

Article

The Future Dreams of Ireland's Youth: Possibilities for Rural Regeneration and Generational Renewal

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Abstract: The renewal of younger generations in farming and rural areas is a key European policy concern and rural sustainability issue. European literature discusses what drives young people from rural areas while identifying diverse and often interlinked factors as responsible. This study uses a future foresight approach to understand what would facilitate young people to remain in or return to rural areas. Targeting youth aged 18 to 30 and examining their personal dream futures in 2035, this paper presents the ideal lifestyle and livelihoods young people envision for themselves in rural Ireland. However, future approaches to alleviate rural decline, support regeneration, and the wider issue of generational renewal must consider the wider impact on rural sustainability. Generational renewal is just one challenging part of rural decline, including wider social, environmental, economic, and cultural issues. Driven by this wider concern, this paper also explores the implications of the youth's future dreams for rural regeneration and generational renewal from a broad rural resilience perspective. The results identify a range of issues. However, rural jobs emerge as a key issue, and the paper outlines how policy attention is particularly needed here for improved resilient rural regeneration and generational renewal.

Keywords: generational renewal; rural regeneration; rural youth; rural resilience; future foresight



Citation: Murtagh, A.; Farrell, M.; Kuhmonen, T.; Weir, L.; Mahon, M. The Future Dreams of Ireland's Youth: Possibilities for Rural Regeneration and Generational Renewal. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 9528. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15129528>

Academic Editor: Jacob Arie Jordaan

Received: 19 February 2023

Revised: 2 June 2023

Accepted: 5 June 2023

Published: 14 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The decline of youth in rural areas and farming is a well-observed issue in research and a European rural and agricultural policy concern. For example, rural youth outmigration is linked as a contributor to the ageing rural population structure [1]. The issue also has differing spatial and gender dimensions. Outmigration, including youth, as a cause of rural population decline is particularly noted as an issue in remote, peripheral rural areas [2–4]. Evidence also suggests female outmigration is a greater concern than male [5–7]. Declining rural populations is an enduring rural policy issue, highlighted more recently through the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas [8]. More specifically, the renewal of younger rural generations is also a European policy concern [9]. While the youth levels in rural areas are a broad concern, more specifically, the decline of young men and women engaged in farming is a considerable concern to the industry's survival. A high proportion of European farmers are approaching retirement age [10].

Rural regeneration is fundamentally concerned with addressing problems of rural decline [11,12]. The above picture calls for rural regeneration focused on population decline. On a basic level, more young people in rural areas would help address the broad issue of an ageing rural population structure. However, when we take this question alongside the issue of realising integrated rural regeneration, we must expand our questioning beyond rural youth repopulation. Regeneration can aim to do more than address decline; it can reinvent or transform in the long-term and open new frontiers [13–15]. This type of thinking is also embedded in the concept of generational renewal. Its ambition goes beyond alleviating the decline of rural youth in farming and rural areas but is also constructed

as part of improving wider rural economic and social sustainability [9,16]. For example, Dwyer et al. [17] (p. 4) define agricultural generational renewal as: “sufficient young people, willing and able to take on farms and farming as a business choice, to enable agriculture to make a positive and enriching contribution to the local economy and community in which their farms are situated”. Therefore, generating renewal in farming is about reducing the older age imbalance in the profession and how farms can become a more attractive and viable livelihood for individuals, enhancing the wider rural area. In the farming context, the process of generational renewal has been conceptualised as a three-phase, cyclical process, with four spheres of broader influence, from the personal to societal [18]. From a broader rural development perspective, generational renewal is also essential to a vibrant rural entrepreneurship sector needed for the sustainability and resilience of rural areas [19–21]. Generational renewal is important to rural regeneration. However, it is a complex idea and process.

This picture calls for an expanded assessment of the challenge of reviving the younger rural population. Taken alongside the wider question of future rural regeneration and sustainability, there is a need to look at the issue with a wider lens. This is the approach taken in this paper, examining two key questions. Namely, what could keep young people in rural areas or attract them to return if they have moved away? Here we use foresight analysis to construct the personal dream futures of youth who aspire to live in rural areas focused on lifestyle and livelihood. Secondly, we ask, in building this future, how will it contribute to the sustainable and resilient regeneration of rural regions? This paper does not claim to provide a comprehensive assessment of this issue. The focus of the youth’s future dreams is personal and therefore reveals an individualistic future picture. The analysis does, however, highlight several issues of importance and opens areas for potential further research.

The paper first assesses current research exploring challenges for youth basing their lives in rural areas, focusing on livelihood and lifestyle dimensions. Next, the broad question of increasing rural youth alongside rural sustainability and resilience issues is explored. After detailing the methodology employed, we describe the results of the rural dream futures of youth. This presents a picture of what could keep young people in rural areas or attract them to return if they have moved away. Finally, we draw out the implications of this evidence to explore our second essential question: if we build this future, how will it contribute to rural areas’ sustainable and resilient regeneration?

