

Enhancing uptake of best practice in agriculture



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Group extension is an increasingly popular approach to providing farm advisory services. The expectation is that the uptake of innovations and best practices is promoted by enhancing opportunities for farmer-to-farmer learning.

Recent research compared livestock monitor farms funded under the Scottish Monitor Farm Programme to discussion groups within the Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP) in Ireland. The research has identified key success factors in the design of group extension programmes to enhance uptake of best farming practices.



Photo: ZALF

Key Lessons

- In both Scotland and Ireland, providing farmers with an **opportunity to share their experiences and discuss with other farmers** was an effective way to help farmers learn more about new practices.
- The quality of farmers' learning was dependent on the **degree of openness** between participants – especially in relation to **sharing financial data**. This is in turn influenced by the **trust** between participants, which can be increased by **constant group membership**.
- However, learning about and discussing new techniques did not necessarily result in farmers adopting these new practices.
- The degree to which farmers adopted new practices was higher in the Irish programme because of the **financial incentives and stringent requirements** for participants.
- **Evaluating the success** of group extension programmes was easier for the more structured Irish programme because of its **clearly defined goals**.

Research undertaken

To compare the two extension programmes, we analysed official documents, attended meetings and interviewed 13 participants and 6 facilitators. Both programmes aimed to improve farmers' profitability but differed in their approach.

The Irish discussion groups involved 15-20 farmers who were paid to participate and were required to implement certain practices on their farms that had been identified based on research. This provided a facilitated space to compare experiences and results, including financial performance.

In Scotland, the monitor farms primarily involved one monitor farmer who would adopt a range of practices suggested by a management group of active farmer participants. The monitor farmer would then receive support in tracking the results of his practice changes and host bi-monthly meetings to share the experience with other farmers (the wider *community group*). Some monitor farms had also set up a benchmarking group (a subset of the larger group) whose members shared and discussed financial performance data.

Findings

This research found that the Irish discussion groups resulted in a high and uniform level of both learning and practice change for participants (Figure 1). By contrast, Scottish monitor farms showed much more differentiation between participants. The more involved the participants were in the planning and implementation of the monitor farm's new technologies, the higher the level of learning and adoption of new practices. Another factor that influenced the quality of the learning was the extent to which financial performance information was shared between participants. Learning and knowledge exchange were easier to achieve than the adoption of new practices. At the same time, learning and knowledge exchange are prerequisites to experimentation and adoption.

Success factors

The success in terms of adoption can be explained by the following factors:

- Task-driven approach: participants have to select and complete tasks from a list of practices
- Benchmarking is made an integral part of group meetings (e.g. using a profit monitor tool)
- A strong knowledge transfer focus from research to advisors to farmers
- Professional facilitators or farm advisors with facilitation training are available to structure the process and group discussions
- Ongoing engagement of farmers in planning and implementation of practices in groups of max. 20 members
- A financial incentive that covers some of the costs involved in participating in group extension or the costs associated with a new practice
- Availability of follow up one-to-one advice

Programme Background

The resources spent on the Irish BTAP are considerably higher (€15M over the three year period 2012-2014) than on the Scottish programme (€1.7M/£1.3M in the period 2009-2013). The Irish programme covered 289 (as of 2014) beef discussion groups with approx. 5000 participants, compared to 18 monitor farms (for beef and other sectors) with an average of 25 participants at the meetings. Per participant, this is a similar investment.

However, if the spent is divided by the number of farmers who demonstrably changed their practices, the Scottish programme is much more expensive. Monitor farms are currently funded under the Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund of the Scottish Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

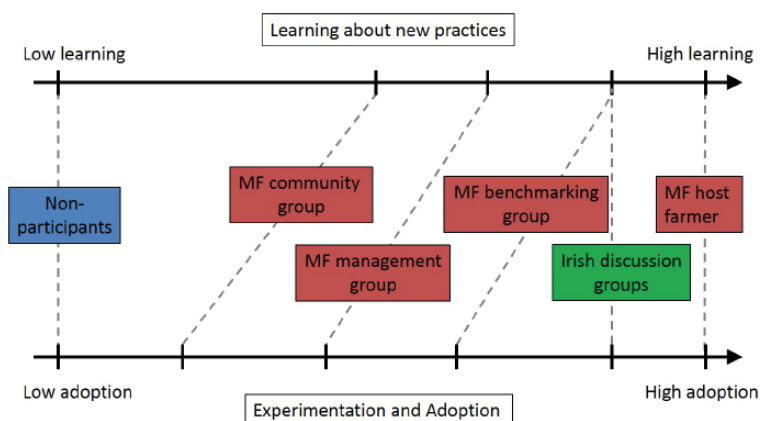


Figure 1: Learning (left) and experimentation and adoption of new practices (right) for Irish BTAP discussion group participants and the different types of Scottish monitor farm (MF) participants

References and further information

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