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Relationships on the river: Can social cohesion encourage flood adaptation strategies in the agricultural sector?

Flooding impacts Irish life in many ways, including destruction of buildings, infrastructure damage, pollution, and interruption to electricity supply. While government and local authorities are typically responsible for flood management, research suggests that collective action on a community level is necessary to address this increasingly pressing climate-change issue. However, sometimes divisions exist among those living in flood-prone areas, such as urban and rural dwellers, or farmers and builders, who may blame each other for flooding. One way forward is to build a sense of shared identity between groups living within the same river catchment, so that the group begins to see their interdependence and role in finding a collective solution. Through interviews and surveys, the diverse range of flood experiences are explored, as well as the extent to which social cohesion and a sense of community influence willingness to engage in flood prevention activities for the benefit of the wider community.

Agriculture plays a large role in both climate change and Irish culture. Farmers are in a particular position to take actions that could significantly reduce flood devastation in their river catchment. River relationships, climate-change perceptions, and concerns of farmers must therefore be established prior to attempting to improve social cohesion or build a shared identity and purpose. If farmers are concerned about climate change or question the sustainability of their agricultural model, this may drive engagement in flood mitigation strategies. Alternatively, if they feel more threatened by climate policy than by weather events, they are less likely to engage with flood mitigation. Positive relationships with other river-dwellers may increase willingness to take substantial action that benefits the catchment, such as creating flood plains on their land to reduce flood risk to residences downstream. However, there is a unique identity and place in Irish society reserved for farmers. The strength of this identity may prohibit farmers' receptivity to decoupling of land from productive farm use, and the strength of the representation by others may damage relationships between farmers and town-dwellers. These issues are being explored to promote flood mitigation and climate action.