

Extended Abstract

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Paper/Poster Title	Business Development Group members and group facilitators opinions – comparison on farmer discussion groups performance
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Abstract prepared for presentation at the 98th Annual Conference of The Agricultural Economics Society will be held at The University of Edinburgh, UK, 18th - 20th March 2024.

Abstract	<i>200 words max</i>
<p>Agricultural extension programmes encourage knowledge transfer, technology adoption and build resilience at farm level. Peer-to-peer learning is a central feature in the design of such programmes and participatory extension programmes of this nature have increased in popularity over recent years. This study examined how effective a peer-to-peer programme in Northern Ireland namely, Business Development Groups (BDG's) has been from the perspective of both group members and group facilitators. Results indicated that the social aspect was most important to members, followed by farm visits and the delivery of talks from outside experts on relevant topics. This aligns with other literature demonstrating the social aspect to be crucial in facilitating learning and engagement. From a facilitator point of view, this study found that allowing for more flexibility in programme delivery was important. Adopting varying delivery mechanisms in future programmes to help facilitators keep group members' participation active and engaged was also deemed to be important.</p>	
Keywords	Farmer discussion groups
JEL Code	Agriculture (Q1) see: www.aeaweb.org/jel/guide/jel.php?class=Q
Introduction	<i>100 – 250 words</i>
<p>In agriculture, extension programmes are designed to improve farm level productivity by encouraging knowledge transfer, technology adoption and increase resilience. Farmer discussion groups are a peer-to-peer method used in agricultural extension to promote learning and collaboration (Dooley, 2020). Peer-to-peer learning has been proven to be an effective method in encouraging farmer learning through utilizing a range of methods, such as, farm visits, demonstration farms and workshops, among others (Prager et al., 2014). In this type of extension, the instructor acts as a group discussion facilitator to encourage farmers to be actively involved in the learning and problem-solving process (Davis et al., 2012).</p> <p>In Northern Ireland, the 'Business Development Group' (BDG) is a comparable participatory extension scheme that focused on knowledge transfer and was an important element of the 2016-2022 Rural Development Programme (RDP). The groups were led by a facilitator who determined the topics and activities for each group. Each BDG comprised approximately twenty farmers grouped by sector, i.e., dairy, beef, sheep, poultry or pigs, and meetings took place eight times a year. This</p>	

study aims to evaluate how the BDG group worked from two perspectives; that of the BDG members themselves and that of the facilitators who led the groups.

Methodology	100 – 250 words
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Two surveys were conducted between April and July 2022 for facilitators, and between January and March 2023 for BDG members. Both questionnaires aimed to capture how the BDG scheme has worked and to highlight where there may be scope for improvement. The BDG member survey focused on areas such as what technologies and farm practices have been adopted since joining the BDG, farm profitability and animal health changes, as well as how logistics such as travelling to meetings, meetings’ timing and group size has worked for them. The survey also focused on farmer, farm household and farm structure characteristics. 2,401 BDG members were contacted via email or text and 804 persons completed the survey, a response rate of 33 percent.

The facilitators’ survey asked respondents about their experience, educational background, and impressions of what worked well or needed future improvement during their time of facilitating BDGs. In total, 46 facilitators were contacted and 34 completed the survey, a response rate of 74 percent. This study compared what aspects worked well, what could be improved in future programmes, opinions on how the financial incentive has worked, and how COVID 19 impacted the programme from their perspective. Furthermore, the study examined how they thought group membership benefited respondent’s farm businesses, as well as facilitators’ opinions on managing the groups and the main challenges they encountered.

Results	100 – 250 words
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Visiting members’ farms was the aspect of BDG’s that facilitators identified as working best by far, followed by having a talk with an expert on a particular topic. Getting farmers to attend meetings regularly, keeping them motivated and encouraging them to use benchmarking in farm business decision making were the more challenging aspects of facilitating a group. Regarding future programmes, facilitators requested having more flexibility to allow them to use their own ideas such as initiating joint group meetings and having outside group visits.

When asked about future programmes improvement, BDG members ranked retaining the social aspect of meeting with other group members as most important, followed by wanting to see a reintroduction of member’s payment. In contrast, facilitators thought reintroduction of payments to be of little importance. BDG members identified improving farm profitability to be most beneficial BDG aspect to their farm businesses. Improving animal and plant health was ranked second and making environmental improvements third. In addition, the majority of members were happy



with the facilitator's capacity to tailor advise for their needs, understand their farm and technical requirements as well as their plans and ambitions for the farm.

Socializing, meeting new and like-minded people was the programme aspect BDG members enjoyed most, while learning new things ranked second and farm visits third. The social aspect and to learn from other farmers were indicated by facilitators to be driving factors for members to initially join a BDG and remain in a BDG. COVID-19 impacted all programme aspects, namely, participation and discussion, attendance, members' enthusiasm, facilitation, and delivery.

Discussion and Conclusion	100 – 250 words
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In this study, we examined opinions of both BDG members and group facilitators on what has worked and what needed future improvement in their groups. We find the social aspect to be most important for the majority of participants. This is in line with other studies that show that peer-to-peer learning is one of the more effective methods utilised in extension groups. Facilitators saw financial incentives mostly as a helpful motivator when first joining the programme at its first iteration while members requested for it to be reintroduced in the future. However, financial incentives have been shown to be inefficient as they lead to other motivations for joining a group rather than for learning purposes (Läpple & Hennessy, 2015). Results suggest allowing for more flexibility in programme delivery helps facilitators most in planning and conducting meetings. Finally, we recommend adopting varying delivery mechanisms in future programmes as facilitators found keeping members engaged to be one of the biggest challenges in conducting group meetings.