

Implementation of farmer groups for animal health and welfare planning considering different contexts *Mette Vaarst & Stephen Roderick*

Introduction

This paper reflects some of the discussions that took place during the ANIPLAN workshop where participants discussed the special farming and farmer characteristics, needs and conditions in their own country in relation to farmer discussion groups, as well as more generic issues to consider when taking a farmer group approach to animal health and welfare planning.

Farmer discussion groups are not unique, and there are examples of different approaches to, and aims of, farmer groups worldwide. Perhaps an important starting point when analysing the successes and characteristics of these groups is to consider their original purpose. The starting point of the discussion in the ANIPLAN project has been the so-called Danish Stable Schools (Vaarst et al., 2007; Vaarst et al. 2008; mentioned in Vaarst *ibid.*), as well as existing approaches within the other participating countries, such as the Dutch Caring Dairy groups (Smolders, *ibid.*). A major feature of the Danish Stable Schools has been the time limited intensive working towards a common goal based around equal participation within the group. This is quite a different approach to other examples, such as the so-called 'erfa-groups' in Denmark ('erfa' as an abbreviation of 'erfaring', which in Danish means 'experience') that have worked for decades on dissemination of new knowledge and ideas to and among farmers, focusing on separate themes at each meeting, such as approaches to parasite control, winter feeding strategies, or the use of body condition scores. Similar focused dissemination programmes exist in many countries. What characterises the ANIPLAN project is that the focus is on a rather more systematic animal health and welfare planning process which is meant to be continuous at the farm level.

So, the goal of the farmer group is of crucial importance, but there also many other factors that will influence the operation, approach and success of farmer groups, including the approach to communication at meetings and the whole structure of setting up the farmer groups. These, in turn, may be influenced by various geographical, practical, cultural, technical and traditional issues in a given region or country. The acknowledgement of the need to adjust the approach of farmer groups to the life and farming conditions of the participants points to the necessity of making a context analysis when starting a farmer groups, and to ensure flexibility during the process based on feed back from the farmers in the group.

The background of the farmer

The educational background of farmers may be a relevant consideration. In many so-called developing countries farmer groups provide a means of educating farmers, some of whom may not received a basic school education. In northern Europe farmers tend to have received an education and have access to a considerable amount of educational material. Younger farmers tend to be generally more educated and there is some suggestion that education level amongst organic farmers is higher than in the conventional sector. In some countries a formal education is required in order to own a farm (e.g. Denmark), although elsewhere there tends to be a large number of family farms acquired through inheritance (Norway and UK). Although it is not clear what relevance this has with regard to willingness to participate in groups, it may be surmised that the latter may be run more 'traditionally' and with less openness to changes, which means that the learning process is aiming at making things work within a given framework rather than more fundamental changes such as the farm structure, herd composition or the basic management.

Who is in charge of and who take decisions about the herd?

The issue of 'family farms' raises other issues with regard to participation. Family farms often involve people from more than one generation and therefore present potential different interests in changing farm structures or management routines. The Austrian project team emphasised the importance of involving the whole family, especially the husband and the wife. In other countries quite dramatic changes over the last couple of decades has resulted in increasingly larger farms with more people involved (eg Germany, UK and Denmark). There was agreement in the discussion on the relevance and practical solution with regard to who is involved in the formation of farmer groups. For the purposes of learning on the farm, the person responsible for the herd should be able to participate at an equal level in a group, and for the mutual trust and stability to be maintained, the same people should participate in all the meetings. One other issue raised was regarding the participation of farms with many employed people where knowledge exchange within the

work environment may be considered sufficient, whereas farmers who work alone may be more receptive to professional discussions with fellow farmers, and maybe even welcome this as a social activity.

Different traditions with regard to open communication

There are different traditions and perceptions within the various farming communities and regions with regard to the openness in which farmers communicate with each other. The structure of the Danish Stable Schools, where one success case and two problem areas chosen by the host farmer are systematically included in the discussion, allows 'the exposed farmer' to direct the discussion so that it is not simply an attack on potential weaknesses. The workshop discussions suggested that there are likely to be regional variations in the degree of openness amongst farmers. Whereas in Denmark and Netherland experiences with very open-minded farmers did exist, there were more doubts from participants from some of the other countries whether farmers would be happy to expose their farm records and results to colleagues. In the UK for example, the quality and availability of farm records varies considerably, and thus a discussion group that partly relies on the use of farm records may alienate some from participation. There is also the issue of confidentiality and privacy to consider in situations where the common sharing of farm data is not commonplace. Culturally, communication between neighbouring farms is common at the personal level but not at the commercial or developmental level, although this situation is changing with increasing participation in discussion groups and benchmarking activities.