2. Influences on Rural Youth Livelihoods and Lifestyles

2.1. Livelihoods

Young people often leave rural areas to pursue opportunities, such as education and employment, to enable them to build a livelihood. The phenomenon of youth feeling they need to “get out” to “get on” is observed [22] (p. 6). In the rural US context, a lack of rural educational opportunities drives youth out-migration. Youth with higher educational ambitions were also less likely to want a future rural life [23]. However, research in different contexts also shows different drivers and dynamics. For example, in the Spanish context, García-Arias et al. [24] did not find a link between school performance and plans to leave, but a lower education level of parents was related to an intention to stay. On the other hand, Ceryn [25] find rural youth can have high career aspirations, and growing up in a rural place with limited employment does not limit ambition, but to realise their ambitions, leaving is an important part of their anticipated future. Concerning rural jobs, UK evidence has shown that if young people want to work in rural areas key to enabling this is the availability of employment opportunities [26].

Similarly, based on Alpine Mountain region evidence, Ferrario and Price [27] find that suitable job opportunities are a central factor in young people deciding to stay, leave or return, such as work that fits their education and skills. Kloep et al.’s [28] study of three country contexts (Norway, Scotland, and Sweden) found youth in rural Norway more disposed to stay rural because of good local access to education and transport

and the low unemployment rate, meaning youth have potentially better job prospects. García-Arias et al. [24] highlight that involvement in a family business, which was more common among males, influenced youth intention to remain rural.

While adequate job and education opportunities are key, looking deeper at wider influences is also important. Concerning the labour market, wider factors also impacting rural youth livelihoods include the job options available outside of rural areas, the amount of available rural jobs and competition for them, the sectors where employment is available, as well as the quality, pay levels and security of jobs [22,24,29,30]. Within a US context, the availability of rural, remote education following the influence of COVID-19 has been highlighted as a positive change; however, broadband availability is still a key enabler to realising this potential [23].

Beyond actual opportunities for youth to build a rural livelihood, perceptions also emerge as a challenge in existing research. Perceptions of opportunities lacking in rural places and available elsewhere shape youth migration intentions [23,27,29]. More specifically, for example, Ferrario and Price [27] find a strong cynicism and acceptance among the local alpine population around a lack of local job opportunities, despite the fact that most of the graduate participants involved in the study were not looking for a job locally. Graduate opportunities were perceived to exist mainly in certain sectors (natural sciences/forestry, medicine, economics, tourism, and engineering). Pessimism towards a future rural life and career is also identified, particularly among young women [6,28,31,32]. Concerning farming, a challenge inhibiting young people from entering agriculture identified is the sector's attractiveness. Specific factors impacting this include the farming profession's relatively low income, significant labour intensity and social status [33,34]. In addition, the economic viability of farm livelihoods is an issue identified globally [35]. Adding to this are issues around succession and inheritance, which impact youth access to land at a young age and the transfer of the family farm to females and males [36,37]. Farming's attractiveness can also be impacted by negative and unrealistic perceptions, as identified by Simões and Brito do Rio [38] in relation to rural NEETS professional involvement in agriculture. Nonetheless, young people may still be interested in farming as a career, particularly as it can be attractive to new entrants for reasons such as the natural working environment, freedom, and independence [39–41].

2.2. Lifestyles

Lifestyle-related factors can increase the chances of youth staying or returning to rural. Rural youth's more personal and individual activities, from hobbies, socialising, community involvement, personal/family circumstances, and recreation, to the accommodation where youth live, all contribute to the lifestyle young people experience in rural areas. However, social and cultural opportunities can be limited in rural areas [27,42]. In the UK context, Jones [43] observes the tendency towards home ownership in the housing market. It fails to cater to young people's need for housing variety and flexibility, arguing that better housing provision is needed for single young people in rural areas. Strong family and active community connections can create a sense of belonging and security, anchoring local rural roots [23,27,28,44]. Young people can also view rural areas as safe places and good locations to raise a family [27,28].

Additionally, a further influence on the intention to remain rural can be intertwined with a role as a family carer, such as for a dependent relative, as identified by García-Arias et al. [24], which was also more common among females. Wider recreational lifestyle factors can also increase the likelihood of youth wanting to base themselves in rural areas. For example, an analysis of rural forested communities in the US showed a strong attachment to outdoor space linked to aspiring for rural life [23]. In rural Spain, García-Arias et al. [24] find a social involvement in sports is important, although more common amongst males than females.

2.3. Beyond Livelihoods and Lifestyles: Other Key Interacting Influences

Existing research also emphasises the interlinkages and trade-offs among social, cultural, and economic factors that influence youth staying, leaving, or returning to rural areas [29,44,45]. For example, rural youth outmigration is influenced by diverse and sometimes interlinked factors, including hopes and dreams coming into conflict [25,29,45]. McGrath [42] argues despite rural youth having positive views of their rural communities there are numerous constraints facing youth in establishing a sustainable livelihood and lifestyle in rural Ireland. Wider constraints facing youth establishing a rural livelihood include adequate social networks, proximity to employment opportunities, transport, and childcare access [42].

