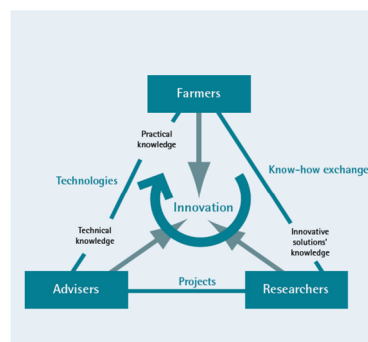


Project number: 5917
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Project dates: Jun 2008 – Dec 2012

Understanding farmer behaviour



Adapted from: <http://www.taslab.eu/framework.htm>

Key external stakeholders:

Beef farmers, the BETTER Farm Beef Programme, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), agricultural advisors and consultants.

Practical implications for stakeholders:

There is a need for targeted research to understand the wide range of complex factors influencing beef farmers' adoption of attitudes and practices that are conducive to enhancing productivity. This project undertook in-depth examination of case study beef farmers, identifying the factors that were implicated in the farmers taking particular paths in terms of their agricultural production and farm development decisions. The main practical learning arising from this research is 1) the need for extension approaches to leverage the social relationships (including peer-to-peer and professional relationships) that are instrumental for farmers' learning processes and 2) to take a comprehensive approach in encouraging a farm development 'package', responding to social and cultural needs of the farm family as well as economic considerations.

Main results:

- Two overarching themes emerged in the data that explained farmers' farm production and development decisions: *farmer characteristics* (farmers' circumstances, needs, experiences, mindsets) and *knowledge and social enablers* (the experiences, events and/or structures that have assisted farmers' technological and efficiency successes).
- While farmers had many different characteristics, they also shared among them broadly common characteristics. In the context of these broadly common characteristics, the research identified 'transformative' experiences that led BETTER Farm Beef Programme farmers to take decisions and actions that led to enhanced farm performance. These transformative experiences (e.g. farmers' exposure to particular information/events; socially triggered realisation of new ways of thinking or prioritising) contain insights to the factors that ultimately cause change to occur among farmers and thus provide important learning arising for extension.
- The transformative experiences identified in the analysis related to the following themes: family farming; cultural capital and emotional attachment to farming; the role of pioneering farmers in farming communities; and engendering an appetite for achievement. The social settings of both participating and non-participating farmers in the BETTER Farm Programme related to these themes, allowing for the analysis to identify factors leading to particular farm development paths. Farmers' transformative experiences under these themes (for instance the experiences of a younger farmer inheriting a farm and gaining independence very early on in life, or a farmer who became involved in agricultural competitions early on in life) were found to be directly influential on the direction of future development and production decisions on farms.
- Through a collaborative Teagasc research/specialist advisory effort, we highlight lessons arising from the research for extension models such as the BETTER Farm Programme and the Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP).

Opportunity/Benefit:

Understanding the critical social and cultural 'triggers' that influence farmers' behaviour is important for fostering change at farm level through extension practice and also for gauging farmers' reactions to policy

instruments/programmes. A report has been produced through a collaborative Teagasc research/specialist advisory effort to highlight main results and implications for extension. A new project has been funded by DAFM's Research Stimulus Fund (RSF) to further explore the processes of farmers' adoption and adaptation of technologies. Two Walsh Fellows have also commenced, with projects focusing on social learning and the use of ICTs in promoting process and product innovations to farmers.

Collaborating Institutions:

Teagasc with supportive interactions from:
NUI (National University of Ireland), Galway
Open University, UK
University of Gröningen, Netherlands

Teagasc project team: Dr. Áine Macken-Walsh (PI)
Dr. Paul Crosson
Mr. Aidan Murray

External collaborators: Dr. Anne Byrne (NUI, Galway)
Prof. Frank Vanclay (University of Gröningen)
Dr. Chris High (Open University, UK)

1. Project background:

Farmers are not necessarily maximisers of profit (economic capital) over all other forms of capital (social and cultural) and a collaborative qualitative research project was initiated to gain insights to farmers' decision-making in the context of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme. A research project entitled 'Qualitative Analysis of Farmer Behaviour' (2009-2012) undertook detailed case studies to explore beef farmers' production decisions and activities. The project was implemented by a sociologist and the empirical focus was decided in consultation with a production scientist, extension professionals, and the management team of a joint industry programme, the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER Farm Beef Programme.

2. Questions addressed by the project:

The research examined the life experiences and 'mindsets' of the farmers involved in ten farms with a view to identifying the factors that were implicated in the farmers' approaches to agricultural production and farm development.

3. The experimental studies:

The case studies involved ten farms: five farms participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme and five counterpart non-participating beef farms on which, by comparison, few or no new technologies were in use.

