The Options for Farm Families Programme: Rhetoric and Reality of Change

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Abstract

Since the turn of the twentieth century, a rapidly changing rural environment has forced agricultural extension services to undergo readjustments and major restructuring in order to remain relevant and valuable to farming communities. Issues concerning public funding for extension services, along with a dramatic decline in farm income, a significant increase in part-time farming and the emergence of a new multifunctional type agricultural regime has forced the Irish extension service (Teagasc) to make significant modifications to their organisation, programmes and methods of delivery. One programme indicative of this restructuring is “The Options for Farm Families Programme” which adopts a holistic approach whereby extension advisers transfer knowledge and advice to farmers relevant to their future “options.” Drawing from an action evaluation of the Options Programme this paper explores the views and attitudes of programme participants, managers and advisers in relation to its delivery to farm family participants. Although many benefits of the programme are identified, what also becomes apparent are problems of programme awareness and levels of participation; the continued use of outdated paternalistic delivery methods and prescriptive rather than consultative structures under which the programme operates. Furthermore what emerges is the importance of appropriate “bottom-up” programme evaluation methods and the realisation that the willingness of farmers to explore their “options” is very dependent on the way in which knowledge is disseminated to the farm family and the levels of engagement at which the extension advisory service operate.

Keywords: Agricultural Change, Action Evaluation Research, Advisory Programme, Options for Farm Families Programme

Acknowledgement: This paper is based on work funded by the Teagasc Walsh Fellowship, Republic of Ireland. Based on these research findings, Teagasc management have begun the process of implementing a series of changes to deal with programme structure, programme delivery, reduction in workloads, and staff training. The programme will in the future be monitored by AUMs and evaluated on a regular basis to ensure that advisers are delivering the programme as intended.
**Introduction**

Rural restructuring has become an inevitable part of the modernisation of society and one of its most distinctive features in recent years has been the fundamental transformation of agriculture. In developed countries such as the United States, Canada, the UK, France and Ireland, agriculture has taken a 'backseat' to industrial development, construction, services and the communications and technology industry (Woods, 2005). While the Irish rural economy is no longer dominated by agriculture in terms of economic stability or employment, farming and farm families still maintain a crucial role and place in Irish society and in the desire for a living countryside (Department of Agriculture & Food, 1999).

The foremost drivers of change within Irish agriculture are the agricultural reforms of the European Union (EU) and the World Trade Organisation negotiations. The reforms initiated by these organisations in the last three decades have created a shift in agricultural practices from production to post-production and in turn to a multifunctional agriculture regime. In 2006, it was estimated that 54% of farmers held an off-farm job, while 48% of all farms received payments for their participation in a Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) (Connolly et al., 2006). In addition, 16,600 farm families engaged in diversification activities in 1998, the most common of which included farm forestry, sport horse breeding, deer farming, amenity horticulture and production of goat’s milk (O’Connor et al., 2008). Although these statistics are not definitively portraying a regime of multifunctional agriculture they are suggesting that multifunctionality is gradually becoming a significant factor within Irish farming and rural communities. Within the EU and Ireland respectively, there has been intense debate about the future of farming; the role of agriculture within the countryside; the extent to which the sector will maintain support from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU; the future direction of rural development and, in the wake of such crises as BSE and Foot and Mouth, how to ensure food safety (Garforth et al., 2003). Such debate and intensity of change have brought into sharp focus the need for consistent and appropriate advice from agricultural extension advisory services, advice that is orientated towards multifunctional agricultural practices and advice that is able to assist the entire farming community to increase income and improve quality of life. This is particularly important in the Republic of Ireland where, in 2006, approximately 37% of all Irish farms had an income from farming of less than €6,500 (Connolly et al., 2006). In addition, data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) of Ireland show that in 2005 the agri-food sector contributed to just 8.6% of GDP and 8.5% of total employment. When the sector statistics are further broken down to consider the role of agriculture alone, the contribution of the sector to GDP is approximately 2.5% in 2005, leading Hennessy (2008) to argue that Irish agriculture is a sector in decline.

Contextualised by this transition of change, the type, extent and applicability of advice and information that farmers receive is crucial to their future sustainability. Since 1988, this advice has been delivered in Ireland by the Agriculture and Food Development Authority and specifically, through their extension advisory services (Teagasc), a group that plays a vital role in ‘shaping modern agriculture’ and in particular the ‘practices of farm families’ (Bogue, 2005, p. 2). With a client base of over 40,000 farmers, out of a possible 130,000 throughout the Republic of Ireland, Teagasc has been considered a ‘leading light’ in the provision of technical farming advice (Phelan, 1998). More recently, however, it can be argued that there is an increased need for the agenda of extension services to shift from a focus on agricultural production to a broader range of services...
relating to marketing, environmental conservation, poverty reduction, rural development issues and off-farm activities (World Bank & Neuchatel Group, 2002). Teagasc attempted to meet this challenge through the provision of rural enterprise training and advisory services in the 1990s and through a new “Rural Viability” service in 2001 (O’Connor et al., 2008). However in 2005, further reform of their extension programmes and services were required following the introduction of the Mid-Term review of the Common Agricultural Policy and the introduction of the fully decoupled Single Farm Payment. Although this new environment created uncertainty within the farming community, according to Teagasc (2005) it also provided opportunities to develop new on-farm enterprises and to access off-farm employment, provided farm families were in possession of information, skills and attitude to grasp those opportunities. In an attempt to respond to this perceived need, in 2005 Teagasc devised a new programme, “The Options for Farm Families Programme.” This programme was designed as a more innovative approach to providing advice and information to farm families to help them make informed choices and successfully adapt to this rapidly changing agricultural environment. The Options Programme thus aims to promote the concept of a multifunctional agriculture regime and in so doing, to encourage the sourcing of income from both farming and non-farming activities. The programme is free of charge, and is available irrespective of farm size to both Teagasc and non-Teagasc clients.

