

# A Qualitative Study of Irish Beef Farmers' Production Decisions: Summary and Implications for Extension

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## 1. Introduction

Teagasc employs an innovative tripartite (research, education, knowledge transfer) strategy in the development and extension of technologies to enhance the competitiveness of Ireland's agri-food sector. Research activities in agriculture and food sciences develop technologies while extension activities and education programmes disseminate these technologies, as well as more fundamental crop and animal husbandry knowledge, to the farming population. Social sciences play an important role in identifying and explaining the factors influencing and the processes surrounding farmers' adoption of technologies. In the context of the critical role that technologies play in reaching the productivity and environmental targets of Food Harvest 2020, social science research that has practical application in enhancing the effectiveness of extension strategies and understanding the often low or modest uptake of technologies among Irish farmers is required.

A social science research project entitled 'Qualitative Analysis of Farmer Behaviour' (2009–2012<sup>1</sup>) undertook detailed case studies to explore beef farmers' production decisions and activities. Implemented by a sociologist, the empirical focus of the project was decided in consultation with an animal production scientist, extension professionals, and the management team of a joint industry programme, the Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER Farm Beef Programme. 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. The case studies examined the life experiences and subjectivities (or 'mindsets') of the farmers on all ten farms with a view to identifying the factors that were implicated in the farmers' approaches to agricultural production and farm development. Among the factors identified were influential occurrences in the life histories; experiences and circumstances of the farmers; the socio-cultural significance of farming; specific influences of agricultural extension; and social related factors relating to farmers' peer-to-peer relationships and support systems.

This summary report presents some of the main categories of factors influencing farmers' production activities and is intended to be of interest to extension professionals and those with a remit in agricultural policy development and the design and implementation of extension programmes. The report was developed collaboratively by Teagasc researchers and a Teagasc extension specialist.

The report has four main sections. First, a background of the genesis and rationale of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme is presented. Second, an overview of the research approach is presented, identifying the main questions that the research project sought to answer and the methodology used. Third, the research findings are presented, highlighting the types of factors that were found to influence farmers' production decisions. The main focus is on farmers' characteristics and on knowledge and social enablers. The final section of this summary report highlights implications from this research for extension, identifying specific areas of current and future extension practice where learning arising from the research has application.

## 2. Introduction to the Teagasc/Irish Farmers' Journal BETTER Farm Beef Programme

The Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal BETTER Farm Beef Programme is a collaborative programme involving Teagasc (the Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority) and the Irish Farmers Journal, with support from key industry stakeholders (Dawn Meats, Kepak Group, ABP Ireland and the Agricultural Trust). BETTER is an acronym for *Business, Environment and Technology through Training, Extension and Research*. The programme was launched in 2008 with sixteen suckler beef cow farms with a strong commercial focus participating in the initial phase of the programme (in 2012 the programme was extended to include 35 farms). The aims were (1) to establish a national programme to demonstrate the potential to increase the financial returns on beef cattle farms through improved technical efficiency, (2) to improve levels of technical efficiency on livestock farms on a national basis by communicating the key messages

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1. Teagasc RMIS Project 5917 (2009–2012).



generated from the national programme through various media channels including the Irish Farmers Journal, (3) to provide a better understanding of how and why technologies are adopted by farmers thus leading to improved design and implementation of advisory programmes and, (4) to provide clear signals for further research by identifying critical areas where the level of current knowledge is lacking.

The BETTER Farm Beef Programme has a two-tier management structure. The programme is managed by a Management Team comprising a project leader, programme advisers working directly with farmers, personnel from the Irish Farmers Journal and a Teagasc animal production researcher. The Management Team is responsible for the day-to-day management of the programme. In particular, the project leader and programme advisers have responsibility for ongoing communication and advisory support to the participating farmers. A Stakeholders Group operates to advise on the strategic management of the programme and any fundamental changes to the structure or direction of the programme is discussed and agreed with the Group. The Stakeholders Group comprises of a nominee from each of the industry stakeholders and the members of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme Management Team. The BETTER Farm Beef Programme is an integrated industry, research and extension programme, representing an example of the current Teagasc-led Irish Agricultural Knowledge Innovation System (AKIS).

When the BETTER Farm Beef Programme was initiated in 2008, an overall financial target was set for each farm to achieve a gross margin of €1000/ha. Prior to the programme, the average gross margin of the participating farms was €386/ha (2008) and in a broader context, the gross margin of Irish suckler farms generally was €167/ha (NFS, 2008). In order to reach the target of €1000/ha, major technical and process adjustments were required on the participating farms. The fundamental basis for the planned adjustments was customised and formalised written development plans for each farm. These plans addressed all the essential components of profitable suckler beef production as defined by Teagasc research. It was through the customised development of these farm plans that the management practices and production technologies most critical for each participating farm were identified.

The farm development plans were implemented by each of the participating farmers with advisory support of their dedicated BETTER farm adviser and also each farmer's Teagasc local adviser, who in most cases had a prior longstanding relationship with the farmer. The implementation of the plans was supplemented by continued monitoring of grassland, live weight, reproductive, herd health and financial performance.

As a result of implementation and continuous monitoring, production strategies forming part of the overall farm development plans were refined as necessary. Furthermore, the farm development plans were modified iteratively according to policy, sector and market developments. The participating farms received an intensive level of advisory support and the results from the first phase of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme showed average increases in farm output and gross margin by 49% and 118% respectively. It was estimated that 66% of gains made were as a result of improvements in technical efficiency with the remaining gains due to price inflation.

Primarily the BETTER Farm Beef Programme is an extension programme and, as such, the key principles underpinning its operation are (1) to expedite the appropriate transfer of profit-enhancing technologies onto participating farms, (2) to evaluate the impact of these technologies on the physical and financial performance of the farm, and (3) to disseminate these findings in the farming media to enhance the uptake of these technologies among the wider beef farming population. To ensure the efficient transfer of technologies, it is important that the local Teagasc advisers, who are most familiar with the participating farmers' systems, play a key role in the development and implementation of the farm plans together with the BETTER farm adviser. However, the local adviser typically has a much larger client base than the BETTER farm adviser who is solely dedicated to technology transfer on a relatively small number of (BETTER) farms and therefore, has the capacity to propagate to a much greater degree technology changes on the farms. The measure of success of the programme is however, not alone an improvement in profitability of the participating farms, which is relatively simple to evaluate. The programme is also intended to improve profitability on beef cattle farms on a national basis, the success of which is much more difficult to evaluate. The assumption, however, is that weekly features in the Irish Farmers Journal, occasional articles in Teagasc publications, farm walks, satellite discussion groups and other extension activities will expose to a much broader group of farmers to information and learning generated by the programme.