Place attachment is another factor given considerable attention in current research. In the Icelandic context, Bjarnason and Thorlindsson [29] find the strength of local identity and national pride are factors influencing those less inclined to leave, also personal level family dynamics, such as family bonds and negative aspects of upbringing. However, significantly they point to economic opportunities elsewhere as a central influence that mediates the overall intention to leave. The diverse personal, social, and cultural lifestyle factors discussed in the above section on lifestyle can all contribute to creating place attachment, which is also an important aspect linked to intentions to stay or return to rural areas [23,24,29,44]. However, the exact influence of place attachment also remains under question. For example, García-Arias et al. [24] identify a range of dimensions as part of place attachment (e.g., personal, social, nature and heritage). The different aspects are identified as having different effects on youth migration intentions. Personal attachment is, however, the only factor identified as necessary in intending to stay rural. Specific rural areas also appear to generate different levels of place attachment. Simões et al. [44,46] observe strong place attachment of graduates from island, remote and isolated rural areas.

Gender and temporal dimensions are also important. The wider issue of the masculinisation of rural areas, where jobs and recreation can fit with more traditionally male roles and interests, is also an issue impacting the rural youth population structure [24,28]. Furthermore, deciding to leave or stay in a rural area is not a decision made at one point. Leaving a rural area to take advantage of opportunities elsewhere is not necessarily a permanent decision [29,44,47]. Mobility is impacted by a range of factors across time and space and should not be viewed in a binary way. Factors include spatial and social structures (e.g., remoteness, local social relations, transport infrastructure) and more personal and individual level factors such as identity and place attachment. Lifestage can also influence the attractiveness of a rural lifestyle. Kloep et al. [28] note that while young women are more inclined to leave than males, some women intend to return when they start a family. They also note that rural access to education and transport and community closeness leading to claustrophobia can emerge as negative factors in adolescence, while in earlier childhood are not significant issues.

Youth leaving but returning to rural areas is also essential to consider as potentially positive for rural areas. Access and circulation of different forms of capital (e.g., social and cultural) also influence mobility [48]. In addition, spatial mobility gives access to other resources, such as social, economic, and educational, that facilitates youth to achieve their ambitions [25]. However, returning also has complex influences. For example, García-Arias et al. [24] find that involvement in community activities is not linked to an intention to remain rural, but it could be a deciding factor influencing the rural return of youth. Bernsen et al. [23] also highlight positive attitude to and active engagement in the community as a factor influencing the rural return of youth within a US context. Simões et al. [44] find that the place of study can also grow in importance and influence the decision to return to a rural area, an ongoing negotiation process for students.

3. Youth and the Sustainable and Resilient Regeneration of Rural Areas

It is argued that young people are essential to future rural social and economic sustainability [22]. For example, the 'brain drain' of educated, skilled youth is highlighted

as a critical issue [27,44]. Nevertheless, is there a danger in the tendency to assume that an improved youth population in rural areas will positively affect their sustainable and resilient regeneration? Youth can have different effects on rural regeneration depending on their skills and activities in rural areas. In the context of youth as a driver of economic regeneration, youth are not necessarily clear contributors when youth returnees compete for existing, limited jobs rather than becoming self-employed or creating employment for others [4]. Kloep et al. [28] argue that youth ‘returners’ are potentially more positive contributors to rural development because of the social and personal skills and resources they develop through having left.

Consequently, it is argued returners possess a greater potential to adapt effectively to change than those who stay continuously in rural areas. Similarly, Jones [49] argues ‘conformists’ tend to stay in rural areas while those who leave tend to be ‘dissenters’ with ideas for change. However, leaving rural areas has become common, such as to access further education and it no longer an exceptional activity for rural youth [50]. Alternatively, it can be argued that those who stay challenge the norm of leaving and are active creators of their rural future. Bjarnason and Thorlindsson [29] highlight the traditional path for rural youth is to migrate from rural areas to the perceived cosmopolitan place of opportunity offered by urban areas. However, they suggest an alternative, less conventional path is to stay rural and create their own self-directed and determined rural future. Perhaps the key point is, given the nature of modern society and increasing individualisation, that increasingly there is a greater responsibility on youth to “create their pathways in an uncertain world” [51] (p. 9), wherever the location.

Nevertheless, the need for a more critical eye on rural regeneration, generational renewal, more sustainable rural futures, and the role of youth is essential. In relation to rural futures generally, Shucksmith [52] discusses what should inform how this is envisioned. The place of the rural idyll is questioned because it is backwards-looking and potentially embeds nostalgia for an imagined past. ‘Utopian thinking’ is proposed as a possible way forward. This provides room for alternative, potentially transformative rural futures to be collectively imagined: “Antipathy to utopian thinking serves to reinforce the status quo, while a strategy of deliberately imagining the Good Countryside could help to dislodge that status quo” [52] (p. 164). Taking a broad rural resilience thinking perspective as a lens provides a helpful way to question how young people’s future dreams link to future rural social and economic sustainability.