**Purpose**

This paper illustrates the significance of a bottom-up approach to evaluation of extension programmes in determining the real extent of their success on the ground. It suggests that a programme such as Options, which is not built around more conventional and easily-identifiable measures, such as successful funding applications, must necessarily involve a more in-depth, qualitative approach, with a particular focus on the programme recipients in order to establish the degree to which it has fulfilled its aims and objectives. This paper thus provides an action evaluation of “The Options for Farm Families Programme,” whereby a number of concerns around the format, interpretation and delivery of this programme for the period 2006/2007 are revealed, and a range of challenges for both programme participants (farmers and their families) and programme deliverers (Teagasc management and advisory staff) are highlighted. The aim of this paper is to outline and discuss these difficulties, particularly in the context of management and advisers’ reactions to the evaluation results, the changes that have been recommended and those that have been implemented.

**Conceptual Framework**

A measure of the challenges facing extension advisory services is the rapidity and complexity of change within agriculture over recent decades. Such change has engendered a range of often competing interpretations and perspectives on the status and future direction of agricultural policies and practices. One of the most compelling conceptual debates to emerge in recent years has focused on the transition of agricultural regimes from productivism or intensive agriculture to post-productivism or extensive agriculture (Marsden et al. 1993; Halfacree, 1997; Ilbery & Bowler, 1998; ) and in turn to a multifunctional agriculture regime (Wilson, 2001). The productivist era, or the productivist agricultural regime (PAR), spanning a period from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, placed significant emphasis on intensive, industrially driven and expansionist agriculture, with state support primarily on output and increased productivity (Low et al., 1993). According to Bowler (1992a), the advancement of productivist agriculture was built on three dimensions intensification or the pursuit of
higher productivity rates through the increased utilisation of agri-chemicals and the substantial mechanisation of farms concentration or increased farm sizes and structures and specialisation or the investment, and concentration in one single crop.

By the beginning of the 1980s the PAR had became a victim of its own success as intensive agriculture led to over-production of food in many developed countries. In addition, inadequate environmental regulations within the agricultural community led to increased pressure from environmentalists who felt that the farming community were no longer ‘protectors’ of the land but were playing a significant role in destroying the countryside. By the mid-1980s increased productivity led to fundamental changes within the policy environment and a concerted effort to reduce farm productivity gave rise to what many authors termed the post-productivist agricultural regime (PPAR), (Cloke & Goodwin, 1992; Marsden et al., 1993). Ilbery (1998) defined it as involving a shift in agricultural policy from intensification to extensification, concentration to dispersion and specialisation to diversification. A policy of extensification, which included the removal and restriction of production subsidies, aimed to slow down production rates, thereby reducing the artificial inputs used by farmers and decreasing levels of environmental pollution. Such revised policy measures and the accompanying impact on farm incomes encouraged the agricultural community to seek new sources of income through different types of agricultural and non-agricultural diversification (Ilbery, 1998). On-farm investment and off-farm employment, conceptualised as pluriactivity (Kinsella et al., 2000), became a recognisable part of the PPAR and a possible method of sustaining the family farm.

The literature on agricultural change however identifies a certain reluctance to concede that productivist agricultural practices are a thing of the past and that we have entered an era of post-productivism. In a UK context, Wilson (2001) argues that there is a distinct lack of evidence to prove that all farmers have made a wholesale shift to post-productivism (see also Robinson, 2004). Consequently, the notion of a “multifunctional agricultural regime” has been put forward as an “alternative end-point” that acknowledges that productivist and post-productivist action can occur simultaneously, spatially as well as temporally (Wilson, 2001; Potter & Burney, 2002; Wilson & Rigg, 2003). Multifunctional agriculture has been defined by Burton and Wilson (2005) as a “territorialisation of agricultural regimes. This includes a) intensively farmed regions (mainly in lowland areas) geared towards the production of food and fibre output, b) post-productivist farming regions (mainly in lowland area) aimed at extensification, wildlife and habitat preservation, and c) sustainable countryside management, that also includes non-agricultural activity such as recreation and diversification” (p. 97). In contrast to post-productivism this definition does not abandon the production practices of the farming community; instead it allows such practices to co-exist with non-production practices, spatially as well as temporally. The practice of multifunctional agriculture acknowledges the significance and reality of the multiple roles assigned to agriculture, and in so doing acknowledges the role of the farming community in the implementation of such practices. Such a changing agricultural landscape provides the challenging context in which the extension advisory services must now operate.

