Development of a Family-Focused Advisory Programme in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

Advisory services in Ireland have evolved towards a technical focus, away from the farm family and household. However, even though there is less overall involvement of families in the running of farms, decision-making is influenced by more than the farm operator. Teagasc introduced the ‘Opportunities for Farm Families Programme’ in 2001, which recognised that the challenges facing farmers required a ‘whole family’ response. The fundamental objective of the programme is to help farm families generate additional household income and improve quality of life.

The aim of the research outlined in this paper was to determine the views and attitudes of advisers and farm families to the programme. The majority of advisers and participants considered that the programme helped farm families to take a realistic look at their current situation and was useful in terms of identifying ideas to improve their income and quality of life. Families who participated together derived greater benefit than individuals. The key lesson learned from this research was the importance of early evaluation of new advisory approaches. Educational institutions and extension agents need to highlight the importance of an objective assessment of both the deliverers’ (advisers) and target groups’ (participants) views on extension programmes. For assessments during programme delivery to be successful, they must be focused on the development of the programme and not the monitoring of extension agents. The information gathered from assessments should be used to guide the further development of programmes and appropriate training for advisers.

Keywords: Farm families, extension research, advisers, evaluation, education

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**Introduction**

Agricultural extension systems throughout the world play a key role in the development of agriculture; however, they are not without weaknesses. One of the main tasks of a public extension system should be human resource development that can equip medium and small-scale farmers to solve their own problems and respond to new opportunities (Swanson & Samy, 2002). However, the top-down approach to extension has often centered on the extension agent believing that they know what is best and failed to focus sufficiently on the client’s needs, preferences and abilities (Tucker, 2000). This has lead to extension becoming prescriptive. This concept is supported by Van den Ban (1999) who states that farmers may expect a concrete recommendation because they have learned that this is the role of their extension agent. The expectation of a prescriptive solution is a serious problem facing extension agents and farm families as people adjust to change more rapidly when they themselves initiate, identify and solve problems that directly affect their welfare (Cohen & Uphoff, 1980, as cited in Düvel, 1995).

Most developing country extension systems pursue some combination of human resource development and technology transfer programmes (Nagel, 1997). However, many extension systems concentrate their efforts on technology transfer. Swanson and Samy (2002) highlighted that public extension has not been effective in responding to the basic education and technology needs of small-scale farmers. Many farmers have little contact with the advisory service and become increasingly marginalized. In developing countries, the extension service aims to reach the wider farm family (men and women) however, as agriculture develops, the advisory contact focuses on the main operator (predominantly the man). Even though there is now less overall involvement of families in the running of farms in Ireland, decision-making is still influenced in many cases by more than the farm operator. Therefore, there is a need for advisory services to reconnect with other family members.

One of the difficulties for extension is the need to become involved in regulatory responsibilities (Tucker, 2000). In Ireland, the extension service (Teagasc) has not become involved in regulatory activities but has become involved in supporting farm families in the completion of application forms in order to obtain payments under the Common Agricultural Policy (Phelan, 1998). The financial and staffing pressures on Teagasc, combined with the farmer demand for technical information and support in obtaining direct payments, have meant severe difficulties for the extension service to provide an effective viability service to an increasing number of farmers whose income is at risk (Phelan, 1998).

The shortcomings of many extension systems led to a reassessment of their focus. While it is easier to reach the larger-scale, more progressive and better-educated farmers, extension services are making greater efforts to serve those in need of agricultural information, who are often overlooked (Birmingham, 1999). There is also a growing realization that advice is not only needed on the adoption of new technology but also on many other decisions farmers have to make such as the choice of their farming system and the decision whether or not to earn an income from outside agriculture (Van den Ban, 1999). These changes in extension are not easy for the extension agencies. Agricultural development demands painful changes in the way of farming and of living for many farm families. It is a challenge for extension agencies to help farm families realize this (Van den Ban, 1999). However, the chances for success are enhanced by the ‘expert’ having ability to listen and give responsibility to the people who are to benefit (Ludwig, 2002). Extension agents also have to accept that it may no longer be possible to give a definite recommendation but the extension agent should rather help the farmer to decide for himself the best option (Van den Ban, 1999). Hoffman (1994, as cited in Van den Ban, 1999) identified that an extension organization should use its limited resources mainly to help farm families with the most important decisions they have to make. These important decisions focus more on the fundamental questions of: whether to remain in farming? To continue with an enterprise? To seek an off-farm source of income? To assess the future for the farm household? To assess if the farm operations are contributing positively or negatively to quality of life? Rather than, what is the best variety? How much fertilizer should be used? Or, how to increase yield?