Resilience provides a helpful metaphor to shape thinking on the direction of rural change, re-frame and highlight new perspectives on rural development [53,54]. The rural economy and change supporting improved sustainability, diversification, and the presence of multifunctionality have been linked to greater rural economic resilience [55–57]. In farming, for example, multifunctional agriculture functions beyond food production, contributing to public goods and services such as cultural landscapes and biodiversity preservation [58]. For rural areas, more broadly, those that are highly multifunctional could possess features related to an economy that is diversified and has low dependency on external funding, and a society that has strong communities, gender equality and good services. Multifunctionality supports resilience because of the diverse functions it supports in rural areas [59]. Also important to supporting multifunctionality and resilience are place-based resources and their intersection, such as economic, social, and environmental capital [55,56]. Focusing on the interconnections between the environment, society, and the economy is also crucial to a resilience perspective, where environmental issues must be considered part of rural development [53,55,56,60]. From this viewpoint, a key question is how to increase the youth population in rural areas and how their activities, such as their lifestyles and livelihoods, contribute to resilient rural regeneration.

More fundamentally, resilience is responding to shocks or disturbances and returning to a pre-existing state. However, in rural and regional development contexts, many argue it is necessary to look beyond this construction of resilience and focus on resilience as a more transformative process that includes potential for positive system change or

reform [53,61,62]. The ‘proactive human agency’ strand of resilience literature is highlighted as necessary in rural contexts and positions communities as proactively responding to change rather than reacting to shocks or disturbances [61]. However, key in realising this capacity are local, micro-level abilities to proactively drive change and develop more resilient and new development paths [63]. This raises a further important question around the capacity of young people to proactively drive rural change.

4. Methodology

This study uses a future foresight approach developed by Kuhmonen et al. [31] to examine the personal futures of youth. This method was first applied in Finland but has been used in nine European contexts [64]. The focus on the micro, personal level is uncommon in future research, with a macro approach more often found. While personal futures reveal a diverse mix of futures which may not be realised, common patterns can still be identified, and the micro-level focus gives agency to individual, place-specific perspectives [31]. Foresight studies and imagined futures are also essential to inform future policy with the potential to develop measures to support realising future visions [31,52]. Teasing out the implications of foresight studies for policy also helps to ensure it is informed by a forward-looking vision enabling rural areas to be future-ready [65]. In youth studies, the importance of focusing on aspirations, or orientation towards a desired future, is also noted to understand the intricacies of growing up in development contexts [66].

Data was collected in 2020 with an online questionnaire targeting youth aged 18 to 30. Respondents were asked to look 15 years ahead to 2035 and to outline their ideal or ‘dream’ future in three domains. The livelihood domain aimed to capture how the respondents earn their living, while lifestyle focused on how they live and the accommodation where they live. To cover different types of rural regions, the data was collected in two region types based on the urban-rural typology [67]. These are NUTS 3-level regions, and data were collected in one predominantly rural region (Western region) and one intermediate region (Mid-East region) of Ireland.

The results capture the future personal dreams of young people that dream both of urban and rural futures, as well as futures in and outside of Ireland. The focus of this analysis is on the youth dreaming of a future in rural Ireland. This leaves 115 respondents with an average age of 24. A profile of these respondents is provided in Table 1. This is not a representative sample; therefore, the results are not generalisable but illustrate the nature and contents of the future dreams of youth who aim to live in rural Ireland. It was chosen to analyse the results overall and not by region because of the small sample it represents.

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Characteristic	Sample (%)
Gender	
Male	37%
Female	63%
Employment status	
Student	51%
Employed	43%
Unemployed	6%
Family status	
Single	62%
Have a partner	38%
Children	
No	96%
Yes	4%
Education, highest finished	
Primary	0%
Secondary	37%
Tertiary	63%

Thematic content analysis was carried out on the open-ended questions relating to lifestyle, livelihood, accommodation, and obstacles to realising the dreams. As per Braun and Clarke's [68] characterisation of thematic analysis, this was a theoretical thematic analysis driven by the analytical and theoretical scope of the study while still allowing room for the data to reshape this scope. However, it was not purely an inductive approach that was wholly data-driven. Instead, an interpretative approach to analysis was taken, rather than taking the data at face value and describing its contents but looking deeper into the data to unpack underlying ideas and assumptions. The thematic analysis also aimed to identify the critical contents of the dataset overall, but also with a focus on particular, less dominant aspects illustrating particular issues of interest to the analytical focus of this paper. Braun and Clarke's [68] six-phase process was also adopted, where the first familiarisation with the data and the second generation of initial codes were carried out. Then thirdly, initial codes were identified and fourthly reviewed. The fifth step was to name and define core themes, and the final sixth step was the final analysis.