The Options for Farm Families Programme

A major challenge is contained in the main objective of the Options Programme, that is, “to stimulate and support farm families in building the capacity of the farm household to increase income and improve
quality of life” whereas Cristóvao et al. (1998) suggest that predefined or vague programme objectives can create difficulties for advisory personnel and can be confusing for programme participants, the specific objectives of the Options Programme are more clearly defined and thus more measurable in terms of achieved outputs. These include the need to assist the farm family in examining their current situation, to identify their future needs, to examine all possible options both on-farm and off-farm, to draw up an Action Plan for the future, to identify critical advisory training and referral needs and implement a plan of action (Teagasc, 2005). A key intended feature of the programme is to achieve a high level of engagement between farm families and their adviser on a one-to-one basis, resulting in the development of a plan that identifies specific actions for that farm family in the immediate and longer-term.

In opting for a participative, discussion-based approach involving the adviser and family members, the Options Programme targets issues of central concern and explores potential options both on-farm and off-farm for the farm family. The male dominance of rural societies is well-documented and according to Ní Laoire (2002) is associated with the gendered nature of agriculture and traditional household structures (Whatmore, 1991; Brandth, 2002; Liepins, 2000). However, acknowledgement of the importance of other family members in the decision-making process is regarded as one of the core elements to the successful delivery of the Options Programme. These “Significant Others” or “Trusted People” (Errington, 1986; Ferreira 1997) are seen as valuable opinion sources within the farming family unit and important players in making decisions about future options.

In delivering the Options Programme the process is designed to be carried out by a local adviser through a very definite process of stage development. This involves an initial viability appraisal which allows the farm family to identify their main household concerns and to explore possible future options both on-farm and off-farm, which are then documented in a “Way Forward Action Plan.” The plan outlines specific aims and objectives that may generate additional income and improve the quality of life of the farm family. In addition to assistance from the adviser, the farm family can also be put in contact with other relevant agencies that could help realise the successful outcome of the Action Plan. In the final stage of the programme, the farm family implements the specific actions documented in their Action Plan and within twelve months the Teagasc adviser carries out a follow-up visit to ascertain the success or failure of the Plan.

**Challenging a Paternalistic Model of Programme Delivery**

In delivering advisory programmes, a number of key competencies are required of extension advisers. These range from interpersonal and communications skills to knowledge, planning and evaluation (Straw et al., 1996). In the context of a rapidly-changing multifunctional environment for agriculture, the ability of advisers to quickly adapt, to absorb new knowledge, to adjust their advice and its method of delivery, not only in line with their own changing situation, but in relation to the changing situation of farmers, is of crucial importance. In addition to new skills, advisers require a considerable ‘shift of mind-set’ and a much wider range of knowledge than required by earlier generations of agricultural advisers (Garforth et al., 2003). As “agents of change” (Carey, 2004) advisory services have a dual responsibility of not only effectively advising farm households but also showing the ability to change internally. This implies fluidity and reflexivity in terms of goals and objectives that are not just reactive to the changing policy environment but which also change proactively and attempt to influence the directions in which
policies might be headed. However, the evidence would suggest that rather than taking a reflexive approach to changing policy and operational circumstances, advisers tend to remain attached to traditional modes and procedures of advice delivery, many still rooted in a productivist agricultural policy era.

Van den Ban (1999) refers to the problems of introducing change in advisory attitudes and procedures, particularly in the face of long-standing beliefs and practices. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s the acceptable model of extension theory was the transfer of technology in a two-way communication mode in which farming systems research was pioneered by economists and agronomists, and farmers were often viewed as sources of information and technology (Haug, 1999). This model of extension according to Cristóvao et al. (1998), involved transmitting a technical agricultural message from “sender” to “receivers,” i.e. from those in authority, government planners, advisers or researchers to a farmer who was often uneducated and ill-informed. This has given rise over time to a strong paternalistic approach to advice-delivery, an attitude that the advisory services “know best,” and a hesitancy and reluctance to embrace the current participatory model of extension that is being supported and encouraged (Murray, 2000). On one level this student-teacher-like relationship has instilled an expectation amongst the farming community that advisory services will provide the answers to their changing situations (NAFES, 2005). On another level, the intensity of change and the need to assimilate new information at a rapid pace have placed many advisers in the invidious position of possibly being unsure of their knowledge base, yet carrying the weight of expectation from farmers to deliver solutions for them.

Van den Ban and Hawkins (1988) contend that extension advisory services are judged by their capability of transferring knowledge from researcher to farmer, advising farmers in their decision making, educating them on how to make better decisions, enabling them to clarify their own goals and possibilities, and stimulating desirable agricultural development. Similarly, Swanson and Samy (2002) suggest that one of the foremost tasks of a public extension system is human resource development that can equip medium and small-scale farmers to solve their own problems and respond to new opportunities. However as farms and rural enterprises become increasingly diverse the farming community requires knowledge and information that increasingly exceeds the traditional routine of promoting specific farming practices or technologies. Consequently a “one size fits all” approach (Garforth, 2003) has become less pertinent and is no longer a suitable method of disseminating valuable knowledge and information to farm families. All of this suggests that the “paternalistic” model of communication is not one that can meet the rapidly-evolving needs of the farming community. However, Cristóvao et al. (1998) indicate that extension advisory methods tend to retain a traditional model of communication. The situation is further compounded, when advisers remain “prescriptive” in their methods of delivery rather than encouraging the farm family to seek out a solution to their problem.

