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Evaluation of rural advisory and extension services

Publicly-funded rural advisory and extension services were once an accepted mainstay of rural life – providing education and access to technical support for those engaged in agriculture and rural communities. Over recent decades, with the emergence of the private sector in the advisory domain and the emphasis on government limiting itself to ‘market failure,’ the role of advisory services has increasingly been scrutinised to ensure the appropriate ‘settings’ and outcomes (Hunt et al. 2012).

The changing mix of advisory services has coincided with increasing challenges in rural areas. This has included environmental, globalisation and poverty issues. Issues around environmental, economic and social sustainability in rural areas have demanded proactive responses from government and advisory services and subsequent increased need to demonstrate that these issues are being effectively addressed.

In the New Zealand context, Fielke et al. (2018) also highlighted the on-going need for technological development and uptake by rural producers in this more fragmented but more challenged agricultural sector. They identified the concern there about *limited implementation of novel technologies by rural producers*. They pointed out that innovation was more than ‘adopting new technologies’ but rather (from an agricultural innovation systems perspective) a *co-evolution of technologies, societies, economics and institutions*. These extra complexities and multiple players add to the question about how best to evaluate rural advisory services and hence ensure the settings and desired outcomes are being achieved and improving over time (Christoplos, Sandison, and Chipeta 2011).

In the past, monitoring and evaluation of extension and advisory services focused on impact of programmes on users of technologies or new management approaches. It followed a pre-determined view of what the desired capacity gains, adoption and impacts would be. Today’s thinking focuses on evaluation of the *process* of innovation rather than linear milestones and outcomes (AgriSpin 2017). With an increasing emphasis on co-innovation, facilitation and brokering roles, the emphasis must shift to capture how well the process is working in bringing together the key parties and how this is impacting on problem/opportunity definition, collaboration, innovation, adaptation and change. This was one of the challenges given to participants who submitted papers in the ‘evaluation stream’ of the 23rd European Seminar on Extension (and) Education (ESEE) held in Crete in 2017. In this issue, four of these papers have been selected which describe different approaches to the evaluation of advisory services and draw lessons from their analyses to improve future evaluations. Their different approaches and findings are introduced below.

In their paper, Cristiano and Proietti explore the potential of the existing Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) to assess the technical, economic and environmental effects of cooperative innovation projects at farm level. They note that the paper *is not focused on the development of new indicators, and consequent collection of new data, but it puts attention to the usefulness of those already existing, thus laying the foundations for the adaptation of the current methodology for data collecting*. The methodology applied was based on both desk research and farm visits and utilising available FADN indicators to measure the performances of different innovations. They conclude that while the breadth of indicators collected by

the FADN survey provides a helpful way of tracking the performance of certain types of innovations – including the ability to measure resulting change and side effects – the data *did not allow recognising the contribution of a specific performance over the global one of the surveyed farms*. They argue that this limitation can be overcome by *carrying the survey with a participatory approach and/or by exploiting the deep knowledge of farms that data collectors have*. Further, they see that such an approach can be used to inform and improve the FADN framework and its value.

The use of advisory services by farm managers and their linkages with the economic, environmental and social performance of farms was examined by the authors Herrera, Gerster-Bentaya, Tzouramani and Knierim. In their case, they also drew from the FADN data and framework to access data from across nine European countries and used a cluster analysis approach to determine groups of farms *according to their sustainability performance and explored the correlations between contacts with advisory services and a set of farm-level sustainability indicators*. Their analysis suggested that there were some differences between clusters in terms of sustainability indicators and the linkage with the use of advice and concluded that there was value in evaluating the impact of advisory services using this approach and *hence a better targeting and evaluation of policy instruments aiming to improve the knowledge management*. They noted, however, that *the attribution of effects of advisory services in multiple objectives at the same time is limited to characteristics of advisory service, farming systems and managerial decisions*.

Utilising existing information was also the basis for a systems evaluation by Lioutas, Charatsari, Istenič, La Rocca and De Rosa. They addressed the evaluation of the increasingly complex extension systems confronting countries by testing a ‘systems approach’ through desktop analysis of available reports and documentation of the services. They compared the cases of Greece, Italy and Slovenia, which they say had *essential differences but also characteristic similarities in their agricultural sectors*. Central to their approach was seeing the ‘customers’ of the extension service (i.e. the farmers) as the main element of analysis and focused on two different aspects of value – value in production and value in use. They viewed ‘service’ as the *application of an actor’s knowledge and competencies for the benefit of another actor*. Despite limitations of information from secondary sources, the authors argued that the approach had a major advantage of integrating different aspects of value, permitting a more holistic evaluation with the potential to identify gaps and improvements. They suggest that if their approach was combined with the collection of primary data, this would strengthen the benefits of such an approach.

This theme of utilising available information continues with the Cawley, O’Donoghue, Heanue, Hilliard and Sheehan. They were concerned with directly quantifying the link between the access of information and advisory services by farmers on the economic return to farm profitability for clients of their service in Ireland during a time of hardship in the sector (2008–2014). This was seen as critical to decisions around future rationalisation of services and their locations. They drew on data for participation and farm performance from the existing *Teagasc National Farm Survey* and data on advisory provision from internal administrative records in Teagasc. Their analysis showed that the benefit of participation was positive but that the level of impact was negatively affected by the increased ratio of clients per adviser in their local office over the period. They concluded that there was value in such quantitative analyses in providing meaningful data to policy makers – although they saw benefit in including further qualitative data to better understand and explain the influencing factors. They also saw benefit in being able to compare across different rural services.

These papers demonstrate the extra value that can be gained from existing data sources in analysing rural advisory services – while emphasising the need to build in extra qualitative

approaches to enrich and explain quantitative results. The papers also highlight a need to develop an accepted robust common framework for monitoring and evaluating rural services and informing those who engage in on-going data collection processes about what extra information is required to best support such evaluations – and hence strategic policy.

This issue also includes a paper by Gorman entitled *Becoming an agricultural advisor – the rationale, the plan and the implementation of reflective practice in extension higher education*. Although not part of the cohort of papers from ESEE17, the paper addresses a key element of the rural advisory system if it is to be effective – building the capacity of advisory staff. The author presented a model of reflective practice modules used in professional development of advisors and the experience of the students who undertook them. The paper found that experiential learning and reflective practices best supported the needs and challenges facing extension staff in their careers. It was concluded that higher education in agricultural extension needed revitalisation to include more of the social dimensions.

The overarching message is one of the importance of reflection – of evaluation – of the policies that influence and drive the effectiveness of rural advisory services and hence providing an evidence base for on-going adaptation and improvement.

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