It is important that as much as possible is learned from how the BETTER Farm Beef Programme achieves and promotes its *Business, Environment and Technology* goals, and from the dynamics of the relationships underpinning the programme's collaborations in *Training, Extension and Research*. As a model that has been recently expanded and is compatible with the objectives of EU measures such as the European Innovation Partnerships (EIP), much can be learned from the BETTER Farm Beef Programme by other integrated multi-stakeholder extension programmes and also programmatic sectoral extension models such

as the BTAP (Beef Technology Adoption Programme<sup>2</sup>; DAFM, 2012). A variety of research approaches are required to examine the various operational dynamics of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme and one approach, a qualitative sociological study, is set out in the current summary report. The particular contribution of a sociological study is to identify the factors influencing farmers to follow particular development paths and the preconditions for as well extension processes leading to greater sustainability.

### 3. Qualitative Analysis of Farmer Behaviour: Research Approach

A Teagasc study of Milk Production Partnerships A significant proportion of farms in the European Union and across the world are operated as family farms, which are recognised as having particular traits in terms of how they are operated and managed. Three forms of capital are identified as influencing family-farm decision-making: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital.

- *Economic capital* essentially means material or financial wealth and how it motivates farmers. Financial and material wealth can be often tied in with forms of cultural and social capital, particularly where wealth is required to maintain or enhance cultural or social capital.
- *Cultural capital* can be described as what is prestigious to or esteemed by farmers, from the perspectives of farmers themselves. Cultural capital, or 'pride', can be attached to types of knowledge, skill, or tradition that are valued, admired and important to farmers. In various cultural contexts, it is known that some production activities or technologies correspond with farmers' cultural capital, while others may potentially undermine their cultural capital. One example is when scientific knowledge can contradict farmers' own practical, locally specific forms of knowledge. While cultural capital can either cause resistance to or facilitate the adoption of technologies, it is important to note that cultural capital is not static – it changes over time. Extension processes that are culturally sensitive can contribute to changes in cultural capital and the evolution new forms of cultural capital.
- *Social capital* can be described as the value of social relationships to farmers. Farmers place value on social relationships with family members and their peers and may not wish to take decisions that can lead to an undermining of these social

relationships. For example, farmers' decisions about the adoption of technologies are often influenced by the opinions of their peers. Some farmers will not adopt technologies if they feel that their peers disapprove. On the other hand, some farmers – because of their particular social positions – find it possible to take roles as leaders in pioneering new technologies among their peers. The adoption of new technologies or farm management decisions can therefore be seen as a social rather than an individual process, influenced by farmers' desire to maintain or enhance social capital.

Consistent with understanding farmers' decisions as being informed by complex cultural and social issues rather than financial factors alone are Vanclay's (2004) 27 social principles that are specifically relevant to agricultural extension. The fundamental bases of Vanclay's principles are that farming is a socio-cultural practice and a way of life, not just a technical or income-generating activity and that farmers are not passive, indiscriminating receptors/adopters of new knowledge, but are influenced by their own circumstances, mindsets and knowledge in evaluating production and management options that are presented to them.

One of Vanclay's (2004) principles is that 'farmers are not all the same' and as a widely accepted principle, researchers often seek to identify differentiating characteristics of farmers so that policies can be targeted at or tailored to different categorisations of farmers. Researchers have devised categories that place farmers in opposing groups, such as *adopters* versus *non-adopters*; *innovators* versus *laggards*; *big farmers* versus *small farmers*; *old farmers* versus *young farmers* (Vanclay, 2004, p.214). Other such categories are: *reluctant and restricted farmers*; *adaptable farmers*; *progressive farmers*; *very proactive/entrepreneurial farmers* (Wales Rural Observatory, 2012, p. 14). However, in reality, farmers are not easily categorisable and their characteristics may be relevant to several categories, not just one or two. Some methods of categorising farmers focus on 'styles' of farming, styles that are categorised not according to simple indicators such as age, size of farm, and whether or not a farmer has adopted a particular technology but according to farmers' different understandings, priorities, values, and ways of working (van der Ploeg, 2003). Using such characterisations can lead to more meaningful ways of categorising farmers, where each style represents implications for how farmers within that style are likely to behave and react to different issues and choices they encounter.

2. The Beef Technology Adoption Programme (BTAP) is a knowledge exchange programme based on the discussion group concept. It involves the attendance at discussion group meeting and the completion of practical tasks to enable participants improve the performance and profitability of their beef enterprises. It is funded by the Irish Government with participant receiving up to €1,000 annually for successful completion of tasks, including attendance at discussion groups.

The concept of farming styles is relatively popular and tends to have ‘immediate intuitive validity’ to scientists, farmers, and extension professionals (Vancly et al 2006, p.62). Understanding different styles of farming is clearly relevant to the research presented in this report, which focuses on the factors influencing Irish farmers’ decisions in relation to their farm production and management activities. However, while it is accepted that ‘farmers are not all the same’, it is also the case that farmers can have key areas of similarity, and it is in these areas of common ground that much of the potential for programmatic sectoral extension interventions lies. While individualised, targeted extension supports are provided to specific groups of farmers (such as farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Programme), sectoral extension programmes such as BTAP must inevitably support large numbers of diverse farmers. Standardised but intuitive and flexible approaches that relate as effectively as possible to groups of diverse farmers and capitalise on key learning opportunities are required. Considering the growing role of peer-to-peer extension approaches (discussion groups, for example) and the diversity of farmers that participate together in such extension groups, understanding the nuances of key areas of common ground between them is instrumental for optimising peer-to-peer learning processes. The circumstances, experiences, needs and challenges that farmers have in common and the various ways in which farmers see ‘eye to eye’ are valuable contextual starting points for inclusive participatory learning opportunities.

The in-depth sociological case studies of farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme and of counterpart non-participating farmers, highlighted differences but also many fundamental similarities in farmers’ characteristics, circumstances and esteemed forms of cultural, social and economic capital. Understanding the main points of confluence between the two different groups of farmers and in this context, identifying the specific factors that led only some of the farmers to enhance farm performance, are of value in designing effective extension and policy interventions. Informed by the key factors – or in sociological terms the ‘transformative experiences’ (see Hards, 2012) – that influenced higher performing farmers to take particular development paths, extension can seek to support or recreate such *transformative experiences* among members of the wider farming population.