Consequently, if extension services are to remain valuable to the wider rural community they need to embrace a more participatory approach that involves information sharing and the acknowledgement that farm families have relevant opinions that need to be considered through a joint decision making process (National Agricultural and Forestry Extension Service, 2005). In terms of outcomes for the farmer, the successful delivery and implementation of an advisory programme cannot be the sole responsibility of extension advisers; they also have a responsibility to engage in dialogue and seek out suitable information and advice. In the
context of this research it becomes apparent, both of these issues are at work, namely, the farming community being predisposed towards expecting the answers to all of their problems and future needs, having “come to expect a definite recommendation from their adviser” (Van den Ban, 1999), and the delivery of a more participatory and inclusive type of programme is not that readily embraced by advisers.

Methods
This research was conducted in two phases. The initial phase was carried out as part of the National Farm Survey (NFS) which is designed to collect and analyse information on 1,016 selected farms (representing 115,000 farms throughout the Republic of Ireland). The NFS is a member of FADN, the Farm Accountancy Data Network of Europe; it surveys approximately 1200 farms nationally that are weighted to represent the total population of over 10,000 farms. The reason for using the NFS is that it gives a national picture of the current farming situation in Ireland, and the awareness of farmers. Because the Options Programme is available to all, this generated data in relation to awareness of the programme among the farming community (both Teagasc clients and non-clients), reasons for participation and non participation, changes made on-farm and off-farm due to the farm families’ involvement in the programme, and changes made irrespective of programme participation. The second phase involved deliberately targeting Teagasc clients, by surveying three key groups directly involved in developing, delivering and participating in the Options Programme. These included a) 18 Teagasc Area Unit Managers (AUMs), responsible for the range and quality of services and programme within a particular region in the Republic of Ireland (100% response rate); b) 240 Teagasc extension advisers, the primary programme deliverers (In 2005, all advisers except Teagasc REPS advisers were charged with delivering the Options Programme), who play a crucial role in disseminating knowledge and information to over 40,000 farmers (40% response rate); c) the programme participants. The principle survey technique used with AUMs and advisers was a detailed postal questionnaire. Programme participants consisted of all farm families that were listed as having participated in the Options Programme from September 2005 to January 2007 (total of 5,038). To obtain a subgroup of this population a multistage sampling method was applied. A sample of eight counties within the country was first obtained, using the regionalisation arrangement negotiated by the Irish Government in the context of the Agenda 2000 Agreement. From within these, a random selection of 160 farm families was made, using the Teagasc Client Information Management System which provided the names and numbers of those farm families that were listed as having completed the Options Programme. All 160 farm families were interviewed on a personal basis either at their place of residence or through a phone interview if this was more suitable. Due to the nature of results emerging from the participants’ survey, the client list was revisited and rechecked on a number of occasions to ensure its validity. In addition, a number of participants were re-interviewed to verify initial results.

Findings
Extension services aim to bring about positive change on farms, in agriculture and in rural areas (Fulton, 2003). Consequently, the success of extension organisations is monitored and judged by the changes that are initiated at farm level. However, it is contended that extension programmes delivered by advisers have limited impact if they do not result in some ‘doing’ by the participants, as it is only then that true ‘knowing’ takes place (Clements, 1999). The Options Programme is driven by what the extension services have perceived as the needs of the farming community, as
opposed to being led by farmer demand, consequently, farmers are not incentivised to actively seek out the programme. The implication is that for demand-led extension services to be successful, they must be customised to the expressed demands of the clients or recipients of the service (Garforth, 2004). However, the reality of change within agriculture, and the predicted impacts at the national level have forced Teagasc management to implement a programme that they perceive as representing the current needs of the farming community, even though farm families are not seeking such a programme. Confirmation of this situation has come from a number of advisers, who stated that there was no demand for the programme. Reinforcing the contention that perceived need for extension services has to come from the ground up, one AUM expressed the opinion that “Uptake and demand from farmers is the missing ingredient rather than any deficiency in the Options Programme” (AUM, p. 14).

However, under pressure at national and management level to react to a changing international agricultural scene, extension advisers are nevertheless expected to “sell” the programme to farm families. This becomes an even more challenging task when the demand-led component of the programme is clearly missing, and when farmers only become incentivised through an expectation of a definite tangible output (e.g. scheme application, grant or subsidy application or technical targets) from advisory contact (Bogue, 2004). Convincing farm families of the merits of the programme is clearly a challenge for the advisory service as it is a “process driven programme” and the farming community have an “expectation for a concrete recommendation” (Van den Ban, 1999).

**Testing for Programme Awareness**

The Options for Farm Families Programme has been identified by Teagasc as “the umbrella for all other advisory programmes” (Boyle, 2005, p. 19), signifying the flagship nature of the programme to the advisory services. However, the importance of the programme to Teagasc as the key to meeting the needs of all farm families is not reflected in the level of recognition afforded it by the farming community. Of those participating in the NSF survey, 67% of respondents had never heard of the programme. Of greater concern was the fact that only 25% of farm families, identified by Teagasc as having participated in the programme, stated that they had any knowledge or awareness of the programme. Over 65% of respondents stated that they received advice from their local adviser while considering either on-farm or off-farm changes, however only 5% of these farm families received this advice while participating in the Options Programme.

One farmer remarked: “I never heard of the Options Programme, although I may have gotten involved if I did” (F. 17), while another farm family stated that they “were involved in two programmes delivered by Teagasc and neither was the Options Programme” (F. 65). Another farmer commented: “I was in touch with Teagasc last year regarding an inheritance issue, and the adviser mentioned it then, but nothing further than that” (F. 43). This raises a number of serious issues around the level of recognition of the programme, which was clearly not as well-publicised amongst their target group as Teagasc may have believed.

