The dialogue with farmers

Interview results, analysis and reflections on farmers, dialogue in relation to animal health and welfare planning: deliverable 4.2 of the ANIPLAN project

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Summary

This report covers the project outcome Deliverable 4.2 'Analysis completed after a joint effort to identify possibilities in each country as how to facilitate the best possible dialogue regarding animal health and welfare' as part of the European CORE Organic project 'Minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds through animal health and welfare planning.' The work was intended to understand the processes and was analysed from the perspective of the key animal health and welfare (AHW) planning principles developed as part of the project. The analysis was completed on transcripts of interviews of facilitators and advisors who had participated in the ANIPLAN project, some of them as partners in the project group.

If animal health and welfare planning is to gain widespread use among organic farmers, communication between farmers and between farmers and advisors and other actors in the organic farming environment is crucial. Whilst other forms of communication regarding the role and benefits of AHW assessment systems, such as benchmarking, may be the motivational catalyst needed to encourage engagement in the process, a creative dialogue with the individual farmer is necessary when identifying goals and planning means to reach the desired goals. In order to understand how this dialogue works in practice, and what issues arise, a series of interviews were conducted in all of the ANIPLAN participating countries, involving persons directly involved and those with other experiences. The analysis of the interviews was based on a theoretical framework concerning learning, knowledge and empowerment and a functional framework based on the animal health and welfare principles developed as an output from the ANIPLAN project.

The key conclusions were:

- The farmer should take the responsibility to plan and advisors and colleagues should encourage and enable the farmer and facilitate the active process of planning. Only when the farmer owns the problem and the solution will it be possible to improve the herd through daily practices. Dialogue is the key in this process, either between farmer and an outsider, such as an advisor, or between farmers in a group. In both cases, there may be need for facilitation rather than the traditional approach of advisor as teacher.
- The role of the advisor is traditionally viewed as an 'expert', but in light of the need for farmers to be facilitated to take ownership, we conclude that the advisor should act as an expert giving specific advice only on request from the farmer. It is also recognised that an expert role can be played by farmer groups as well as animal health and welfare professionals.
- When data is used in health planning, it is paramount that the farmer understands the data and how it was derived, and that there is a common understanding between the farmer and advisor or other colleagues involved in the health planning dialogue. This understanding can be enhanced by ensuring that dialogue is taking place at the same time as data collection protocols are being developed. Further, if data recording is conducted by an external person, the dialogue regarding the data and its role in health planning needs to be a part of the ongoing planning process and not just when formulating the health plan.

A scientific publication will be produced from the results of this study of dialogue in health planning.

1. Introduction to this report

This report covers the project outcome Deliverable 4.2 'Analysis completed after joint effort to identify possibilities in each country as how to facilitate the best possible dialogue regarding animal health and welfare' as part of the European CORE Organic ANIPLAN project 'Minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds through animal health and welfare planning' [6].

If animal health and welfare planning is to gain widespread use among organic farmers, communication between farmers and between farmers and advisors and other actors in the organic farming environment is crucial. Whilst other forms of communication regarding the role and benefits of AHW assessment systems, such as benchmarking, may be the motivational catalyst needed to encourage engagement in the process, a creative dialogue with the individual farmer is necessary when identifying goals and planning means to reach the perceived goals. In order to understand how this dialogue works in practice, and what issues arise, a series of interviews were conducted in all of the ANIPLAN participating countries, involving persons directly involved and those with other experiences. The analysis of the interviews was based on a theoretical framework concerning learning, knowledge and empowerment and a functional framework based on the animal health and welfare principles developed as an output from the ANIPLAN project.

This report is a part of the outcomes from the European CORE Organic project 'Minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds through animal health and welfare planning'. The project was initiated in mid-2007 with the aim to investigate active and well planned animal health and welfare promotion and disease prevention as a means of minimising medicine use in organic dairy herds. The project group attempted to meet this aim through the following activities:

1) Development of a set of animal health and welfare planning principles for organic dairy farms under diverse conditions based on an evaluation of current experiences.
2) Animal health and welfare assessments, based on the parameters developed in the Welfare Quality project (Welfare Quality®, 2009), were applied to different organic dairy herd systems across Europe. The outputs from these assessments are described by Gratzer and co-authors (2010). These assessments were reported to participating farmers and their responses to this process are reflected in part in the evaluation of dialogue reported here.
3) Guidelines for communication about animal health and welfare promotion in different settings were developed for existing animal health advisory services or farmer groups such as the Danish Stable School system and the Dutch network programme (Wielinga et al, 2008). These guidelines were developed from interviews and workshops involving project partners and various stakeholders in some of the ANIPLAN partner countries. This guidelines and the underpinning research process are described in this report.

This report combines inputs and discussions between the ANIPLAN project partners, as well as interviews and workshop reports, primarily compiled by the coordinator of the project.

[6] This is deliverable 4.2, which is titled: 'Analysis completed after joint effort to identify possibilities in each country as how to facilitate the best possible dialogue regarding animal health and welfare'.

Interviews with a range of stakeholders in some of the involved countries (The Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, UK and Denmark) focused on how dialogue with farmers were included and perceived as part of the health planning process instigated during the course of the project.

The focus is primarily on dairy cow health and welfare, but we also draw on experiences from other sectors where relevant. Furthermore, we have focused not only on conscious and formal health planning initiatives but also included experiences from other advisory service and research initiatives, which aim at improving a situation in livestock herds.