Rather than studying a large number of cases, the research approach of this project involved studying in-depth a limited number of cases, exploring comprehensively all of the factors influencing farmers’ production activities and decisions. The detailed case studies involved interviewing the main farm operators (and, where necessary, additional family members) using what is called a narrative methodology (Wengraf,

2001). The principal aim of narrative methodology can be simply described in the context of this project as encouraging the farmers being interviewed to detail from their own perspectives the important factors influencing their farm production activities and decisions. The narrative format facilitates the researcher to trace changes in the farmers’ mindsets over time, and to pinpoint the events that were particularly influential or transformative.

A characteristic of qualitative narrative methodology is that the researcher seeks to have minimal influence on the farmers’ narratives. This makes the methodology different to surveys or structured interviewing, for example, where questions are pre-defined by the researcher and a limited choice of answers, also predefined by the researcher, is available to the farmer in answering the pre-defined questions. The narrative methodology used in this research involved a number of stages. The interviewing process began with the researcher asking a single prompt question to the farmer being interviewed, inviting the farmer to ‘tell the story of farming your land’, for example. After the narrative is elicited from the farmer, which takes approximately two hours, subsequent parts of the interview involve the researcher probing aspects of the farmer’s narrative that are specifically relevant to the research question under study. If necessary, the researcher subsequently asks direct questions about matters that are relevant to the research question but have not arisen in the farmer’s narrative thus far. The central principle underpinning the narrative data collection method is that once presented with a prompt question, farmers’ subjective perceptions, viewpoints, opinions, knowledge types etc. and their life histories are encouraged to come forth in a narrative format in such a way that is not limited or constrained by the research biases of the researcher. It is in the analysis phase that the researcher uses various theoretical frameworks that explain farmer behaviours to analyse the narratives. As distinct from surveys or structured interviewing approaches, however, the researcher must take into account and reconcile in the analysis all aspects of the data, not only the aspects that correspond to various models.

The research findings of this project are themed according to what emerged from the narratives of the farmers. Two overarching contextual themes emerged from the analysis, which are: farmer characteristics (what are the key circumstances, experiences, mindsets, needs of the farmers interviewed?); and knowledge and social enablers (what experiences, events and/or structures have assisted technological and efficiency successes?). In relation to farmer characteristics, while farmers had many different characteristics, they also shared among them common characteristics. In the context of these broadly common characteristics, we focus on specific transformative experiences that



led the BETTER Farm Beef Programme participants specifically, at various points in their life-courses, to take decisions and actions that led to embark on development routes towards enhanced farm financial performance. The empirical analysis relating to transformative experiences draws only, thus, from the narratives of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme participants – notwithstanding that transformative experiences analysed have a common socio-cultural milieu and reflect all case-study farmers. The transformative experiences analysed are themed as follows: family farming; cultural capital and emotional attachment to farming; the role of pioneering farmers in farming communities; and engendering an appetite for achievement. In discussing knowledge and social enablers, we focus on particular aspects of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme as an extension model and on the social dynamics of conditions in which farmers' learning can successfully occur.

### 3.1 Family Farming

Family farms across most world cultures are known to employ a wide range of adaptive strategies to ensure the survival of the farm. Farm families are recognised as being particularly adaptive, both socially and economically, with a view to maximising their resilience (see, *inter alia*, Darnhofer 2010). Conventional socio-economic strategies of resilience have been patrilineal inheritance, maintaining production adaptability, and off-farm work. More contemporary adaptive strategies include arrangements such as joint farming ventures (Almas, 2010; Macken-Walsh, 2011) and the stronger role of farmwomen in generating off-farm income and pioneering farm diversification (Byrne *et al.*, forthcoming). Adaptive strategies used by farmers also originate from the extension interface, where farmers can adopt farm production and management technologies developed by scientists, or more recently, technologies that are co-designed by farmers, scientists, extension professionals and other stakeholders (Jennings *et al.*, 2010). These technologies are typically designed to enhance farm efficiency and financial performance and assist farmers to improve agricultural productivity and the economic viability of their farms, particularly in the context of competing in world food markets. A range of social, cultural and economic factors is known to influence farm families' use of all the various adaptive strategies that are available to them, factors that are comprehensively reviewed by Vanclay (2004). In the farm family context, it is widely accepted that cultural, social and economic priorities relating to the farm and members of the household are closely intertwined. Furthermore, decisions and actions relating to the farm are made in a family context where different perspectives and attitudes of family members, often spanning two or three generations of the same family, potentially bear an influence.

In this regard, it was notable from the case studies of farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme that all of them, since a relatively young age, had operated their farms independently of their fathers. Some had experienced the death, illness or disability of a patriarch (male head of family), leading to the farmers as heirs (or impending heirs) of the farm to experience sudden and forced independence as they were left to manage the farm without the support or involvement of their parent. The loss of their parent as an active participant on the farm was a significant event in the narratives of the farmers concerned and they related the impact that the loss had on their lives and on broader family members' lives. The loss of their parent also very much represented a transformative moment leading to a changed path in the development of their farms. The farmers' narratives explained the enhanced sense of responsibility they felt towards the farm and the broader family, which in the context of the independent approach that they had no choice but to follow, led to exploring strategies to manage and develop the farm as best they could. A greater sense of responsibility was experienced by the farmers, resulting in a feeling of pressure to make the farm a success, and also a greater sense of ownership, independence and decision-making discretion in relation to production activities.

"I ... knew what he had been doing that was fine for a year because I kind of continued on and the next time I realised, a year down the road, this fella is not coming back telling me what to do, do you know?"

In the absence of the patriarch, the farmers interviewed tended to turn to alternative support such as local farm advisers in a more prominent way. In one case, the role of the farm adviser was particularly strong in supporting and mentoring a young farmer to take over the farm. In all cases, the roles of advisers were notable in encouraging young farmers to experiment with new ways of working and new technologies. In the context of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme farmers' narratives, the loss of the patriarch and subsequent enhanced responsibility and decision-making discretion at a young age, was found to be a critical transformative moment leading to the development path their farms had taken towards greater efficiency and financial performance.

By contrast, the counterpart non-participating farmers in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme had experienced had farmed for most of their lives in the traditional patriarchal system. Some of the farmers continued to farm with their parent, while others had farmed closely with their parent well into middle age and then had taken over ownership of the farm. In these cases, it was notable that taking over the farm was not a significant



event in the farmers' narratives and that it moreover represented a relatively insignificant occurrence that amounted to a change in legal ownership rather than a change in farm development direction. The change of ownership was presented as a technicality, leading to no distinctive set of farm production strategies on the part of the farm heir. In the context of the narratives, it was apparent that the change of ownership was relatively late in the lifecourse, at which point the farmers concerned had established relationships and ways of life. This contrasts with the narratives of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme participants, where taking over the farm suddenly and prematurely by typical standards, happened early in the life course and was directly associated with new development directions on the farm.