According to Fulton, et al., (2003) the availability of new advisory programmes needs to be continuously highlighted. Teagasc clearly failed to raise such awareness of the Options Programme and as a consequence, removed the possibility of encouraging reflection and decision-making by the farm family about their own future. This is contrary to one of the guiding principles of all extension programmes as discussed by Cristóvao (1998); the fact that local actors should be empowered to plan and implement their own improvements. Due to the fundamental changes in agriculture it is no longer possible for
advisers to provide farm families with simple recommendations, rather, extension agents should attempt to assist the family in deciding which farm system they prefer and how much risk they are willing to take (Van den Ban, 1999). In this regard, raising awareness of the programme would also serve as a longer-term benefit for advisers themselves, shifting the established tendency for farmers to wait for them to provide solutions, and encourage them to become more active participants in the decision-making process. Because the benefits of participation in the Options Programme are not immediately evident to the farming community, it is essential that farm families are led to the programme through the adviser or through a well-devised marketing process. The eventual success of the programme depends to a large extent on high levels of participation among farm families, however if they are unaware of the programme, continued uptake will be insignificant. According to Bogue (2004), a multifunctional type of advisory programme will fail to attract farm families to participate on their own initiative, therefore it needs to be ‘sold to them’ by the adviser.

**Participation or Not?**

Extension organisations currently face dual challenges of supporting market competitiveness for commercial agriculture operating in a global market whilst also addressing rural development issues (World Bank & Neuchatel Group, 2002). Teagasc has attempted to meet this challenge by devising the Options Programme, which adopts a holistic approach to farm adaptation and change, however, any measure of success is predicated upon a high level of programme acceptance and participation. The research findings do not reflect a high level of participation. Results from the National Farm Survey indicate that only 3.1% of farm families throughout the Republic of Ireland took part in the programme. Whilst these figures are highly significant, of more concern were the findings from the Options Programme participants’ survey. Of the total of 160 farm families surveyed, only 5% believed that they participated in the programme. Another group, comprising 25% confirmed that they had heard of the programme, but were adamant that they had not participated in it. One farmer stated: “I heard of the programme but I’m sure I never participated in it” (F. 97). Another respondent, a farmer’s wife, was confident that she was “on-top of all the information and advice they receive from Teagasc;” she was also certain that the family had never participated in the Options Programme (F. 17). This implies that 95% of respondents did not participate in the Options Programme, even though they were recorded by Teagasc as having taken part in it. These stark results raise questions of accountability within the organisation and among extension professionals and lead to the conclusion that advisers themselves experienced difficulties in “buying in” to the programme, and this materialised into a particular type of interpretation, and subsequent implementation, of a range of intervention measures which reverted back to what farmers expected (i.e. tangible outcomes in the form of scheme applications, etc.), and what advisers felt comfortable in delivering. They did not, however, resemble the format of the Options Programme, and most importantly, they failed then to embrace the core ethos of the programme, which was to generate a breadth of decision-making via a participatory approach. With regard to participant failure to buy in to the programme, this is impossible if they are not aware of the programme to begin with.

**Farmer’s and Advisers’ Perceptions**

Along with obvious problems of adviser buy-in to the programme, another major weakness that emerged from the research was the fact that it failed to create a strong identity for the programme with farmers themselves. The reasons for poor
programme identity may be attributed to several factors: a possible perception on the part of farmers that the programme was specifically for farm families in financial difficulty; that it was for those who wished to consider making changes on-farm or off-farm; that the programme was of such little consequence to the farm family that when questioned about participation, they had forgotten that they participated in it. However, this latter potential explanation overlooks the fact that the basic requirement of the Options Programme was to draw up of an Action Plan between the adviser and the farm family. When implemented fully, in the format laid down in the programme guidelines, this constitutes an intensive and time-consuming task, providing the farm family with a definite plan of action for a five year period. It is to be assumed that it would be difficult to forget that such an exercise had been undertaken, or the subsequent document emerging from it being easily misplaced. According to 95% of programme participants an Action Plan had never been received by them. When advisers were questioned on this, the issue of workload was advanced as an explanation. One adviser stated, “I find it almost impossible to produce quality plans with over 200 clients that are demanding several different programmes” (A. 13). According to another adviser: “getting plans completed is only possible if advisers are given more time and fewer targets.” Irrespective of the reasons for poor programme identity and awareness, the overriding concern emanating from this research remains that the majority of individuals documented as having been involved in the programme had no recollection of having participated in it. This finding becomes even more significant when coupled with the information that 52% of NSF participants stated that they actively sought advice from a Teagasc adviser when they were considering either on-farm or off-farm changes, and nearly 80% stated that they received excellent advice and help from their Teagasc advisor. This raises the inevitable question as to why these farm families were not introduced to the Options Programme as a method of delivering the advice they were seeking from their adviser. Implementing a new advisory programme requires the ‘buy-in’ and endorsement of all actors involved in programme delivery. However, only 5.9% of advisers and 6% of AUMs were of the opinion that the Options Programme was an excellent programme, while 41% of advisers stated that it was a good programme, in that the programme can achieve its stated objectives of increasing household income and improving quality of life. According to one adviser “the Options Programme has not received unmitigated acceptance as there is more urgent and specific work to be done” (A. 27). Therefore, while Tucker (2000) suggests that in some cases the farming community may be “self-satisfied and complacent,” leading to a “top-down” approach being used by the adviser (p. 6), this approach fails to focus specifically on the client’s needs, preferences and abilities, in effect, reverting back to the paternalistic model of advice-giving. The outcome in this case was a below average take-up of the Options Programme and a failure to accept the ethos and concepts of the programme, which are based on a more inclusive, participatory model seeking to address the current needs of the farming community.