The Opportunities for Farm Families Programme (commonly known as the
Opportunities Programme) is a new approach to the provision of advisory services to farm families in Ireland. It was introduced by Teagasc (Agriculture and Food Advisory, Research and Training Body) in 2001 with the aim of refocusing the delivery of advice to farm families and attempting to better meet their needs. The purpose of this paper is to outline how Teagasc has refocused its services to farm families through the Opportunities Programme and to present the findings of an assessment of the attitudes of extension agents and farm families to this new service.

Opportunities for Farm Families Programme

The mission statement of the Opportunities for Farm Families Programme is: “… to proactively encourage, stimulate and support farm families in building the capacity of the farm household to achieve and sustain viability” (Teagasc, 2003). The fundamental objective of the programme is to help farm families generate additional household income and to improve their quality of life. A further objective of the programme is to change the method of delivery of advice to farm families by providing training to help advisers. This training helps advisers facilitate group meetings and explore on-farm and off-farm options in a systematic way. Particular emphasis was placed on connecting with those who had limited contact with the advisory service.

The technical and direct payment focus of the advisory service in Ireland resulted in the social and family issues being somewhat sidelined and the ‘bigger picture’ of the overall direction of the farm and household unit being lost. The introduction of the Opportunities Programme was an attempt to redress this imbalance. The programme also aimed to get farm families thinking about new ideas for improving their farm income – to explore new opportunities both on and off the farm. Alex, Zijp, and Byerlee (2002) identified rural information services as key to unleashing the potential of rural people and enabling them to change their living situations. The need for new ideas and information was also highlighted by Alex, Zijp, and Byerlee stated “… rural people need other options … than they did 10 or 20 years ago … many seek access to information, education and skills to prepare them for new employment.”

The holistic approach adopted in the Opportunities Programme involved the farm family and looked at the wider family and household issues which was necessary because the objectives of farm families are shaped by their resources, past activities and future perceptions (Phelan, 1994). Furthermore, personal, family and business objectives are not independent and need to be considered together and that the priority objectives for farm families reflect a combination of lifestyle and economic goals (Perkin & Rehman, 1994). This factor was recognized by Teagasc and an emphasis placed on getting other family members in addition to the main operator to participate in the programme. The emphasis within the programme is the identification of priority issues and the exploration of future options through a process of interactive discussion rather than the provision of prescriptive solutions.

Programme Outline

The programme involves three stages and is free to farm families with less than 100 income units (180,000 litres of milk quota, 100 beef cattle, 600 sheep, 100 hectares cereals or equivalent). Stage 1 involves viability appraisal in which the farm family identifies their main household viability concerns and explores possible future options (on-farm and off-farm). This stage is delivered by way of three facilitated group discussion meetings. Families are guided through worksheets which explore on-farm and off-farm options in a systematic way. Particular emphasis was placed on connecting with those who had limited contact with the advisory service.

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Purpose

The specific research study outlined in this paper is part of a larger research project which focuses on the development and assessment of impact of the Opportunities for Farm Families Programme. The project is one of
action research involving the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the extension programme. The aim of this specific research study was to determine the extent to which the programme was achieving its stated objectives. It determines the views and attitudes of advisers and participants to the Opportunities Programme. The research findings primarily informed Teagasc management on the further development and enhancement of the advisory programme. The findings also provide an insight for the advisers delivering the programme on the views and attitudes of both their colleagues and participants to the programme. The specific objectives of the advisers’ research were to:

1. Determine the views of advisers on the achievement of the objectives of the programme
2. Determine the views and attitudes of the advisers towards the programme in general.
3. Determine the views of advisers on the programme content and delivery.

The specific objectives of the participants’ research were to:

1. Determine their reasons for participating in the programme (and expectations).
2. Determine the views of participants on the achievement of the objectives of the programme.
3. Determine the views of participants on the programme content and delivery.
4. Determine the views of participants on the Way Forward Action Plan (Stage 2).
5. Determine the views of participants on the benefit of the programme.