"I suppose guys who were at home and their fathers were in charge ... And they were very genuine guys now these couple and they felt inhibited and that it was unfair on everyone else that they didn't put in the figures [and] the other fellas did and they opted out because of that d'you know?"

While clearly different circumstances were experienced by some BETTER Farm Beef Programme participants on one hand, and non-participants on the other, it is nonetheless the case that all farms are part of the same patriarchal system of agriculture, where the male senior family member (patriarch) ordinarily retains ownership and considerable decision-making power until relatively late in life. In such contexts where transfer of ownership of farms can tend to be late in the life of the farm heir, it is possible that in these cases, future heirs can have reduced decision-making discretion while operating farms with their fathers and this can impact on the development path of the farm, including the adoption of technologies and other strategies to enhance farm performance<sup>3</sup>. Recent research in Ireland has highlighted difficulties that farmers who are not officially 'in charge' of farms that remain in their fathers' ownership can experience difficulties in participating in extension activities such as discussion groups when they are not in a position to share with other discussion group members financial data relating to the farm, for example (Macken-Walsh, forthcoming). However, it is also the case that, for

various social, cultural and economic reasons, it can be an accepted (and desirable) cultural norm in farm families for future heirs to work closely with their fathers and other family members until late in the life-cycle (see Macken-Walsh, 2011; Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012). Therefore, and in the context of the limited success of schemes that incentivise early retirement among farmers (DAFM, 2011), it is the challenge of extension to work within such cultural norms while finding innovative ways of increasing younger farmers' decision-making power.

Farm partnerships, where two or more farmers work together, are potential vehicles for enhancing younger farmers' sense of ownership and decision-making discretion while maintaining working relationships with older farmers within existing ownership structures. A study of farm partnerships in Ireland (Macken-Walsh, 2011; Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012; Macken-Walsh and Byrne, forthcoming) found that family farmers used partnerships as a resilience strategy and that they led to a range of benefits<sup>4</sup>. Sixty nine percent (441) of the total 635 Milk Production Partnerships currently in place are parent/offspring partnerships. Milk Production Partnerships are currently the most prevalent form of formalised partnerships in Ireland, and research has highlighted that formal written agreements underpinning partnerships, in addition to providing protection to the parties involved, also provide an opportunity to formulate practical and feasible shared working arrangements and strategic business plans that often involve a more sophisticated approach to farm development than had been taken before. Farm partnerships have significant potential benefits on beef farms, representing vehicles for younger farmers' enhanced decision-making discretion and for the formulation and implementation of business development plans. The development of new farm partnership agreements and other joint farming arrangement, thus, represents a critical opportunity for targeted extension intervention. Another opportunity for extension lies in establishing discussion groups specifically for co-farming parents and offspring so that farm development information and planning can be contextualised to joint working arrangements and to accommodating and exploiting the distinctive competencies and needs that may be held by the different parties involved.

3. There is an officially acknowledged need at the EU level to encourage greater representation of younger farmers in the farming demographic, informed by statistical data showing that farmers in younger age cohorts have higher levels of educational attainment and economic performance (DAFM, 2011; DG AGRI).

4. Farm Partnerships were used as a strategy to develop larger farm enterprises/increase scale by managing two previously independent enterprises together; increased milk quota; increased efficiency by consolidating land and facilities and by developing new management strategies and business plans; sharing of work-loads to cope with the extra work involved in up-scaling and applying new technologies on the farm; introduction of new skills, specialisations and occupational preferences to enhance the operation of the farm; fostering of new diversification activities on the farm by bringing in new expertise and business interests; facilitating off farm work; sharing decision-making power between members of farm families (spouses, heirs, for example); reducing isolation in farmers' working lives and improved farm safety; facilitating family circumstances and needs where, for example, farmers had childcare responsibilities; allowing farmers time-off to pursue other interests and take holidays, improving their quality of life.

### 3.2 Cultural Capital and Emotional Attachment to Farming

All of the farmers studied for this research, both participating and non-participating farmers in the BETTER Farm Programme, shared fundamentally similar forms of farming-related cultural capital (aspects of farming that are esteemed and prestigious to them) and social capital (the importance of social relationships). The farmers had similar emotional attachment to farming as a way of life and the socio-cultural (non-economic) significance of their farms.

The social-cultural importance of farming was strongly linked to the farmers' sense of personal identity and self-image, their self-worth and their social relationships with family members and in the community. The main aspects of farming to which the farmers commonly ascribed prestige and esteem were the socio-cultural importance of their land assets as heirloom farms and the involvement of their families (particularly offspring) in the family farm. Farmers' references to what was enjoyable about farming related in the most part to their autonomy on the farm (i.e. operating as they wished on their own territory) and the sense of well-being and satisfaction attained from their interactions with and care of livestock. It was evident from the narratives of all the farmers interviewed that they attached significant esteem to the condition and well-being of livestock in their care and to the various ways in which they succeeded to overcome the various challenges that farming presented, such as ways in which they had made improvements to the quality of their land.

"I suppose there around 6 o'clock do you know and when the jobs are done and that, you'd often go herding and that and if you have all the herding done and that and you are kind of more relaxed and you can size up the cattle better ... that would be a favourite time of the day now"

"... I think land, farming country, everything that you get associated with it, gives you a grounding, gives you something... something different, I think it gives you a resilience ... a great base for any kids to start on ..."

In terms of current strategies to operate and manage their farms, it was evident from the farmers' narratives that current strategies were informed to a significant extent by the past. A clear development path, where various actions were connected together by a relatively consistent logic or attitude, was evident in all the narratives. The significance of the farms as family heirlooms was emphasised, and the history of the farm presenting the stories of various generations of owners was told by all of the farmers interviewed. The story of

each farmer's own farming life, referencing memories of farming alongside previous generations, was also told. Such consistencies in emphasis were evident in the narratives, but the detail of narratives was different. One narrative retold experiences of the farm in the context of Ireland's colonised past and emphasised the importance of family ownership throughout the story leading to the current day when the farm represents less an income generating business and more a family heirloom. Another narrative emphasised the history of the farm as a progressive farm in their locality and the ways in which new technologies were iteratively pioneered on the farm, and shared with farmer neighbours, up until the current day.

