by a scientific expert

Subregional farmer focus groups

Location/Date	Group size	Gender	Age	Farm type
Belfast Hills (Dundrod) 14 June 2022	5 participants	4 x male 1 x female	1 x 30-39; 2 x 40-49 2 x 60-69	3 x beef 2 x beef and sheep
Sperrins (Omagh) 21 June 2022	11 participants	9 x male 2 x female	1 x 40-49; 5 x 50-59 3 x 60-69; 2 x 70-80	8 x beef and sheep 1 x beef and dairy 2 x sheep
Mournes (Newcastle) 29 June 2022	14 participants	14 x male	1 x 30-39; 3 x 40-49 2 x 50-59; 5 x 60-69 3 x 70-80	10 x beef and sheep 1 x dairy and pigs 1 x beef 2 x sheep
Sperrins (Limavady) 17 August 2022	9 participants	8 x male 1 x female	2 x 40-49; 3 x 50-59 3 x 60-69; 1 x 70-80	5 x beef and sheep 1 x beef 3 x sheep
Antrim Glens (Ballycastle) 2 September 2022	12 participants	12 x male	1 x 20-29; 2 x 40-49 2 x 50-59; 6 x 60-69 1 x 70-80	7 x beef and sheep 4 x sheep 1 x beef
Antrim Glens (Carnlough) 14 September 2022	9 participants	9 x male	1 x 40-49; 2 x 50-59 5 x 60-69; 1 x 70-80	9 x beef and sheep

Expert-led farmer focus groups (held at a neutral location)

Group	Group size	Gender	Age	Farm type
Group 1	4 participants	4 x male	2 x 40-49 2 x 60-69	4 x beef and sheep
Group 2	5 participants	5 x male	2 x 40-49 2 x 50-59 1 x 60-69	2 x beef 3 x beef and sheep

Farmer characteristics

Characteristic	Number	Percent
20-29	1	2
30-39	2	3
40-49	11	18
50-59	15	25
60-69	24	39
70-80	8	13
Male	57	93
Female	4	7
Beef only	7	11
Sheep only	11	18
Mix of beef and sheep	41	67
Beef and dairy	1	2
Dairy and pigs	1	2

Characteristics of hills and upland farming

- Several distinct **challenges were** highlighted (when farmers were asked to compare themselves with lowland farmers) e.g. difficult topography, nature of livestock, land damage from visitors
- Natural custodians - viewed their farms as **more environmentally sustainable** than their lowland counterparts, with environmental benefits arising from traditional farming practices:

  "Environmental practices...that the farmers that have been using for generations have really been working well and there was very little fires and gorse or anything on the mountains when the mountains were properly grazed and managed...." (HUF10, Mournes)

Characteristics of hills and upland farming

- But perceived themselves as possessing certain **traits**, e.g. being distinct in their skills, knowledge and physical abilities when compared to lowland farmers:

  "…hill farm is entirely different to a lowland farm because it takes a hill man and a hard man to work the sheep and cattle on the hills, it's not any man that can look after stock on a field…." (HUF8, Mournes)

Perceptions of AES

- Recent AES were compared negatively with **previous schemes**
- Current arrangements contrasted with memories of earlier directives and guidance - **questioning the value of the advice being given**
- A sense that the introduction of AES was ‘interfering’ with long-held good practice

Transitioning towards results-based AES

- Farmers were provided with a two-page summary of a pilot results-based AES (REAP) that was trialled in RoI, along with an illustrative scoresheet
- The discussion showed a tendency to focus on the specific features of the exemplar scheme, as opposed to the principle of payment-by-results
- **Favourable views** of existing schemes, such as those in the **Burren and Inishowen** – a perceived ability to improve within the results-based structure

Transitioning towards results-based AES

- **Positivity** around the opportunity for **flexibility** within the scheme – specifically the ability to choose from different options to achieve desired goals:

  "I think it's the way to go, it's a good idea because the farmer knows what he has to do to get what he can get and if he does it he's going to get it and if he doesn't then he's obviously not. And the choice is in his hands, he's not being forced to do anything." (HUF6, Carnlough)

- But a **production-first mindset** was evident:

  "If you want a nice meadow with 15,000 different grasses growing on it and you want to walk by that and see poppies and daisies ….. you have to pay for it." (HUF8, Mournes)

Peatland regeneration – a systems change

- Negativity around the term ‘rewetting’

- Viewed in terms of turning back on established practices and concerns about whether it was a good outcome in the long term

  “My ancestors has left it a certain way and I feel fit to carry it on and leave it a certain way, I don’t want to go back from what they fought for years and proved and made a living off and done their best …” (HUF9, Ballycastle)

Peatland regeneration – a systems change

- Expert facilitator - marked difference in response with farmers noticeably more measured in their responses to rewetting – underscoring the potential value in having a respected expert to facilitate the discussion of a sensitive matter

- Farmers could be incentivised to participate in peatland regeneration – at least for poorer land

Peatland regeneration – a systems change

- An appetite to work with inspectors in a dual monitoring and knowledge transfer role:

  "As long as whoever is inspecting knows what they're doing. I think that's the main thing. … if they come by with advice it would be a lot more attractive." (HUF3, Expert-Led Group 2)

- Key characteristics of a future scheme - flexibility in farm-level provision, timely payments and the avoidance of a penalty-orientated structure

Conclusions

- The importance of a sense of place and identity – implications for the adoption of new agri-environmental practices and involvement in AES

- However, there is some appetite for change and a willingness to transition to results-based AES, based on certain conditions

- Role of the trusted expert is key in facilitating change, especially in relation to radically different and contested approaches