Methodology

The Opportunities for Farm Families Programme Action Research Project involves research in 6 areas in Ireland (Teagasc services are managed locally through 28 areas). The areas selected for participation in this research programme were counties Mayo, Limerick, Kerry, Offaly, Meath and Wexford. These counties were selected as being representative of the country in terms of farm size, enterprise mix, soil type and geographic spread. For the purposes of the specific research study documented in this paper, advisers in these 6 counties who were involved in programme delivery were interviewed. In addition, county coordinators in all other areas were invited for interview. A total of 61 interviews were completed (approximately 150 advisers were involved in the delivery of the programme nationally). The interview questionnaire for the advisers focused on their: views of the aims and objectives of the programme, opinions on the programme content and delivery (including changes/improvements), and opinions on the programme worksheets (including changes/improvements).

A sample of programme participants were interviewed in three counties: Mayo; Meath and Offaly (which were selected as being representative of the country overall). The information was collected by two University Postgraduate students. Participants in the programme in these counties were identified from the Teagasc Client Management System. It was intended to select the sample at random; however, experience from the action research project had shown that families who had completed the programme more than six months previously had little recollection of the specific aspects under review. It was therefore decided to randomly select within those families who had participated in the programme within the previous 6 months. It was intended that 50% of the sample would have completed Stage 2, and the remainder would have only completed Stage 1. However, the reality in collecting the data was that there were much fewer farmers who had both stages completed and this is reflected in the sample which includes 119 farm families who had completed Stage 1 and 56 who had completed Stages 1 & 2 (the sample represents approximately 10% of the farm families who participated in the programme in 2003). The interview questionnaire for the participants focused on their: reasons for participating, views of the achievement of the aims and objectives of the programme, opinions on the programme content and delivery (including changes/improvements), opinions on the programme worksheets (including changes/improvements), opinions on the development and content of the action plans, and household details.

Both questionnaires contained open and closed questions and appropriate scales. The questionnaires were developed by the author in conjunction with a research steering committee (university personnel, Teagasc management (local and national), Teagasc specialist advisers and Teagasc socio-economic researchers). Data from both samples were analysed using SPSS.
Results

The key research findings are provided separately for the advisers’ and participants’ surveys.

Advisers Survey

The findings represent the views of advisers who were actively involved in the delivery of the programme.

Achievement of the Programme Objectives

Some 88.5% of advisers believed that the Opportunities Programme helped farm families take a realistic look at their current situation. The main reasons cited were that the process (discussion sessions) focuses their thinking on their own situation (21%) and encourages families to discuss wider household and family issues. Almost three-quarters (74%) of advisers believed that the programme could help farm families generate additional household income, mainly through improved efficiency (31%). Almost three-quarters (73%) of advisers believed that the Opportunities Programme could help farm families to improve their quality of life, mainly through better work organisation (54%).

Programme Views and Attitudes

Four out of five (81%) advisers believed that the Opportunities Programme has something to offer their clients. Therefore, the programme was not ‘more of the same’ but involved a change in approach to the provision of advice. The most important aspect of the programme identified by advisers was that it provided an opportunity for participants to appraise their own situation and options (47%). The lack of time for dealing with farm families was cited by one fifth of advisers as the main weakness of the programme. Some 16% of advisers identified a lack of options for farm families and 14% considered recruitment into the programme as weaknesses.

Opportunities Programme Content and Delivery

The vast majority (95%) of advisers believed that the Stage 1 sessions provided for good interaction and discussion among participants. The level of interaction depended on the facilitator and the composition of the group according to 39% of advisers. More than one family member participating in the programme was considered important by 92% of advisers. Some 72% of advisers believed that the Stage 1 sessions generated enthusiasm among participants. One-fifth (21%) of advisers believed that the level of enthusiasm of participants depended on the input of the facilitator. Almost two-thirds (64%) of advisers believed that Stage 1 instilled a belief among participants that they could improve their income/quality of life. One fifth (19%) of advisers stated that the level of belief of participants in what they could do to improve their income/quality of life depended on the attitude of participants coming into the programme, while 12% stated that it depended on the facilitator. Over three-quarters (77%) of advisers believed that Stage 1 was a necessary component of the programme because it allowed for an exchange of views and opinions among farm families. However, 19% of advisers felt that a one-to-one advisory consultation would be better. The vast majority (84%) of advisers believed that the local co-ordinator and one adviser should deliver the Stage 1 sessions (as specified in the programme guidelines).