Davis (2006) provides some further answers, in that he argues that extension services can no longer operate from an educational paradigm that is based upon the simple provision of information to clientele. Today’s information-based society demands that value is added to information if extension is to survive (ibid). The delivery of the Options Programme has clearly posed a challenge for extension advisers, in that it implies moving away from a ‘preferred style’ of programme delivery, extending their range and adapting to new methods of information dissemination. Because the
A conceptual approach behind the Options Programme is a new departure for Teagasc, and unlike any programme previously administered by the organisation, the method and approach of delivery require a change in mind-set. To embrace such a change means programme deliverers need to ‘buy-in’ to the programme and accept the ethos embedded in the programme. Only then can advisers be fully prepared and committed to engaging in new and diverse methods of programme delivery. Consequently, whilst one of the principal aims of this evaluation was to identify whether farm families had initiated or considered any changes as a result of participating in the programme, the almost complete lack of awareness of the programme that was evident among both non-participant (NFS) and participant farm families suggests a lack of this buy-in by deliverers, resulting in an outcome that has clearly fallen well short of the aspirational content of the programme aims and objectives.

Advisers’ Assessment of Programme Success or Failure

The objectives of the Options Programme were to assist farm families to realistically assess their current situation, to improve household income and improve quality of life. Van Den Ban and Hawkins (1988) argue that the “choice of objectives for an extension programme will be influenced by the opportunities its management can see for achieving the desired situation” (p. 209). The majority of AUMs (76%) were of the opinion that the Options Programme could achieve its objectives. According to one AUM, the objectives could be achieved by “working through a guided process that helps the farm family set out possible and realistic goals for themselves.” Similarly, 69% of advisers believed that the Options Programme could help farm families take a realistic look at their current situation, and nearly half of advisers (49%) were of the opinion that participation in the programme would improve the farm family’s household income. However, although the majority of AUMS and advisers were relatively content that the objectives of the Options Programme could be realised, the programme still did not achieve the “desired situation.” This was felt by advisers themselves to be related to a number of factors including issues of workload and targets. Although this may be the case, an examination of programme delivery discovered that 71% of advisers neglected to follow the stated guidelines in delivering the programme. According to one adviser “when I come across a situation suitable to the programme I would implement it in my own way.” Although advisers need to follow their own instinct in delivering extension programmes, it is also essential, for the ultimate success of the programme, that they follow the basic guidelines.

Issue of Staff Workload and Setting Targets

Kutilek et al. (2002) contend that concerns about an extensive workload and unclear priorities leave extension professionals experiencing a lack of job satisfaction and an additional feeling of being unappreciated, which in turn prevents extension professionals from delivering a successful programme. Successful extension programmes depend on adequate planning which should take into consideration the existing workload of all potential programme deliverers. According to Bogue (2005) existing workload should never be the factor that hampers the introduction of a new advisory programme. However, because the Options Programme is a priority programme within the organisation, prior to its introduction, staff workloads should have been examined and a timescale allotted to its delivery. In Bogue’s opinion “the excuse” of workload needs to be removed, either it is a real problem and is dealt with by the organisation or it is determined not to be a real problem” (2005, p. 20).
In terms of it being a “real” problem, according to 40% of AUMs, and a larger proportion of advisers (59%), the biggest constraint facing the Options Programme in its attempt to reach the “desired situation” was staff workload/priority of workload. One adviser summed up the situation, with a suggestion that the problem lay in a degree of inadequate planning by management: “Advisers’ workload is the biggest problem with the programme and management will have to deal with this situation before the programme can move any further” (A. 56). This implies that initiation of the programme, from the top down, had not taken sufficient account of reservations that advisers may have had about its implementation on the ground. If advisers on the “front line” of dealing with farm families were in fact being asked to take on another responsibility without sufficient account being taken of existing workload, then implementation problems for a new programme could have reasonably been foreseen. This indicates a failure at management level to fully anticipate and take account of workload, and perhaps other, “buy-in” issues. It also signifies the importance of an open, participatory approach being adopted at all levels of the implementation process, which should include advisers. Otherwise, the result is an implementation process which becomes subverted in certain ways, whereby advisers, who are arguably also stakeholders in the programme, operate in ways that enable them to best manage their situation, and prioritise and protect their own interests. In trying to deal with the increased workload situation, many advisers “tagged” the Options Programme on to other programmes that they were delivering to the farm family. One adviser described this strategy as follows: “Due to time constraints I have completed the Options Programmes in 2006 based on the work I have been carrying out for farmers on Farm Waste Management Programmes, etc.” (A. 14). In a similar vein, a second adviser stated that: “The option programme is very good but I have no time to deliver it and because of this I completed my quota last year based around the Farm Waste Management Programme” (A. 82). In delivering the Options Programme in this manner, it could be argued that the programme has established no definite identity among the farming community. A number of advisers were of the opinion that many farm families failed to realise that they were taking part in a specific programme. In the words of one adviser “many farm families have completed this programme and I don’t think they are sure of what they completed” (A. 23). In light of these findings, although workload emerges as a significant obstacle in the delivery of the Options Programme, it is also one that should have been considered in the planning stages of the programme.