The ways in which the farms had been operated over time and key behaviours on the farms were underpinned by forms of social, cultural and economic capital that were constituent of a particular and identifiable culture on the farms. The narratives gave evidence of multiple instances where forms of cultural, social and economic capital were altered on farms, leading to changes in the culture on the farms and changes in the development direction or emphasis on the farms. These are the transformative experiences (or transformative realisations) depicted in the farmers' narratives that are particularly relevant to extension as they reveal opportunistic circumstances and conditions in which change can be enacted. Farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Programme experienced specific transformative experiences that involved a change in cultural and social forms of capital, which directly influenced how their farms were managed and their financial performance. Matters relating to a single key theme triggered the main transformative moments experienced by farmers in this regard: lifestyle off the farm. The narratives revealed that while farming-centred cultural and social capital were important to farmers, there were other forms of cultural and social capital relating to lifestyle, particularly educational and leisure pursuits, that were esteemed by farmers.

"I try to value my time. I try to put a value on it and slowly ... but I'm trying to get around to the stage where I will say well I do so many hours on the farm and this is my return ... Ok you do farming because you love it, yes, but loving a farm, not getting paid for it, doesn't give you the money, the flexibility to enjoy going off with your family at the weekends, ya know if you have to take them away for a week"

These forms of cultural and social capital to some extent related to family life but also to the farmers' personal needs. Most of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme farmers interviewed were married and had offspring of school-going age. A desire to provide

their families with opportunities to enjoy and benefit from lifestyle/leisure and educational pursuits was emphasised in the farmers' narratives. The farmers emphasised the importance of formal agricultural and third level education and spoke of the importance of their families having holidays and of their own personal desires to travel and see more of the world. An acceptance that the farm needed to perform at a higher level in order to provide lifestyle and educational pursuits was evident. The farmers spoke of incidents when they realised that they could not afford the financial costs of meeting various educational and lifestyle needs of their children and spouses. They spoke of distress and frustration they experienced in this context and how this led to them strategically explore measures available to improve the financial performance of their farms.

"I fell apart when I saw how poorly this farm was doing from the financial end of it, from the financial end of things, and eh although I had an idea it's like driving a car without a petrol gauge, you may have an idea what way you're going but you don't really know whether the tank is three quarter full, or half full or only little bit in it"

The narratives revealed how farmers strategised to use the farm business to provide economic capital as a route towards achieving forms of social and cultural capital (i.e. lifestyle and educational pursuits) unrelated to farming. The narratives revealed in instances how certain types of farming-related social and cultural capital had to be compromised in order to support other forms of social and cultural capital. One example of this is when a farmer accepted that none of his offspring would become full time farmers. Although this compromised some aspects of his own cultural capital (prestige and esteem attached to farming and the continuation of the family farm), it was conducive to other forms of cultural capital (prestige and esteem attached to education) and his social capital (social relationships with his offspring) to facilitate the life choices of his offspring. The farmer sought to develop his farm to achieve higher financial performance in order to attain the economic capital necessary to facilitate his offspring's educational pursuits.

"But, at the end of the day I think if an opportunity came up for say a bigger farm in one block ... see this is kind of spread out in different spots ... but if I had the opportunity to move on I would hate to think that my emotions would stop me progressing".

In the context of their farm businesses having difficulties in financing educational and lifestyle pursuits, the narratives of the farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme gave evidence of specific decisions on their part to become what was described as 'less sentimental' in relation to their farms. The farmers told stories of particular times when they made conscious decisions that forms of cultural capital that had been important to them could no longer influence them, and that they must instead take a strategic approach to achieve other goals. Such stories referred to the sale of family farmland, for example, which in some cases involved the purchasing of more suitable replacement farmland. It was notable that while such strategic changes sought to improve economic capital, they were in all cases motivated by a desire to provide the financial costs for lifestyle/educational pursuits as distinct from accumulating economic wealth.

It was also notable that although the farmers' narratives elaborated on how changed production practices led to improved financial performance, they spoke of the changed approach as a system or package of management practices rather than the use or attributes of individual technologies<sup>5</sup>. It was found furthermore that the characteristics of specific technologies or any positive or negative perceptions of the technologies were not particularly influential on the farmers' overall approach to production activities or decisions that enhanced financial and efficiency performance. The farmers referred to various technologies as part of an overall 'package' approach or strategy they could use or were using to enhance their financial and efficiency performance of their farms and how in this context the technologies were useful in achieving the economic capital to access lifestyle goals. However, positive attributes of technologies were not found to be triggers of transformative moments influencing the farmers' decisions/convincing farmers to enhance the financial and physical performance of their farms.

"I was doing the profit monitor here for three, four, five years previous to that ... and I would have known what I was making but it wasn't, it didn't mean anything, it wasn't relevant ... I never studied it I never see ... ya know you'd say well I could do that ... I'll make more next year, but you won't make more next year unless you actually put steps in place or you put a plan in place to do it"

5. This approach to farm development i.e. putting in place a system for efficient production rather than the ad hoc adoption of individual practices/technologies is specifically advocated by the BETTER Farm Beef Programme.



“I used to go in to yer man and go down through it and we’d say that cost ... and that cost is too high ... and if you got an extra 10c a kilo whatever I’d do that, whatever the case is, and that’s be it, and then you’d go back in the next year and same thing, but the results would generally be the same, because we didn’t have a plan of help, we didn’t ... know where we were ...”

The integrated system of new practices the farmers were implementing on their farms was consistently referred to by the farmers as instrumental for achieving the forms of cultural and social capital that had been the original motivators for change. However, it is important to note that the narratives of the farmers also demonstrated the development of new or more prominent forms of cultural and social capital rooted in the new farming system and the associated improved financial performance of their farms. As their narratives evolved, the farmers spoke with pride of the efficiency and performance gains made on their farms (cultural capital) and of the various ways in which they felt respected by their farmer peers as a result of various extension and publicity activities surrounding the BETTER Farm Beef Programme (social capital). This highlights an important implication for the BETTER Farm Beef Programme as an extension method, which is that farmers developed new forms of cultural and social capital that esteemed farm efficiency and financial performance. Developing such new forms of capital has positive consequences for the ongoing sustainability of the technology-driven systems on the farms and for engendering a more technology-oriented culture on the farms.

“it gave me more access to ... it gave me access to answers to questions and people and resources and stuff that just would speed up what I was trying to do. Ya know probably without, I might been getting into the position where I was going to do a lot of it anyway but it would have took me longer ahm I was doing it but I think the BETTER Farm Programme speeded it all up for me”

The farmers studied who were not participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme attached esteem to similar types of farm-centred cultural, social and economic capital as the BETTER Farm Beef Programme participants but their narratives did not feature significantly the types of non-farm centred motivators (e.g. broader lifestyle, educational pursuits) representing transformative moments leading to new development paths. Factors such as aspiration-constraining financial circumstances or, more fundamentally, a lack of preference for diverse lifestyle pursuits are of course logical explanations for the farmers’ lack of emphasis on such pursuits in their

narratives. However, it is within the remit of extension activities (particularly those that are attuned to socio-cultural factors) to present new lifestyle possibilities to farmers, and showcasing the transformative moments of other farmers can be a powerful tool in that regard. The transformative moments, experiences and achievements of farmers who have implemented new systems can be incorporated to discussion groups, farm walks (particularly groups and walks affiliated to the BTAP which targets the general farming population) and also to programmes such as Teagasc’s Farm Options Programme that already includes financial and lifestyle ‘reality checks’. New beef farming systems, rather than alternative non-farming options, may be an attractive option for farmers who already have entrenched forms of cultural and social capital that are oriented to conventional farming.

