

An examination of LYNC as a communication tool to facilitate farmer discussion groups in the Kilkenny/Waterford Region



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Background/Rationale

Since covid-19 restrictions in Ireland were established (mid-March 2020) all farmer discussion groups have had to cancel face-face meetings and have instead moved towards a dependence on electronic communication where practicable. The main form of communication within Teagasc for this purpose is LYNC. Advisors and farmers participated in this study to gain an understanding into how these discussion groups are being run and how effective they were in meeting farmer’s technical, practical and social needs within a discussion group setting. Teagasc operates close to 700 discussion groups across all agricultural sectors with approximately 12,000 farmer members (Teagasc, 2019). Electronic communication allows advisory services to contact famers with ease and speed, this electronic exchange of information would allow researchers, farmers and advisors to have contact with each other and many more on a daily basis if needed. The role of electronic media is very critical for keeping the farming community updated by providing them relevant agricultural information (Khan et al. 2013). Access to ICT does not guarantee success as it needs proper input, planning and attitude from extension agents to see the best results (Birke et al. 2019).

Aims/Objectives

The overall aim of the study is to determine the effectiveness of electronic communication methods in meeting the needs of farmers in Teagasc discussion groups.

The objectives of the study are:

- 1.To identify what farmers are getting from their face-face discussion groups in terms of needs around areas such as technical information as well as socially.
- 2.To rank the effectiveness of discussion groups using LYNC compared with face-face discussion groups in meeting the farmer’s needs according to the farmers involved.
- 3.To establish the relationship between farmers’ openness to adoption and effectiveness of LYNC discussion groups.
- 4.To identify improvements that can be made to improve knowledge transfer through farmer discussion groups through the use of LYNC.

Methodology

A mainly quantitative approach was taken with a small amount of qualitative research carried out. The main methods used in this study are outlined below,

- Interviews with 2 Teagasc farm advisors from Teagasc Kilkenny to establish their views on the relative openness to innovation of their farmer discussion groups.
- Observe several discussion group meetings conducted via electronic communication methods and record the nature and level of interaction/participation of the farmers.
- Post discussion group survey with the farmer participants to establish their feelings towards the discussion group proceedings. Noting any suggestions that might improve the meetings.

Findings

- 76% of farmers had no difficulty connecting to the LYNC discussion group calls
- 56% of farmers had a problem hearing the conversation at times
- 53% of dairy farmers felt the ‘technical information’ received was as good as face-face. Only 14% of beef farmers felt this way.
- In terms of the overall social aspect 80% of dairy farmers felt it was ‘Poor’ when compared with face-face, 72% of the beef farmers also felt the social aspect was ‘Poor’.
- When asked would this form of DG work better at busier times:
 - 46% (13) of the beef farmers indicated YES along with just 27% (8) dairy farmers.

	B1 (strong)	B2 (weak)	Average
Average attendance	53%	61%	57%
Contributions of advisor	15	12	13.5
Contributions of farmers	30	10.7	20
Farmers with 0 contributions	1.5	7	4.25
Contributions/farmer	3.38	0.9	2.14
Farmers leaving early	2	2	2
Length of discussion group (mins)	54	54	54
Farmer contributions/minute	0.6	0.2	0.4

Conclusions & Recommendations

LYNC facilitated discussion groups worked in keeping discussion groups together through tough times such as covid-19 restrictions. It allowed members of discussion groups access to information that was needed at the time to run their farms to the highest order. However, the lack of social and practical elements meant that these discussion groups were not effective when compared with face-face discussion group meetings. This form of discussion group works well as a platform for direct knowledge transfer but discussion groups in Ireland act as more than just a learning platform.

The study recommends that:

- Teagasc advisors audit their own discussion groups to determine their relative strength in order to try strengthen them
- That LYNC could be used to disseminate large amounts of information at short notice (scheme deadline, change of information etc) instead of some events or meetings.
- That observation be used to assess the level and nature of interaction at face-face discussion group meetings into the future

	D1 (strong)	D2 (weak)	Average
Average attendance	81%	73%	77%
Contributions of advisor	23	22	22
Contributions of farmers	53	56	55
Farmers with 0 contributions	0	0	0
Contributions/farmer	4.11	4.83	4.47
Farmers leaving early	0.5	0.33	0.42
Length of discussion group (mins)	67	68	67.5
Farmer contributions/minute	0.8	0.8	0.8