

Learning and Change Through Monitor Farms

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What are we doing and why?

A study looking at learning and change based on observation and interviews with stakeholders at two Monitor Farms. We are looking at key factors that contribute towards learning through community-based on-farm demonstration to better understand how and why farmers might implement new innovations and practices. In particular, we are focussing on features of successful demonstration, conducting soil assessment as an example of best practice, working together in innovative ways, and opportunities associated with different host farms and farmers. The research started in 2017, including ongoing attendance at meetings, and interviews in winter 2017-18. A second round of interviews will be conducted in winter 2019-20.

What have we found?

Communication is key. Demonstration days help everyone to engage and share opinions, encouraging useful and interesting discussions. This is evident when the right people are involved:

- **Importance of good facilitation** – multi-skilled teams and individuals who are informative, approachable, and effective in the organisation of on-farm demonstration;
- **Openness of host farmers** – in terms of sharing successes and failures, working with and learning from the community group;
- **Interpretation that encourages engagement with the topic** – including hands-on experiences, in-situ discussion of relevant topics, and sharing resources to communicate specific information and help recall details.



Soil assessment...

...is fundamental to soil management best practice and is recognised as such by farmers. Monitor Farm 'soil sessions' were found to be engaging and complimentary to year-round discussion of soil in farmer updates, farm tours, and other topic areas:

- **Practical activities** – such as soil pits, digs, and initiatives such as 'Soil My Pants', promote knowledge exchange and help improve understanding;
- **Instinct vs data** – knowledge and experience through farming practice together with new technologies and means to access them have become standard practice for some farmers over a 20-year period;
- **Importance of purpose** – resource availability is important in determining whether farm-scale soil assessment is conducted as routine and whether localised assessment is conducted following the identification of problems.

Working together...

...is encouraged by Monitor Farms, including formal and informal means of improving farm businesses in association with others:

- **Mixed farming through collaboration** – demonstration of collaboration between neighbouring arable and livestock farmers has provided lessons on the practical benefits, challenges, and negotiation of terms to ensure equitable share in risk and reward;
- **Benchmarking** – improving farm performance requires good understanding of business and technical aspects, with business benchmarking groups providing opportunities for farmers to analyse and better understand their business in relation to others;
- **Building social capital** – new and existing relationships may be developed through attending community demonstration days, which allows farmers to learn from, and with each other, and establish contacts on which they can build in the future.

Host farms...

...involved in this research represent different opportunities in their regions and to the Monitor Farm programme in terms learning and its translation into value for hosts and community group members:

- **Scale as a barrier and opportunity** – difficulties in replicating some aspects of hosts' management practices and use of technology are acknowledged, while their capacity to trial and showcase new innovations is also valued;
- **Mixed farming groups** – allows for discussion, exchange and new opportunities for learning between different farming types – but can also present challenges in terms of pitching information and discussions at the right level;
- **Joint-hosting** – demonstrating collaboration in practice, bringing different farming types together, and providing for a shared and mutually-supportive learning journey.



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