### 3.3 The Role of Pioneering Farmers

The narratives of farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme showed that experimenting with new ideas (farming techniques, technologies and facilities) was part of a longstanding culture on their farms. The farmers could be described as ‘pioneering farmers’, and indeed a willingness to try out new ideas was one of the criteria in selecting participants for the programme. Sociological studies of the characteristics and operation of pioneering farmers have examined the positions and roles of such farmers among their peers and in their communities. To be a pioneer, per se, does not only indicate that an individual has pioneering attributes but logically indicates that the individual is a pioneer in a particular social context, and is a pioneer by virtue of the fact that s/he is recognised as a pioneer by her/his peers. Therefore, to understand the factors determining farmers’ positions and roles as pioneers, we must understand the social context in which they are recognised as pioneers and the social relations that supports their status. Social context and social relations are of particular relevance to extension, because it is important to understand how pioneering farmers and ‘non-pioneering’ farmers inter-relate and the peer-to-peer learning opportunities that arise in that context.

“If we, if the BETTER farm (shows) ... watches me achieve its goal of taking farmers from the average gross margin ... and other farmers can see the benefits of it, it’s worth everybody’s while”

The literature highlights that one reason underpinning why some farmers may not wish to experiment with new technologies is that they do not wish to take the risk of appearing foolish amidst their peers if the technology does not work. As discussed by Vanclay (2004), technologies and innovations developed by scientists do not have automatic legitimacy among farmers and farmers often need to see a new

technology in use on an operational farm (ideally a neighbour's farm with similar characteristics to their own farms) before considering trying it out themselves. In this context, the role of pioneering farmers – who are willing to take such risks – is crucial, and targeting strategic extension activities to support the learning that occurs in the interactions between pioneering and 'non-pioneering' farmers is likely to have effective results. This approach of centring extension activities on pioneering farmers is central to the BETTER Farm Beef Programme and is relevant to programmes such as the BTAP. As evident from their narratives, the farmers interviewed for this research had been pioneering farmers far in advance of participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme and this particular attribute (i.e. their social legitimacy as pioneers) was critically supportive of their roles in the programme and their functions in contributing to the programme's broader extension objectives.

The farmers' narratives illustrated their own past experiences and, in some cases, the experiences of their forebears in experimenting with new technologies, techniques and facilities. They spoke of the social implications of experimenting with new technologies, and how they occasionally met with sceptical attitudes from their peers in that context. However, it was clear from the farmers' narratives that with an established tradition of trying out new ideas institutionalised on their farms, they felt secure in their ongoing experimentation and were not significantly concerned about their peers' occasionally sceptical attitudes. The farmers enjoyed trying out new ideas and in particular, the social dynamic of the interactions they had with farmer peers relating to the process of trying out new ideas. While other farmers may not feel sufficiently socially secure to try out new technologies and to interact with their peers in relation to how the technologies fare out, the pioneering farmers interviewed were able to withstand the scrutiny of peers and were in fact quite comfortable to discuss the technologies with their peers. As the analysis of Shutes (2003) highlights, pioneering farmers can often feel a responsibility to their peers to identify solutions to common problems. While this extent of social responsibility was not explicitly evident in the narratives of farmers interviewed for this research, it was not inconceivable that it existed given the context of the highly social dynamic of the farmers' roles as pioneers in their communities. Their longstanding roles among their peers and in their communities as 'pioneering farmers' supported their current positions as 'BETTER Farmers' and also reinforced their credibility among their peers, which in turn is supportive of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme's broader extension remit.

Aside from the socially entrenched and socially reinforced aspects of their roles as 'pioneering farmers',

it is also important to note the contribution of the farmers' knowledge to their roles. While an objective evaluation of pioneering farmers' knowledge is outside of the current analysis, the narratives of the farmers interviewed indicated that the farmers themselves had a strong sense of confidence in their own capacities to make informed and discerning judgements in relation to which technologies to test on their farms. They attached great prestige and esteem (cultural capital) to their abilities in that regard. The farmers' narratives also indicated that they had been successful in the past, as had their forebears in some cases, and they attached significant esteem to the longstanding tradition on their farms of making 'wise' decisions in relation to the adoption and successful implementation of new ideas. It is notable in this regard that participation in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme constituted a deepening and progression of the farmers' sense of confidence and esteem in their abilities.

### **3.4 Engendering an Appetite for Achievement**

Competition-winning was a significant event in the narratives of the farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme. The story of having won a competition emerged and re-emerged in all of the participating farmers' narratives and were presented by the farmers in their narratives as indicators of their farming ability and as contributing to their self-image and self-worth as 'good farmers'. While the farmers' status as pioneering farmers came forth from the farmers' narratives of their life and farm histories, and was an important factor underpinning their overall confident and assured approach to farming, competition-winning presented in the narratives as a personalised indicator of achievement and was in this context greatly esteemed by farmers as being an achievement very much of their own making and as representing an objective affirmation of their abilities independent of the family farm setting.

In this sense, competition-winning came forth very much as a transformative moment experienced by the farmers, which occurring typically early in life represented a type of 'coming of age' as a farmer in their own right and represented for them a solid indicator that they used to qualify their status as 'BETTER Farmers'. The competitions generated and enhanced the farmers' cultural capital (pride and esteem) in the status of being a 'good farmer' or indeed 'the best' farmer and in this sense engendered an appetite for further successes of that type. The competitions referred to by the farmers were strongly technology-focused (e.g. grassland management competition, breeding competition) and this was found in the narratives as being a direct influence on aspects of the farmers' cultural capital as being technology-oriented. Winning technology-oriented competitions inculcated a personal development approach that was in part

motivated by an appetite to learn about, test and use technology. In other words, technology-oriented competition-winning, and the enhanced sense of personal achievement that it delivered, arguably made the farmers more positive towards technologies. The use of competitions in both agricultural education and extension, thus, is potentially a powerful tool in generating cultural and social capital around technology use and can be particularly effective if strategically linked with technologies (such as grassland management) that are vital for agricultural development. Furthermore, linking the outcomes of the competition – such as publicity of the competition results and the competition prize – with extension tools such as media publications, farm walks and funded educational field-trips abroad for competition winners can further enhance the extension benefits.