The main problems with the discussion sessions identified by the advisers were: generating discussion, a reluctance to discuss financial matters in public, and getting the programme worksheets completed. The main improvements suggested included: getting more of the family involved, keeping a clear focus, using ice-breakers/discussion openers, ensuring that the group are interactive, and presenting real farm examples. Some 95% of advisers considered the programme worksheets (exploring concerns, finances and options) to be important to the overall programme. Advisers estimated that 60% of participants completed or attempted to complete the worksheets. The main problems with the worksheets identified by advisers included: getting them completed, accuracy of the information, and too intrusive/sensitive. The main concern about Stage 1 identified by advisers was recruitment (25%). However, one in five (21%) advisers had no concerns about the delivery or content. Other concerns included: limited options available for families, advisers are not trained as facilitators, too many sessions, and content needs to be strengthened (mainly in terms of technical aspects). The main change suggested by advisers to Stage 1 was to reduce the number of sessions.
Participants Survey

Two-thirds of participants surveyed were farm owners; 29.5% were joint owners with their spouses. The majority (71%) were married and two-thirds (67%) had children. Some 58% were employed full-time on the farm, while over half (54%) of their spouses were either in off-farm employment (mainly part-time) or involved in an alternative enterprise. Overall, 63% of households had another source of earned income (operator and/or spouse).

Reasons for Participation in the Programme

The main reasons why farm families participated in the Opportunities Programme were because they were asked (53%) and loyalty to their adviser (43%) (Table 1).

Couples who attended the programme together were significantly more likely to have done so out of loyalty to their adviser than individuals (60% versus 36%) (cross tabs procedure; Pearson chi-square = 7.085, df = 1 and significance = 0.008). Those who were fully dependent on their farm income were also significantly more likely to attend out of loyalty than those with an off-farm source of income (58% versus 34%) (Pearson chi-square = 10.282, df = 1 and significance = 0.001). Two out of every five (39%) farm families had no expectations about the programme prior to their participation, while 21% expected to improve their income. The majority (55%) of the Stage 1 sessions were held at night, which reflects the preference among farm families for night-time meetings (70%). The majority (71%) of respondents attended the Stage 1 sessions on their own, while one third of married couples attended together. The main reason why more than one family member did not attend was due to a lack of time.

Table 1

Reasons for Attending the Opportunities Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asked</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty to Adviser</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about the Future</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage exceeds 100% because of multiple responses.

Views of Participants on the Achievement of the Programme Objectives

Over seven out of ten (71%) farm families believed that the programme could help them to take a realistic look at their current situation; a further one quarter (26%) believed it could possibly do so. Couples who participated in the programme were significantly more likely to state that it helped them take a realistic look at their own situation than those who attended the sessions on their own (88% versus 68%) (Pearson chi-square = 6.635, df = 2 and significance = 0.036). The programme was considered useful or possibly useful in terms of new ideas for generating more income by 86% of farm families. Half of respondents believed that the programme was useful in terms of giving them ideas to improve their quality of life. Over two-thirds (68%) of couples who participated considered that the programme gave them ideas to improve quality of life compared to only 44% of individuals (statistically significant, Pearson chi-square = 7.893, df = 2 and significance = 0.019).

Programme Content and Delivery

Overall the views of respondents on the programme content were positive: 42% considered the facilitators good and 41% considered the content interesting (Table 2).

Table 2

Main Comments Made by Participants on the Content and Delivery of the Opportunities Programme Stage 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Comments</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators/Advisers Good</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content was Interesting</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Topics Were Not Relevant</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got Ideas from Other Participants</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well Delivered</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthwhile to Focus on Income and Expenditure</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage exceeds 100% because of multiple responses.

The main comment with regard to the relevance of the information presented in the sessions related to the difficulty of meeting the needs of a diverse group – some material was not relevant to all. The information presented was considered to be clear and understandable.
by 99% of respondents. Some 98% of participants felt that they had adequate opportunity to participate/contribute to the discussion in the programme. Some 84% of participants stated that they completed or attempted to complete the programme worksheets. Significantly more couples than individuals attempted to complete the worksheets (98% versus 80%) (Pearson chi-square = 6.887, df = 1 and significance = 0.009). Some 80% found the worksheets to be worthwhile/useful. The Stage 1 discussion sessions were considered to be either important or very important by 92% of participants. Couples who attended were significantly more likely to consider the discussion sessions to be very important (23%) than individuals (8%) (Pearson chi-square = 6.13, df = 2 and significance = 0.043). Three-quarters of participants considered the number of sessions in Stage 1 to be about right with only one participant stating that 3 sessions was too much. Over one-third (35%) of couples who attended indicated that there were not enough sessions compared to 11% of individuals (statistically significant, Pearson chi-square = 4.343, df = 1 and significance = 0.037).