4. Main results:

- There is a need to foster and promote the independence of main farm operators in leading farm related decision-making while also accommodating family farm dynamics. In other words, family farming is the dominant farming model Europe-wide and while there are advantages of family farming such as labour supply and social supports, there can also be disadvantages relating to the 'independence lag' of farm heirs. Various joint farming ventures (e.g. farm partnerships) have potential in this regard.
- Farmer 'role models' had high credibility among farmer peers in demonstrating the use and adaptation of technologies.
- The cultural and emotional aspects of farming was strongly influential on all farmers studied and such aspects can be addressed through extension practice.
- Opportunities to enhance lifestyle was a strong motivating factor in farmers' decisions to change their farm production systems, particularly in the context of fulfilling the needs of family farm members.
- Expertise channelled through extension services, particularly when provided in the form of a comprehensive and customised package, was a powerful knowledge enabler.
- Social supports provided through discussion groups, for example, were critical prerequisites for farmers' strategies to implement change at farm-level.
- Experiences of farming competitions (organised by Teagasc/Industry) were among the most transformative experiences: they could engender a sense of achievement and appetite for

experimentation and 'progression' from an early stage in farmers' careers.

5. Opportunity/Benefit:

Understanding the critical social and cultural 'triggers' that influence farmers' behaviour is important for fostering change at farm level through extension practice and also for gauging farmers' reactions to policy instruments/programmes. Highlighting the key issues arising from the research for policy and extension design, a collaborative research/specialist advisory effort led to the development of a short summary report of specific interest to those involved in BTAP. The report highlights how extension and policy approaches can be attuned to the needs of the family oriented farm, by supporting joint farming ventures, for example; and to the cultural and social priorities of farmers, where farmers may not necessarily prioritise profit-making. Increased attunedness to the family-oriented, social and cultural aspects of farming may lead to policy and extension programmes having greater credibility and popularity among farmers as well as greater impact in instigating change.

6. Dissemination:

Main publications:

Macken-Walsh, A. (2013). Tales of Transformation: a study of BETTER Beef Farmers in Ireland, Teagasc REDP Working Paper Series.

Macken-Walsh, A. and Byrne, A. (2012). Relational Sustainability: examples of the Human and Animal interface in Irish rural society, Teagasc REDP Working Paper Series.

Buckley, C., Mechan, S., Macken-Walsh, A., Heanue, K. (2013). Stakeholder Co-Development of farm level nutrient management software, EGU General Assembly 2013, Geophysical Research Abstracts, Vol. 15, EGU2013-9175, 2013

Macken-Walsh, A. (2012). Multi-Actor Research and Extension Processes in Agriculture, Congress of the International Rural Sociological Association, Lisbon, 31st July, 2012

High, C., Nemes, G., Macken-Walsh, A., O'Dwyer, T. (2012). The Use of Participatory Evaluation Methods in Agricultural Extension, presentation to Teagasc, Best Practice in Extension Services: Supporting Farmer Innovation, Aviva Stadium, Dublin, November 1st, 2012

Seale, C., High, C. Lane, A., Reynolds, M. (2012). Forty Shades of Green: Implications for Knowledge Transfer under a Changed CAP, presentation to Teagasc, Best Practice in Extension Services: Supporting Farmer Innovation, Aviva Stadium, Dublin, November 1st, 2012

McDonald, R., Pierce, K., Horan, B., Heanue, K., Macken-Walsh, A. (2012). New Dairy 2020: A Multidisciplinary Study of Technology Adoption among New Entrants to the Irish dairy industry, presentation to Teagasc Best Practice in Extension Services: Supporting Farmer Innovation, Aviva Stadium, Dublin, November 1st, 2012

Heanue, K. and Macken-Walsh, A. (2010). Indigenous wisdom and the alternative logics for Irish farming, Invited Paper to the Campo Adentro Conference: Art, Agricultures & Countryside, Madrid, 21-23rd October, 2010

Popular publications:

Macken-Walsh, A., Crosson, P., Murray, A. (2012). A Qualitative Study of Irish Beef Farmers' Production Decisions: Summary and Implications for Extension, Teagasc, Oak Park, Carlow, November, 2012. Presented to the Management Group of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme, 4th Oct., 2012.

Heanue, K., Macken-Walsh, A., Maher, P. (2012) (eds). Teagasc Best Practice in Extension Services: Supporting Farmer Innovation, edited book of conference proceedings, Aviva Stadium, Dublin, November 1st, 2012, Teagasc, Oak Park, Carlow, Ireland ISBN: 1-84170-593-4, pp. 1-61

Macken-Walsh, A., McHugh, S., Byrne, A., Woods, A., Crosson, P. and Murray, A. (2010). Understanding and Facilitating Farmers' Adoption of Technologies. *TResearch*, Vol. 5, 2010 34-36

7. Compiled by: Áine Macken-Walsh