“I suppose I am going into the BETTER Farm Programme now, but I go way back, I won a grassland management competition in 1984 ... I had a paddock system going ... I won a trip to France out of it, I remember, spent ten days in France ... It was an agricultural tour”

### 3.5 Knowledge Enablers

The narratives of the farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme gave a detailed account of their experiences in the programme. Emerging as significant in the farmers' accounts of their experiences were references to ways in which the programme provided expertise and knowledge that were directly instrumental in the development objectives of the farm. Such supportive expertise can be referred to as 'knowledge enablers', as the expertise provided enabled the farmers to work towards their farm development objectives.

The farmers spoke of how participation in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme, and their access to and utilisation of various types of expertise accelerated the progress they were aiming for on their farms. The farmers explained how they had striven to reduce costs or to improve the genetic merit of their cattle, for example, but had been taking ad-hoc measures that had limited impact in the absence of a comprehensive farm development system. The farmers' narratives described in detail the comprehensive support packages or systems that the BETTER Farm Beef Programme provided, and the role of extension personnel operating within the programme in assisting them to adapt and implement various technologies according to their specific needs. The farmers, in their detailed descriptions of the systematic and comprehensive development plans implemented on their farms, gave evidence of a good understanding of the rationale, practices, costs and benefits of the

plans being implemented on their farms. Furthermore there was evidence in the farmers' narratives that the extension professionals with whom they worked sought to encourage the farmers to think through their own decisions. Stories were related showing that advisers were positively responsive to critique from actors internal and external to the programme. In essence, there was evidence in the farmers' narratives that while the farmers received intensive support from extension professionals, the approach of the professionals was not overly prescriptive or domineering.

To the extent that it was evident that the farmers showed a meaningful understanding of the development plans implemented on their farms, it was clear that the farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme had significantly improved their skills, expertise and practical 'know how'. However, it was also clear from farmers' narratives that they were receiving intensive support from extension professionals operating within the programme, and that the extension professionals were directly involved in or instrumental to achieving many daily tasks. The prominent roles of extension professionals in assisting the farmers to implement their BETTER Farm Beef Programme development plans was strongly evident in all the participating farmers' narratives and prompted questions in relation to possible reliance issues. However, close relationships between advisers and clients have been traditionally prominent and valued by farmers, affirmed by the narratives of the BETTER Beef Farm Programme participants.

“... is my facilitator here, generally yeah I'd consult with ... on the majority of things certainly and I'd be talking to ... on a regular basis”

“I can ring him anytime”

From an extension-oriented perspective, the close adviser-client relationship that is at its core must be considered in light of the over objectives of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme. Two overarching aims of the programme are that it a) *showcases how beef farms can become profitable*, by putting into place planned production systems on a limited number of farms receiving intensive advisory support and b) *encourages farmers in the general population to learn from the examples of the 'BETTER farms'*, through popular media, farm walks, satellite discussion groups and other extension 'outreach' activities. In this respect, it is compatible with the objectives of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme to provide intensive advisory support to the showcase BETTER Farms and to target the most part of its extension efforts to the outreach activities involving the general beef farming population.



The narratives of farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme presented in detail their experiences of participating in broader extension strategies targeted at the general beef farming population<sup>6</sup>. The farmers were acutely aware of their roles in disseminating learning arising from their farms to other farmers. Illustrative of the social roles of pioneering farmers (discussed above), the farmers' narratives gave evidence of their sense of pride in sharing knowledge and expertise and of their enjoyment in participating in broader extension activities, interacting with other farmers. Numerous examples of their interactions with other farmers and how in diverse ways, these farmers came into contact with learning arising from their farms was related through their narratives. Together, the various accounts of how farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme were involved in broader extension activities illustrated the richness and diversity of scope for beef farmers in the general population to access learning arising from the programme.

"Do you know like, we have our own discussion groups ... since this BETTER Farm Programme ... people would be asking you questions now and putting you under pressure, do you know that kind of way ..."

"Some farmer rang Teagasc boys in (location) and he wanted to know what kind of mill I was using, like that is, you think people are not following the programme, they are following it"

### 3.6 Social Enablers

Distinctively social aspects of conditions required for successful learning to take place emerged strongly from the narratives of all the farmers interviewed. All of the farmers interviewed, participating and non-participating farmers in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme alike, emphasised how their farming lives could be socially isolated and lacking in human contact for most of the working day. They spoke of the implications that the lack of human conversation and discussion had for tackling problems and challenges on the farm. The farmers rationalised that having opportunities to discuss and converse with their farmer peers common challenges was valuable. In terms of learning opportunities that the farmers found useful, peer-to-peer exchange – through casual interactions with neighbouring farmers, discussion groups and farm walks for example – were the most valued by the

farmers interviewed. However, they emphasised that in order to learn from each other, farmers need to be open with each other and frank and forthcoming about their shortcomings and needs<sup>7</sup>.

"it's a social thing to get out because for me it's a way of meeting farmers, like minded farmers, so the discussion group is a very essential part and I have always every time I come home I have learned something. And if it wasn't a subject on hand, it maybe something I have discussed with the farmer where we have walked ... I always take something home"

Farmers, both participating and non-participating farmers in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme, also spoke specifically about difficult experiences in farming, particularly in relation to challenges posed by adverse weather conditions and sickness and death in livestock. As depicted in their narratives, such difficult experiences could cause farmers great distress especially when dealing with loss of livestock. Farmers' narratives conveyed very clearly the effects of loss – including shock and a sense of personal blame – and farming in this regard can be understood as an emotionally perilous occupation, particularly in comparison to most other types of occupations where such losses are not experienced. In the absence of social contact of peers and of family members (in the context of the increasingly common 'one-man-farm' where farm spouses and offspring are engaged in employment or educational pursuits off-farm) farmers could be vulnerable to depression. In this context, the critical need for social supports was emphasised.

"Ah you would you would be fecking mad with yourself, well I say mad with yourself, now I found a great heifer calf now and she was kind of a show type one, one Sunday morning I went up – dead. 'Twould knock the guts out of you now, what can you do only get on with it, and there's no point in being, you do your best like that's it, so it is, like if it was neglect you'd say something like do you know what I mean"

"You'd think you have a problem at home, you could meet someone who has a worse problem and you'd say thank God I went out it takes the ... something like that now ... so a problem shared ... Not get into a fit of depression and that"

6. The counterpart non-participating farmers interviewed for this research were not involved in such extension activities, and none were members of discussion groups

7. The need for farmers to be open, honest and transparent with each other in discussing how their farms operate and challenges experienced has also been emphasised by Irish farmers in the context of discussion groups (see Macken-Walsh, forthcoming).