5. Results

5.1. The Livelihood Dimension

The career ambitions of those who dream rural can be classified as predominantly in four broad areas: 1. Education, 2. Health/social care, 3. Community/rural development, and 4. Farming. A range of other professions is present in the personal futures, such as engineering, finance/business, law, policy/politics, data analytics, marketing, science, and the public and environmental sector. Beyond this, some of the personal futures displayed uncertainty about their future career ambition or did not specify what broad area or profession they would ideally work in. More broadly, the dominant type of employment dreamt of is a salaried worker. That said, many of the youth dream futures displayed entrepreneurial ambition. This could be, for example, a farm-based enterprise. The following comments from a young male farmer, still living at home on the family farm are illustrative: *"Full-time farmers can make a full living from the farm. I want to be able to sell my lamb direct to the public. I also would like to have a small business in fixing chainsaws, lawnmowers"*. However, other types of entrepreneurship are also evident, such as an enterprise linked to their main profession, a hobby or tapping into opportunities locally. For example, one male student living with family on an island off the coast of Ireland stated that he would *"Prefer to be able to live at home on the Aran Islands . . . I would like to continue as a Community Development Officer to have a secure income and start my own seasonal/ tourism business"*.

Interestingly there is also a notable pattern among those envisaging a profession in education to have an enterprise. Young people appear to view the education sector, particularly the teaching profession, as one that can be combined with other professional activities. Particular areas are unclear; examples include the agriculture and fitness sectors. To illustrate, one respondent notes, *"Teacher, unless a justifiable living can be made from beef and sheep farming"*.

The results also give an insight into youth who envision farming as part of their rural future. This does not present a surprising picture. However, it highlights how pragmatically youth assess farming as a future livelihood and the sector's challenges. The personal futures, including farm livelihoods, envision this as a part-time occupation combined with another salaried job and/or entrepreneurship. Off-farm employment, for example, could be in the teaching profession or an area related to agriculture, such as a farm advisor. One male teacher comments: *"My job is being a teacher, but I wish I could make it off the farm at home"*. A key obstacle is farming as a viable livelihood. Some respondents, for example, note that the beef sector is particularly difficult to live from, while dairy is the main viable option. The following helps to illustrate the diversity of concerns youth have around farm viability, particularly one young male farmer living on the family farm: *"Price of agricultural land, access to farms to rent, lack of profitability in all agricultural sectors apart from dairying"*. Such findings are similar to those of Conway et al., 2017 [37], who also raise

questions about farm viability, succession, and inheritance on small family farms within the Irish context.

The livelihood dreams also show how wider factors related to work conditions are important for the future. Salary expectations vary, but generally, expectations are not for very high earnings but to live comfortably and meet key major future needs, such as supporting a family and buying a house. Notable other features of the livelihood emerging from the dreams are to have a work-life balance, which is also an important facilitator of the lifestyle dream, such as to spend time with family, for example: *“Work/life balance is essential, especially in the future with a family of my own”*. But this can also be linked to enjoying free time for hobbies. Work is also not perceived as a means to an end, but youth describe a desire to enjoy their work. One respondent, for example, comments: *“Work/life balance will be key. I want to be in a job that I love doing but also allows me to have free time out of normal working hours to switch off and enjoy working on my home farm and riding horses”*.

A further dimension of enjoying work is that the job should be personally rewarding and have wider positive impacts. Youth can attach a desire to help others through their job, for example, *“What I look for in a career is something that I am passionate about, something that gives me a belonging in life. The kind of work that can change people’s lives”*. This can be explicitly linked to their preferred choice of profession. For example, teachers want to help young people, and farmers want to contribute to change that supports farming. In relation to those who dream of working in the education sector and have the ambition to help and support young people, one respondent comments: *“I want to be able to help young people all day, every day”*. In relation to farming, for example, another comment: *“I want to be an agricultural advisor . . . and my work to be dedicated to helping farmers maximise their assets while protecting the environment”*. Work that has positive impacts in the world can also be expressed as a wider ambition to give back to the community through work and impact positive change, as illustrated by this respondent: *“Working to help others in the community with whatever needs they have. Enhancing quality of life and promoting sustainable living for all”*.

The option to work from home or remotely also emerges in some personal dream futures and, more broadly, to have some flexibility in their future work. One obstacle to realising the dream future is the availability of rural jobs that match their desired profession, education levels and salary expectations. For example, one respondent expresses: *“in a rural environment . . . high scale jobs are unavailable”*. Youth describe barriers related to rural living as having to commute long distances for work outside of their dream rural location or to urban areas. One respondent illustrates how this can result in trade-offs, such as taking up different employment options to avoid commuting: *“I would take a lower salary as compensation for a short commute”*. Some describe Remote work as a way to overcome this issue, but not by a significant portion of the youth.