**Way Forward Action Plan**

Over half (54%) of respondents were the only family member involved in the development of the ‘Way Forward Action Plan’, while 38% were jointly involved with their spouse. Some 96% of participants with income concerns considered that their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ addressed those concerns. Similarly 93% of respondents stated that their quality of life concerns were addressed in their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ However, only 44.4% of those farm families with other (non-income/quality of life) concerns stated that their ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ addressed those other concerns. Two-thirds of the participants had their plans completed within two months of Stage 1. Almost all (97%) of participants were happy with the level of contact with their adviser during the development of their plan. Some 45% stated that they would implement or start to implement the actions in their plan within the next 12 months, while a further 50% said they would possibly do so. The ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ was considered to be important to their future by 84% of participants.

**Benefit of the Programme**

Over three-quarters (76.1%) of respondents considered the programme to be either some or a significant benefit to them and 84% would recommend the programme to a neighbour/friend. The most important benefit of the programme identified by participants was that it provided ideas to improve income (14%) and helped to improve financial management (13%).

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The objectives set out for the programme were the improvement of income and/or quality of life, therefore it can be concluded from the research findings that both the advisers and participants believed that the programme was successful in terms of meeting these objectives. The process involved (discussion sessions) has encouraged farm families to discuss and explore their options and wider household and family issues (identified as important by Van den Ban, 1999). However, to date the achievements for farm families are mainly aspirational as they are recent participants into the programme and the tangible outcomes have not yet been realised. Therefore, these families will need support in order to achieve their income and quality of life objectives. However, the sessions were successful in creating enthusiasm and belief among participants that they could make positive changes. Therefore, the programme was successful in developing the human resource to solve their own problems (as highlighted by Swanson & Samy, 2002).

The programme has something new to offer farm families and is not ‘more of the same’ in terms of the approach to and delivery of advice. This is evident in the fact that the majority of advisers believed that the programme had something to offer their clients in addition to their existing advisory contact. The programme aimed to broaden the traditional farm operator/adviser contact to engage with more family members and was relatively successful in attracting the participation of other family members, particularly spouses (Bogue, 2004). It is evident that families who attended the programme together derived more benefit from it and were more positive about the programme than individuals. This endorses the family focus of the programme and the success in involving families in the programme,
however, it also highlights the need for further effort to be employed in order to encourage more families to participate.

The success of the programme is as much based on the process as the content – farm families appreciate the fact that they have an opportunity to appraise their own situation in addition to receiving technical information. However, the management of the programme requires the striking of a balance between the process and the provision of technical information. There was concern among some advisers that discussion sessions may not be the best delivery approach – not suitable for quiet/shy individuals, however, the sessions led to good discussion/interaction among participants. Despite the skepticism among some advisers, it is evident that the majority believed that the discussion format was a critical component of the programme, however, some advisers believed that the number of sessions in Stage 1 should be reduced.

While the ‘Way Forward Action Plan’ in general addressed income and quality of life concerns (primary aims of programme), there was less success in dealing with ‘other’ concerns of farm families. This is not to be interpreted as a failure of the advisers but highlights the need for more emphasis to be placed on training advisers to deal with wider family and household issues. These are areas that the advisory service had moved away from over time in an effort to meet the technical and direct payment related needs of farmers (Phelan, 1998).

Despite the obvious success of the programme in terms of the views of advisers and participants on the achievement of programme objectives, the programme is not attracting farmers on their own initiative to participate. The programme still has to be sold to them (large proportion who attend because they are asked and loyalty to their adviser). It is a challenge for an advisory service to sell a process driven programme as farmers have an expectation for a concrete recommendation (Van den Ban, 1999). The outcome from the Opportunities Programme is often long-term or at least may not be obvious initially and requires commitment from both the advisers and the farm family. However, many authors have identified that the outcome is more beneficial and effective when the adviser listens and the family get involved and joint decisions are made (Ludwig, 2002; Van den Ban, 1999; Cohen & Hoffman, 1980, as cited in Düvel, 1995).