**Issue of Targets**

The implementation of the Options Programme did clearly create discontent among staff in relation to workload, however, the research findings revealed that it was not the programme *per se* that created the difficulties, but the targets that advisers were expected to achieve. In retrospect, it may be possible to conclude that the organisation was overly ambitious in agreeing a target of 20,000 Action Plans to be completed within a set timeframe. According to one AUM “the programme is very good, however the target number of plans required does not allow for in-depth planning and follow-up due to the very large and ever expanding workload of advisers” (AUM. 11). In the words of another adviser “targets prevent this programme from being as good as it should be” (A. 88). It appears that an over-ambitious target has ultimately led to the delivery of a poor quality Options Programme that advisers themselves are not satisfied with, and farm families have no knowledge of having completed. Bogue (2005) suggested that the setting of targets can be both a positive and negative strategy. It can be positive in that it “focuses on the
task at hand and allows for proper planning’ however it can be negative in that ‘some viewed it as a further imposition on their already heavy workload’ (p. 6).

Confidence Levels of Advisers

Until recently, and in line with the prevailing agricultural regime, advisory agents were required to deliver programmes that mainly consisted of high levels of technical advice and information that led to increased on-farm production levels. However, the changing nature of agriculture in recent decades has forced advisory services to provide a broader service for the farming community. The level of confidence and assurance with which advisers deliver a programme will impact greatly on the eventual success/outcome of the programme. Albrecht et al. (1989) maintain that all extension approaches can be classified as either production technology approaches or problem solving approaches. Production technology approaches are strongly geared towards increasing production targets among larger commercial farmers, and pay little attention to client-related problems. Problem-solving approaches place a strong emphasis on the farm family attempting to define the problem, with help and guidance from the adviser. Although this approach uses technical information and deals with viability issues, the socioeconomic considerations of the client are the programme’s central concern. The Options Programme required a problem-solving approach involving a strong consultative method of programme delivery, and very little, if any prescription advice.

This evaluation established that although advisers in general were relatively comfortable with all aspects of delivering the programme, those who described themselves as extremely comfortable were in the minority, and a significant proportion were uncomfortable with some aspects of delivery. For example, 28% of advisers reported that they were uneasy when dealing with family and household issues, while 29% were distinctly uncomfortable exploring new off-farm options. One particular advisor believed that he “did not have enough information on off-farm options,” and felt that he was “not qualified to give constructive advice” (A. 46). Another adviser stated that he had “no experience or training in many of the options available to the farmer” therefore he found it “difficult to explore these options” (A. 79). The central cause for concern here is the fact that many advisers felt that they have to provide the “solution” for farm families instead of “giving information” to them. The evidence suggests that many advisers still see themselves as responsible for providing “all the answers” indicating a clear need for them to alter this mindset, and instead allow farm families to take responsibility for finding their own solutions to their own problems.

As stated, the Options Programme presented a significant departure from the delivery format previously employed by Teagasc. This implied the need for training and information to ensure that all relevant staff, including advisers, were comfortable with the programme and that it would be successfully delivered. Training was thus provided for advisers and coordinators on the programme’s guidelines and operating details. Additional support was provided by an Options specialist, and a variety of other information resources were made available through the internal Teagasc staff website. This method of training and advice was ongoing throughout the delivery of the programme, however, in the course of this evaluation, a distinct level of dissatisfaction was detected among advisers in relation to the provision of training. According to one adviser “we have had no in-service training for a long time, making it impossible to keep up to date on all the possible options available to the farming community” (A. 93). Another adviser stated that “there is not enough information on options available and constant in-service training is needed to
ensure a certain level of comfort in dealing with ‘options’ issues” (A. 22). According to Carney (1998) to remain valuable to the wider rural community, extension organisations should pay particular attention to the provision of training and up-skilling of staff in areas such as social mobilisation and participatory rural appraisal. Birmingham (1999) argues that such extensive in-service training and pre-service education is imperative to assist extension advisers develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to meet an increasing set of diverse demands, while March and Pannell (2000) recognise the greater levels of skills and competencies required to deliver an increasingly diverse range of advisory programme ranging from technology transfer to facilitating capacity building. While this question of whether advisory staff have received sufficient training to implement the Options Programme is undoubtedly one that deserves attention, it is also important to be cognisant of the referral system built in to the programme, whereby advisers direct farm families to more specific professionals (be they forestry specialists or small business start-ups). On enquiring about the usefulness of this system, it was discovered that it was not successfully operated by management or advisers with links to additional rural agencies reportedly not properly put in place and advisers unsure if referrals would occur: “I never use this system as I don’t know who I am referring to outside of Teagasc” (A. 58). Another adviser commented that there needed to be a “link directly with a liaison person so direct contact is possible and follow up is possible as there is no real professional interaction to deal with issues to the end” (A. 82). What these comments indicate is that while a system may be desirable in principle, its delivery will be compromised if there is a lack of confidence by the programme deliverers in the process.

Conclusions

Two main issues emerge from this research. The first is the concept of planning. While Cristóvão et al. (1998) emphasise the importance of adequate planning as crucial, what this research has shown is a complete lack of awareness of this essential component. This is ably demonstrated in the emergent issues of staff workloads, stakeholder buy-in, an integration of top-down and bottom-up programme design. The second issue that emerges is the importance of appropriate “bottom-up” approach to evaluation. This is particularly illustrated in the case of this research, through the low level of awareness and poor levels of participation in the Options Programme.