Further concerns around livelihood are identified in the data relating to job security and the wider economic climate that could impact the number of available jobs or losing a current job, for example: *“Be employed in a job that is likely to withstand ups and downs of the economy”*. The issue of career progress is also a feature of the obstacles described, including the salary offered. For example, the following comments illustrate these concerns: *“Work-wise, most specialised jobs and promotions tend to be in Dublin or larger cities, so it’s a very long commute every day”*.

5.2. The Lifestyle Dimension

Family life, which involves raising children or being close to extended family, is a strong part of the lifestyle narrative described in the youth’s personal dream futures. Rural areas are considered suitable places to raise a family for various reasons because of safety, strong community, access to sports and nature-based amenities. One female respondent’s comments are illustrative: *“The location would be a safe and clean rural area to raise a family...Socially, the area would thrive with activities for all age groups, including various sports clubs”*. To expand on the importance of safety, those who delve deeper into this link it to greater independence for children and being able to explore the local area more

freely. For example, the following comments are illustrative *“I would . . . hopefully, have a few children. I would want their home to be . . . safe . . . allowing them the freedom to roam the rural area around them”*. More broadly, the nature of rural communities is an essential feature of the dreams. Connecting communities are necessary. For example, one respondent describes this as: *“a tight-knit community where everyone knows each other”*. This links directly to lifestyle and supports the availability of collective community recreation activities in areas like sports, arts, and culture. A wider, more generalised strong community spirit and space for involvement in the local community also emerges as an essential factor, as illustrated here: *“A varied lifestyle that allows for involvement and interaction with the local community would be a priority”*.

The significance of sport to lifestyles is also a strong feature of the personal dream future. Being physically active can sometimes be described individually, tied to enjoying the rural landscape, for example: *“Nice scenic walks and hikes”*. However, a more collective and community-dependent trend is also evident in how the sport is ideally experienced by the youth themselves, and their future envisioned families. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a community-based volunteer organisation supporting Gaelic games and culture, has an important role. It ties community and sport together. Youth describes the importance of local GAA clubs, and some note a more active role in them, such as being involved in training: *“I am and will continue to have a massive involvement in our local GAA club as both a player and coach”*. This can also be connected to, and a gateway into, how they envision their future active community involvement, for example: *“I plan to be a parent by that age and to get involved in the local community, through GAA with my kids or doing what I can”*. There is also an awareness that because of the voluntary nature of the GAA, challenges facing rural areas also present a threat to this culture: *“I would like to still be playing Gaelic games and keeping fit. I hope that our clubs will still be there as depopulation is a problem”*.

Most rural personal dream futures were located in rural areas close to or within commuting distance of a city. The desire to be situated rurally but not disconnected from social and cultural life is a significant trend in the narrative describing the lifestyle dimension. The lifestyle envisioned can be interconnected with what can be understood as more traditionally urban commercial services. This can relate, for example, to access to services for recreation, such as shops, cafes, restaurants, cinemas, and pubs, for example: *“nice pubs and restaurants close by for socialising, creativity, basic enough lifestyle centred around family”*. Another aspect of this is being connected and an active part of a community and having access to sports clubs as part of the lifestyle mix: *“I want to live in a rural area with access to a town 5 to 10 minutes away which has a suitable nightlife with sports clubs also present. I want my neighbourhood to be quiet but get on and interact with the neighbours”*. The desire not to be too rurally remote can also be linked to how youth envision they will access services needed personally, for example: *“It will be important for me to live in rural Ireland. Still, within commuting distance to an urban centre for access to shops and social outlets”*. This can also be linked to services needed for wider family life, for example: *“I would like to have children, and so being somewhere close to facilities for them would be very important”*. Overall, this highlights how access to a wide range of services is a key criterion to enable the future youth to envision in rural areas. The personal dream future overall touches on a range of services as necessary, such as those related to education, healthcare, transport, digital connectivity, retail, and recreation services.

The accommodation aspect of the dreams shows a strong presence of a desire for a detached house. However, there is still variety in the housing dreams, and a range of wider features emerge, such as specifying living or not living in a housing estate, having a large garden, and preferring a two-storey house or a bungalow. Some personal housing dream futures specify that they want, or do not want, to build their own house. While in addition, a minor aspect mentioned is to renovate or restore an existing dwelling. The desired size of the home is not often mentioned, but where it is again, there is a diverse picture from the *“small bungalow”* and *“a humble cottage”* to *“large two-storey house with a large garden”* and *“detached house . . . at least four bedrooms and a back garden for the family”*. The accommodation

aspect of the dreams also gives an insight into youth ambitions for more sustainable living practices; however, this only features, to a very small degree, as a minor trend among the dreams. Specifically, practices generally relate to aspirations for producing their food at home, for example, “*keep hens and grow my vegetables*” or the house’s energy efficiency “*an energy-efficient home*”. Key among the obstacles described in realising future dreams is financial issues, which can relate specifically to housing, such as house prices and getting a mortgage. The more specific issue of difficulties gaining planning permission to build a house is another obstacle emerging concerning accommodation dreams.