Recommendations for Change in the Programme

Recommendations for change to the programme were made as a result of the research. These recommendations were presented to Teagasc management. The key recommendations included:

- Farm families collectively and the individual members need to be asked to participate – personal contact.
- The programme benefits are not obvious and need to be marketed to the farm families.
- Stage 1 should continue to have three discussion sessions.
- The programme worksheets need to be clarified, explained and simplified.
- The on-going support and advisory needs of farm families should be closely monitored.
- The primary method of delivery should remain as facilitated group sessions with an emphasis on discussion/interaction.
- Specific training should be provided to advisers on the facilitation of quiet/shy participants.
- Programme delivery should be evaluated locally on an on-going basis to inform advisers of necessary changes/modifications. There is a need to ask farm families their views (not make assumptions).
- Advisers need to focus on and emphasise the importance of the process of completing the worksheets as well as the accuracy of the information collected.
- Advisers need to bear in mind that the process of discussion is equally important to the provision of technical information.
- Wider household and family issues need to be debated and the programme should not become dominated by technical farm issues.

Changes Made in the Programme

Teagasc reviewed the Opportunities for Farm Families Programme in late 2003 and a number of key changes were made. It was re-launched in January 2004 as the ‘Planning Post Fischler Programme’ The main focus within the new programme was on adjusting to changes post-CAP reform (mid term review of the Agenda 2000 Agreement) (Teagasc, 2004). The key changes included:
• Reduction in the number of mandatory Stage 1 sessions to 2,
• Inclusion of the CAP reform measures in the discussion sessions,
• Programme available to all farm families and free to those with less than 150 income units,
• Programme worksheets simplified,
• Reduction in the number of mandatory worksheets,
• All advisers to be involved in the delivery of the programme,
• Programme of in-service training for all staff.

The new programme incorporated a number of the recommendations from the research; however, it differs in terms of the number of sessions, the focus on CAP reform and the programme worksheets. While the research findings were clear on these areas, decision making in Teagasc is influenced by many other factors, in particular the attitude of advisers to the programme and the workload on advisers. Many advisers were unconvinced about the programme or the need to have three sessions in Stage 1. It was believed that it would be easier to recruit farm families into the programme if there were fewer sessions. There was also a perception that farmers would be more interested if some of the ‘softer’ aspects (family and household issues) were removed and replaced with harder ‘technical’ farm aspects. In addition, farmers were demanding a service from Teagasc to assist them in deciding on their options post-CAP reform. The Opportunities Programme was the most obvious programme to meet this need as it was focused on planning for the future and has now been modified.

Educational Importance and Implications
This research specifically informed the development of the Opportunities for Farm Families Programme by identifying weaknesses and areas for improvement. The key lesson learned from this programme is the need for early evaluation of new advisory approaches in order to make prompt modifications, which are necessary to improve the effectiveness and impact of the programme. Therefore, educational institutions and extension agencies need to highlight the importance of an objective assessment of both the delivers (advisers) and target (participants) views on extension programmes. The importance of this process was highlighted by Tucker (2000) who stated that: “…regular monitoring of progress, with periodic evaluations of the benefits being obtained are a sequence of essential functions … to keep the program well on track.” It is important that the target group (farm families), are involved in the development or enhancement of advisory programmes (or at least are consulted about them). In practice, there tends to be more focus placed on the views of deliverers (advisers) than participants. In this case farm families were very positive about the programme even though this was not obvious to the advisers who were finding it a challenge to recruit participants into the programme and to generate discussion within the sessions.

The focus of the programme was farm families, an attempt to change the traditional farm operator-adviser contact. Advisers by nature of the evolution of advice and the changes in farm families (less family members involved in the farm and a greater level of off-farm employment) had less contact with other family members and in many cases would have no knowledge of them. However, the challenge of family involvement was underestimated by Teagasc and its success very much determined by the advisers’ own initiative. No specific training was provided on family involvement. It must not be assumed because there is a linkage with advice within a household, that other family members will be aware of a programme and sufficiently interested in the programme to participate.

Educational institutions and extension agencies need to recognise that for assessments during programme delivery to be successful, they must be focused on the development of the programme and not the monitoring of extension agents. This was particularly important in this programme because it was a change in approach, in terms of both the content and method of delivery of advice. While it is necessary to evaluate new approaches, it is critically important that it is not interpreted by those advisers who are actively involved in the delivery as a monitoring or measuring of their performance. It is also important that advisers become familiar with the concept of ongoing evaluation of advisory programmes (developmental not monitoring). The full value of such assessments will only be realized if the
educational institutions and extension agencies respond with appropriate targeted training for advisers and take consideration of research findings in making modifications to the programme. To be worthwhile, research must be utilised in the development of programmes. Evaluations must have a purpose to inform programmes or else they are not worthwhile. However, researchers must also accept that there are practical and political realities and many other factors, which influence programmes and the decisions made about them.

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