There is also a potential issue in situations where organic certification issues may be contravened.

In Denmark, research has shown that many farmers who really need improvement may be less open to actually expose their farm to colleagues because it is too painful, and because they may not have the sufficient overview to set the agenda themselves. Thus, farmer groups probably will be more relevant to farmers who are ready and willing to work towards a common goal within the framework of their individual farm goals, rather than farmers who need solutions to a crisis.

The influence of income and subsidies

In some countries, organic farmers have high subsidies and a good income as organic dairy producers, and in some regions, e.g. mountainous regions in Switzerland, there might be subsidies involved as a mean to keep farmers in business in rural areas. This was pointed out as a reason why farmers who are relatively financially more secure tend to be more open and interested in animal health and welfare improvements, whereas less affluent farmers in regions with less subsidies and under harder economical pressure may be seeking advice concerned with increased production and greater economic efficiency. Also, wealthier farmers may be in a situation where they can afford to spend time in farmer groups.

The role of the facilitator

In traditional farmer training situations groups may be formed so as to receive tuition from a professional advisor regarded as 'an expert in the field'. In the common participatory learning scenario, where the main focus is on exchange and mutual advice between farmers, the role of the professional advisor will be more of a facilitator rather than trainer or teacher. There are differences in the method of payment of advisors in different countries and in certain situations some farmers may be unwilling to pay an expensive advisor who facilitates rather than advises, as there is no perceived and tangible benefit obtained from the expert knowledge. There is no formal advisory service in the UK. Advisors are normally employed privately by farmers, either as general consultants or through marketing activities, such as nutrition advisors. Veterinarians increasingly act as herd health advisors, but this is not a general approach.

Experiences show that if the facilitator takes the role of being an expert, farmers will often be less open to give their own experience and knowledge as freely because they consider 'expert' to be the person with the right answers. Some participants expressed concern that farmers would not accept an advisor in this non-traditional role of facilitator rather than advisor. Others expressed concern that the farmers might say or suggest things which were simply wrong or could be harmful. The experience of participatory approaches in farmer groups in North Western Europe has shown farmers to be very knowledgeable and even through one farmer might express something that was not in accordance with the facilitators perception of what was the 'right thing to do', there would often be another farmer giving another view which often results in a more a balanced discussion. There are different perceptions across countries as to what 'a professional educated advisor' is supposed to contribute but a general consensus is that it requires a special effort by a facilitator to make a farmer group work with maximum participation and openness.

Length of time for meeting and transport

Farmer meetings need to fit into a farmer's busy schedule if good participation is to be achieved. Differences in opinion on the most appropriate time span of meetings were expressed. In particular, it was felt that in Switzerland farmers wanted to spend time talking and discussing when meeting, which may be related to the distances farmers need to travel to meetings and the dispersed of farms. This is particularly true when bio-dynamic farmers meet together as they often have to travel a long distance to meet other bio-dynamic farmers. Farmers in mountainous generally travel longer distances, and in some areas there is also long distances between organic dairy farms. In some areas of the UK, there are often clusters of organic farms which present a good opportunity for farmers in close proximity to work together. In the Netherlands, there is a preference for lunch time meetings to avoid morning and afternoon traffic congestion, whereas in Denmark farmers prefer meetings of 2½-3 hours that finish before lunch time. which exist, the communication between organic farmers perhaps tends to be more commercial or developmental rather than the more traditional personal communication, largely because organic farms tend to be dispersed.

How to compose a farmer group?

Ownership has been identified as critical to the development and implementation of animal health and welfare planning and therefore it is critical that if this is to be achieved through a group process, participants should be motivated to be involved rather than have a feeling of compulsion. In the Danish Stable Schools, the nature of the common goal (reduction in antibiotic use) made it possible to compose groups of farmers from very different farms (Vaarst et al., 2007). In other situations the common goal may be very specific to certain farm types or situations, which will dictate the composition of the group eg groups of bio-dynamic farmers or those with Jersey herds, or herds with milking robots or farmers from the same dairy company.

Lessons drawn from practical experiences

This paper has identified some key influential factors that are likely to influence the success, composition and nature of the farmer groups that will emerge during the ANIPLAN project across the various regions. During the course of the project, the practical experience from these farmer groups will be collected and analysed and used to develop recommendations for the future development of farmer participatory groups with common animal health and welfare goals.