Interconnections among aspects of the lifestyle and livelihood dreams are also interesting to note in relation to farming. It appears tied to a lifestyle more than the other professions. Those who imagine other professions do not often mention them as part of their lifestyle but are more focused on detailing wider aspects of lifestyle, such as work-life balance, sports, access to amenities and community involvement. On the other hand, for those who dream of farming, it is clear that the farm may encompass where they live and work. For example, one respondent describes their accommodation recipe as: “*On the family farm in a house filled with kids*” and lifestyle recipe as: “*Farming, farming, farming, go on a holiday every year and spend quality time with family and friends*”. However, challenges to realising this dream are clear and linked to the viability of farm livelihoods and the wider economic and policy context.

6. Discussion

The future dreams of Ireland’s youth show how there is an appetite for Irish rural life among young people. They value and identify with some of the core strengths of Ireland’s rural areas, such as the presence of connected, active and close-knit communities. However, the future dreams of youth also highlight some persistent and fundamental rural development issues as barriers to attracting and retaining youth in rural areas—a clear, central issue is rural jobs. The dreams underline the importance of employment opportunities for youth to support rural generational renewal. Over 50% of interviewees were third-level students, with 43% employed and 62% single. While these statistics fail to show a clear correlation towards the respondents’ interest or commitment to rural village regeneration, when analysed alongside their responses, they show the respondents’ interest in remaining in their rural area if high-quality jobs were available. Such analysis is similar to the work of Shucksmith (2018) [52], where he highlights the factors influencing the retention of rural graduates. Wider rural jobs issues, such as sectoral availability, job security, pay levels and progression opportunities, are also a clear constraint to the future dreams found in the Irish context. This issue is reinforced by the evidence seen in the broader literature, e.g., [27,29]. Tackling the rural jobs issue appears essential. Existing research also presents insights on a potentially multi-dimensional approach to improving the youth labour market, hence supporting rural generational renewal. Increased job creation is an obvious point, but beyond this better understanding of the nature of the rural labour market (e.g., sectors with available jobs, salaries available, permanency of jobs) could provide a realistic view for the youth of the offer opportunities. This follows Ferrario and Price [27], who acknowledge that policy directed towards job creation is essential, but also call for a more accurate local labour market and potential career path information to shape policy supporting Alpine youth brain gain.

Another potential avenue for future action is that different aspects of the results point to the need to focus on careers for youth in rural communities—the presence of uncertainty and unspecified future careers, the dominance of certain professions in the personal futures and the presence of ambition for entrepreneurship. This links explicitly to the findings and recommendations of García-Arias et al. [24] (p. 323), where schools should be seen as part of the local networks involved in rural development. Creating better links between schools and their local area would: “help young people to detect opportunities, unresolved problems and discover their vocations”. Developing the connection between rural schools and their local area and enabling youth to envision future careers from a place-

based perspective also emerges as an important consideration for future rural generational renewal and development policy.

Rural jobs and the economy also provide an essential aspect to explore, specifically in relation to rural resilience. Shucksmith [52] argues we must look towards alternative, potentially transformative rural futures. While meriting further research, another important point emerging in this analysis is the range of livelihoods presents quite a traditional picture of the rural economy and the job expectations of youth. For example, professions in areas linked to more sustainable and diversified rural economic futures, such as the bio, circular and creative economy, are not evident. Therefore, another part of improving the rural labour market for youth could involve looking towards areas of untapped opportunity that support jobs for youth but also wider rural economic modernisation, diversification, sustainability, and resilience. This follows the recommendations of Simões et al. [44] (p. 11) around the need for strategies such as the European Green Deal to see the better realisation on the ground in rural areas because: “These changes may open up a more vigorous and diverse services sector (e.g., agro-tourism) creating financially rewarding opportunities for young entrepreneurs as well as for qualified young people”.

Further, a greater focus on supporting and stimulating rural youth innovation and entrepreneurship would also be necessary as part of improving the labour market for youth, as well as supporting rural economic resilience and wider generational renewal. Enhancing innovation and entrepreneurship is important in creating more virtuous development cycles in rural areas [24]. The presence of ambition for entrepreneurship is an evident feature of some dreams. This shows how young people are interested in starting businesses and creating employment in the rural economy. For future rural economic sustainability, this presents a promising feature of youth ambition. However, as argued by Stockdale [4], youth may lack the human capital to, for example, start and successfully run small businesses, while people in later stages of life could be more likely to possess these skills and capacities. However, with a direct focus on building youth’s capacity and skills in innovation and entrepreneurship, this could help overcome these deficits.

Further, this would also simultaneously support the proactive ability of youth to direct their futures and positively shape new paths for economic development in rural areas, an important dimension of resilience in rural contexts [61]. These business and entrepreneurial findings are similar to the work of Guzman et al. (2020) [19] who use examples from the US to examine the perceptions of young people and business owners on the issue of business development and, in particular, the potential for young people to contribute to rural entrepreneurship as means to revitalize rural communities. The potential vitality they bring stems from attributes such as a greater propensity to react to new information or technologies and a likely lower burden of risk [19]. However, the opportunities to promote youth entrepreneurship were also highly context-specific and related to identifying appropriate opportunities within existing businesses to promote entrepreneurship and structural issues relating to local markets and networks [19].