Social supports, as rationalised in the farmers' narratives, could facilitate farmers to gain perspective at times of difficulty and loss by understanding that fellow farmers were experiencing the same difficulties and loss. There was strong credence in the motto '*a problem shared is a problem halved*' and social outlets for farmers to meet each other and casually discuss their problems were emphasised as a crucial part of the 'coping process'. In this regard, traditional sociology has emphasised the importance of the 'third place', which is a social outlet outside of the constraints of home and the workplace, that is important for maintaining a sense of personal well-being. For farmers living in rural areas, available 'third-places' can be limited with choices confined to the homes of neighbours or the local pub. However, discussion groups – as well as representing venues for learning – are also fulfilling important social needs for farmers. This was clearly evident from the narratives of farmers interviewed and their experiences of discussion groups. The availability of social supports through discussion groups or 'third places' were clearly important to the farmers' wellbeing and to their coping strategies. Without such social supports, considering the importance attached to them by the farmers interviewed, the pursuit of development plans to enhance farm efficiency and financial performance would seem unlikely and removed from immediate personal realities. Therefore, the importance of social supports as a pre-requisite for successful agricultural extension to take place (or indeed as a by-product of extension venues such as discussion groups) is probably underestimated and undervalued in how extension programmes are currently conceptualised and delivered.

## 4. Implications for Extension

Two overarching themes for learning arising from this research were identified which play a critical role in farmers' development paths: farmer characteristics and environmental knowledge/social enablers. Within these themes, transformative experiences that influenced the mindsets and future actions of farmers and ultimately led to greater farm efficiency and productivity are identified. The implications of these transformative experiences for extension are summarised as follows:

### 4.1 Family Farming

A notable feature among some farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme was their independent operation of the farm from an early age. This led to greater sense of responsibility, more independence and the involvement of greater support from outside the farm such as from farm advisers. The opposite was the case for the non-BETTER farms, who farmed closely with a parent until middle age and saw

inheritance as simply a change in legal ownership. It is apparent from these findings that there is a need to find ways of operating within cultural norms that provide benefits from strong parent-offspring relationships in farming while also facilitating younger farmers to influence development and innovation on farms. Clearly, joint farming ventures are the most obvious vehicle for this as are also to some extent early retirement schemes and installation aid (financial support to help young farmers establish their farming business).

### 4.2 Cultural and Social Capital

Current farm approaches are significantly influenced by and embedded in the history of the farm. It was clear that current practices are largely based on habit and tradition. The main triggers or motivations for change are lifestyle preferences outside of farming, most prominently educational and leisure pursuits off-farm. Enhanced lifestyle preferences are valued by main farm operators themselves but also by farm spouses and offspring who have increasingly diverse lifestyle expectations and preferences. Lifestyle preferences can represent an incentive for the adoption of new farm development and profit-enhancing technologies to provide for education and lifestyle requirements and to enhance quality of life. An important message for extension programmes is to highlight these potential rewards from farm development through extension activities. Showcasing the 'real life' stories and experiences of other farmers is a useful tool in this regard. A guide to highlighting social and cultural aspects of family farming in the context of group based extension techniques such is outlined in Macken-Walsh and Roche (2012).

The research showed that as farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme experienced improved efficiency and financial performance, forms of cultural and social capital that were conducive to technology adoption and further farm development were strengthened, fostering an enhanced progressive culture on the farm. This is an important outcome of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme from an extension perspective: fostering a culture of higher performance/culture of innovation on the farm through increased adeptness at technology usage.

### 4.3 Pioneering Farmers

The BETTER Farm Beef Programme participants studied had a history of experimenting with new ideas and were identified, thus, as pioneering farmers. They had a strong sense of confidence in testing new technologies on their farms and had great prestige in their abilities in that regard. They were recognised as pioneering farmers by their peers and participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme enhanced their reputation. In the context of broader extension efforts,

the use of pioneering farmers – those who are genuinely recognised as pioneering farmers by their peers – can play an important role in technology transfer. Furthermore, the research found that esteem generated by peer-to-peer relationships work both ways: farmers learn best from fellow farmers, particularly those who are credible; and pioneering farmers are conscious of their social roles and themselves have a sense of prestige and esteem in guiding other farmers. In the case of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme, by virtue of publicity in the national media, the followers of pioneering farmers were beyond the farmers' locality as the farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Beef Programme developed a national profile. The role of the local and BETTER Farm advisers as intermediaries in this regard is also critical since they are largely responsible, with the farmers, for the implementation of the farm management plans, the generation of data outlining the impact of the plans; and explanation of key technologies. The more recent launch of the Phase 2 of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme with a much wider national profile, the establishment of satellite discussion groups around eight of the Phase 2 farms and the launch of BTAP scheme, again with appropriate dissemination of technology gains on participating farms, will engage with a greater breadth of farmers.

#### **4.4 Engendering an appetite for achievement**

The farmers' status as pioneers was underpinned by having won a technology focussed competition early in life, thus affirming their independent abilities, strengthening their confidence, and contributing to their self worth. It is clear from this finding that competitions play a key role in engendering an appetite for achievement among farmers and their ongoing development. There is potential to broaden and diversify the strategic role of competitions into new areas ranging from technology, education, to lifestyle enhancement, for example.

#### **4.5 Knowledge enablers**

Farmers recognised their progressive development paths as part of an overall package and depended on the comprehensive and integrated support package provided to them through the BETTER Farm Beef Programme. Individual elements of the package were not as important to farmers as the integrated whole. Farmers participating in the BETTER Farm Programme valued the non-prescriptive, empowering approach of the advisers they worked with. Clearly, farmers in addition to group and peer-to-peer extension supports such as discussion groups and farm walks continually value one-to-one dedicated extension support. The impact of the BETTER Farm Beef Programme on the national population of beef farmers was not evaluated, but the programme participants participated in and enjoyed participating in outreach extension activities.

#### **4.6 Social Enablers**

There is a need for extension supports to acknowledge the social needs of farmers as without social support structures, farm development, productivity and profitability can be very low down on their list of priorities. Social events and opportunities for interaction can be added to existing discussion group activities to help counteract social isolation. Furthermore, dedicated events to include young farm family members and spouses specifically are encouraged. Targeting the contributions of farm women to farm development remain largely outside of extension efforts and much potential exists from drawing from women's knowledge and skills.



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