Participation in extension advisory programmes must ultimately change people’s attitudes or behaviours, if these programmes are to have any meaningful impacts (Diem, 2003). In the case of those farm families surveyed, this evaluation was unable to provide any evidence of change as a direct result of their involvement in the programme, because so few were able to identify with having participated in it. What the evaluation did discover was an extensive lack of awareness among farm families of the Options Programme. Equally disquieting was the fact that only 5% of farm families that were recorded by Teagasc as having participated in the programme believed that they had actually done so. Such findings not only raise issues of accountability on the part of advisers, but have led to a severe curtailment of the evaluation process, in terms of not enabling any real examination of the programme’s success or otherwise for farm families, and in confining it effectively to the level of Teagasc managers and programme deliverers. Although devising and implementing the Options Programme illustrated a considerable degree of progressive thinking within Teagasc, to successfully implement such a vision requires the commitment of all programme...
providers. The evidence from this research clearly indicates that if programme implementation is prescriptive and not consultative, commitment at the collective level will not occur (Fulton et al., 2003).

As suggested by Bogue (2004), the success of a family-focused advisory programme is as much based on the process of the programme as the content. It is within the process that farm families are afforded the opportunity to appraise their own situation in addition to obtaining technical advice. However if the process and content of the programme are not adhered to, then farm families may not have an opportunity for discussion or for the inclusion of all family members. This evaluation discovered that programme participants were unaware of their involvement in the Options Programme, which ultimately implies that they were not afforded the opportunity to experience this process and the benefits it might have brought to them.

The role of advisers in delivering the programme also drew attention to a range of weaknesses inherent in the programme. These ranged from a continuing paternalistic attitude towards providing advice to farmers, reservations about their ability to provide the range of advice needed, the apparent failure of the referral service, and concerns about additional workload. These findings also indicate a breakdown in understanding and communication between management and advisory staff within Teagasc, and a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, leading to the widespread practice by advisers of simply “tagging” the Options Programme on to other, more prescriptive programmes. This “interpretation” of programme delivery also reflects an enduring adherence to traditional service delivery methods, which in itself would suggest a number of failures within the training strategies being directed towards advisory staff.

**Recommendations and Implications**

The multifunctional ethos underlying the Options Programme fills an identified need within the agricultural community, but few farm families will seek out the possibilities if extension professionals fail to ‘sell’ the programme. Successfully delivering a multifunctional programme requires forward thinking, and the full commitment of all concerned in its implementation. If, as Maguire (2000) argues, an ability to practice change needs to be faster and more decisive if organisations such as Teagasc are to survive as an influential force in agriculture and rural development, then the ultimate success of the Options Programme depends on Teagasc’s willingness and ability to address the problems identified as part of this evaluation. Among the more crucial of these is the need to improve the level of recognition and awareness of the programme amongst farm families. It is imperative that the practice of attaching the Options Programme to other programmes and services be discontinued, and that it be delivered according to the guidelines that were originally set out. This includes a retrenchment from the more traditional approaches used in programme delivery which requires (what is for some advisory staff) a significant change in approach. For some, this will necessitate a shifting from a paternalistic method of service delivery, to one that can embrace a more participatory model, and creation of a situation that empowers the farmer and other family members to become decision-makers in their own right. Reported difficulties with the system of referrals should also be investigated with a view to strengthening this support structure and clarifying for advisers the nature of interaction and level of support that they can expect.

Further, this shift in delivery mechanisms extends to managers. Extension managers have a responsibility to ensure that all programmes are delivered to the highest possible standards, and that advisory staff, at the front-line of programme delivery, are
supported and facilitated in this task. This means ensuring that operational issues relating to workloads, training, and questions relating to referral services, must be actively monitored on an ongoing basis. The findings from this research suggest that once the Options Programme had been devised and launched, management effectively withdrew from direct involvement in any aspect of its delivery. This led to the development and subsequent justification of a range of ‘managing’ or ‘coping’ strategies by advisers, which only served to weaken the programme. Management must therefore take a proactive role in monitoring the progress of the programme. The apparent reluctance on the part of advisers to raise concerns about workloads and perceived training deficiencies also indicates the need for management to explore in more detail the causes for a clear and in many ways inexusable breakdown in communication between these levels of the organisation.

The findings of this research very clearly indicate the importance of evaluation as an inherent part of successful programme implementation. If implemented from the outset, effective evaluation measures enable problems to be discovered in the early stages of programme delivery. Cristóvão et al. (1998) strongly argue that lack of adequate planning and continuous evaluation is a major reason for the frequent failure of development projects and extension activities. Monitoring and evaluating of advisory programmes is vital in that it helps to build professional and organisational credibility, and both determine and support the degree to which participants achieve intended results (Diem, 2003). It is clear that appropriate “bottom-up” evaluation methods and monitoring are hugely significant for successful programme implementation. What is also clear from this research is the essential nature of adequate planning. Failure to put adequate time and resources into planning extension programme will ultimately result in poor programme delivery and unattained programme objectives. This research also highlights the need to “embrace error” Korton (1980) and the fact that evaluation is a process of individual and collective learning (Chaudhary & Tandon, 1984), which allows us to learn from our successes, but especially from our failures.

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References