The personal dream futures collected directly focused on identifying the accommodation dreams of youth. The results identify a potential challenge in need of reconciliation to facilitate the future housing dreams of youth and generational renewal while supporting more resilient rural regeneration. While there was variety in the type of housing envisioned, the desire for a detached house shows the persistence of a positive culture towards one-off housing in rural Ireland. This is a potential challenge for a youth-friendly rural future where housing provision has sustainability at its core. Scott and Gkartzios [69] discuss how the legacy of the culture towards one-off rural housing in the Irish countryside creates issues for rural resilience. It presents a ‘lock in’ or ‘path dependency’ towards sub-optimal housing development paths in the context of the low carbon transition.

7. Conclusions

Returning to Shucksmith’s [52] point in relation to envisioning the ‘Good Countryside’, how do the future dreams of youth move away from the status quo, towards new frontiers

and away from the nostalgia attached to the rural idyll? The character of the personal futures of Ireland's youth can be connected with a more traditional view of rural areas. They present a vision of family life with work-life balance in connected communities. Livelihoods can be associated with quite a traditional rural economy, with sectors related to a more modernised, diversified rural economy not evident. While a small portion does, it is uncommon for the youth profiles to situate their dream as contributing to wider change in rural areas, such as improving the rural economic or social situation. Sustainable living practices are present but not a strong feature of lifestyle dreams. We, therefore, could be critical of the future dreams of youth from a rural regeneration perspective as not immediately presenting a strong vision for alternative and more sustainable rural futures. However, we argue we cannot be too critical of the future dreams of youth and expect them to be the source of the core new frontiers of regenerative, resilient rural development. While not dominant, there are important patterns in the results that directly provide promising areas for youth to become part of more sustainable rural living patterns and wider rural change. There is a danger in expecting youth to be the solution to more resilient and sustainable rural futures without providing the right support and policy measures that could empower youth populations to be the drivers of change in rural areas.

Another crucial point is building capacities and skills that facilitate capitalising on the promising areas identified, such as the interest in entrepreneurship and the desire to work in areas that give back to society. We have also pointed to the centrality of addressing the rural jobs issue for improved generational renewal and resilient rural regeneration. However, to pair and simultaneously address these two objectives needs policy action, and this paper provides some suggestions for policy in this regard. These suggestions include a policy concentration and directive around the supply and availability of quality rural jobs suitable for rural graduates, allowing them to work and remain within their rural area. Additionally, other policy suggestions included the need to provide the right support and measures that will attract young people to return to rural areas and entice them to remain.

This research also raises several important areas for further research. Particularly because of the small sample the study is based on, further investigation is merited. Wider research has highlighted that youth outmigration and de-population are particularly an issue in remote rural areas [2–4]. The need for place-based rural policy and the notion that one size does not fit all is well argued [1,70]. The results of this study in the Irish context suggest that remote rural areas are least attractive to youth as most of the dreams were located in non-remote rural areas. However, it does not reveal the nature of the challenges of generational renewal in remote rural areas. This needs to be better understood to provide insights into balanced rural development across different rural area types and to avoid some regions being left behind. Two critical issues for further research centre around the diversity of livelihoods and rural housing. It is identified that the dream livelihoods envisioned link to a more traditional rural economy rather than a modernised, diversified rural economy. However, this needs more extensive research to understand the pervasiveness of this pattern better. The rural housing dreams also present a more traditional picture with the persistence of a preference for the cultural phenomenon of the bungalow in the countryside.

Further research is needed to understand how much this is a game-changer for rural youth, or perhaps with more affordable, sustainable rural housing, this part of the youth's future dreams can be open to compromise. In addition, to further research, however, there is a need to connect the above suggestions and completed study with national policymakers. Although a difficult task, this could potentially be achieved by compiling and disseminating the research findings in a non-academic manner, building a relationship with relevant policymakers, and attempting to engage policymakers in a briefing workshop or round table discussion on the topic of this research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.M., M.F., T.K., L.W. and M.M.; methodology, T.K. and A.M.; formal analysis, A.M.; writing—original draft preparation, A.M.; writing—review and editing, A.M., M.F., T.K., L.W. and M.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was carried out as part of the RURALIZATION project. It received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 817642. The opinions expressed in this document reflect only the authors’ views and in no way reflect the European Commission’s opinions. The European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical approval for the University of Galway’s involvement in RURALIZATION has been received from the University of Galway’s Research Ethics Committee (application number: 20-Apr-08).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data on which this paper is based are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and requirements around protecting personal data based on the General Data Protection Regulation of the EU.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to acknowledge and thank participants for their time and support as part of this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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