In the following, the starting point developed within the ANIPLAN project will be presented in terms of the initial principles for a 'good planning process'. The methodology section provides an overview over the theoretical framework behind the analysis of the dialogue process. The results and discussion go through experiences and aspects of the dialogue process both in relation to the planning process in general, and in relation to the experiences in farmer groups. In the project, the 'Stable Schools' approach was tested and examined as a model for farmer groups, as discussed in the section on experiences with groups.

2. Methodology

2.1 The framework for analysis

2.1.1 The nature of the dialogue processes in the ANIPLAN project

Basically, two types of dialogue were examined throughout the ANIPLAN project: individual farmer planning and the farmer group approach. The description of how the planning process was conducted in each of the seven participating countries is explained in details in the project report on deliverable 5.1. In practice, there was a wide variation in the manner in which dialogue took place on the participating farms. The analysis of how the dialogue occurred within each of the two approaches is based on how these 1) fitted with the ANIPLAN principles and 2) the theoretical understanding of the nature of dialogue.

Clearly, dialogues involving farmer groups differ in nature from dialogue which involve individual farmers and their advisors. The common and distinguishing characteristics of these two types of dialogue are explored here.

2.1.2 The ANIPLAN principles

In the ANIPLAN project the aim was to develop a model for animal health and welfare planning which can be implemented in all different types of farming environments, e.g. large scale dairy farming as well as alpine, smallholder and diverse farming systems. The principles are closely linked to dialogue (see results and discussion), which catalyses this process. The dialogue is required in order to achieve a balance between farmer needs, animal needs and the wider societal perception of health and welfare whilst also satisfying the multiple objectives of organic farming. Different actors represent these different views, and in groups of farmers, different experiences and viewpoints are exchanged and enrich the group in a common learning and development process. Based on these considerations, the key principles were developed in October 2007 (Box 1) with the aim of them being implemented as part of a continuous process (Figure 1).

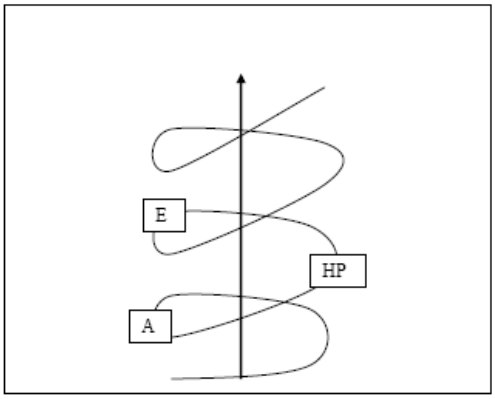

Figure 1. Representation of animal health and welfare planning as a continuous process based on assessment (A), planning (HP) and evaluation (E).

1. A health planning process should aim at continuous development and improvement, and should incorporate health promotion and disease handling, based on a strategy including
    - current status + risks (animal based + resource based parameters)
    - evaluation
    - action
    - review
2. Farm specific
3. Farmer ownership
4. External person(s) should be involved
5. External knowledge
6. Organic principles framework (systems approach)
7. Written
8. Acknowledge good aspects

Box 1. The original eight principles for animal health planning process developed at the start of the ANIPLAN project.

2.1.3 The theoretical framework

The analysis is based on an understanding that dialogue leading to action can be viewed from a number of theoretical viewpoints, including issues about learning and empowerment. The learning framework is based primarily on the idea of legitimate peripheral participation, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991). Empowerment is understood as strengthening of identity and increasing ability to master one's own situation, and in particular with regard to social capital (e.g. Vaarst 2009), and specifically in relation to the issues of farmer group approaches, such as Communities of Practice (Blackmore, 2010). The concept of social capital based on the ideas described by Munene et al. (2005) and Bebbington (2002) are also considered.

2.2 Interview methodology

All interviews were performed by the first author, and in some cases with participation of the national ANIPLAN partners. The selection of the interviewees was very much based on the national ANIPLAN partner's network and focus, and was limited in scope by the time and logistical issues associated with working across 7 countries.

The interviews and material in the different countries are listed below:

The Netherlands: One focus group interview with 5 researchers with experience in on-farm research; Participation in one farmer group meeting and visit to 3 farms; Individual interviews of 6 facilitators and/or persons with experiences with different types of farmer group approaches

Austria: One focus group interview with 6 advisors in relation to a Stable School course (one of whom were from Bio-Austria and also interviewed individually); Individual interviews with organizations engaged in advisory service and animal health inspections: Bio-Austria, Agricultural Chamber and The Animal Health Service; Individual interviews with 4 ANIPLAN partners who had experiences with on-farm research, working with farmer groups, 1 Stable School facilitator and one who set up farmer courses.

UK: Informal interview with one experienced scientist engaged in participatory research; informal experience exchange with a group of organic advisors who participated in a course organized by IOTA; group focus interview of stakeholders in Soil Association; individual interviews of 2 facilitators who were also researchers of FFS-groups or farmer learning groups.

Switzerland: Focus group interview with 6 advisors in different Swiss advisory structures; individual interviews with two project partners who both are facilitators in Stable Schools.

Denmark: 10 individual qualitative interviews of facilitators of 'Stable Schools' (different set-ups); Interviews of farmers and farmer groups earlier reported (Vaarst et al., 2007)

Germany: Interview with the two project partners who were the advisors of farmers wanting to improve,

The focus of the interviews was very much on issues related to farmer group communication, using the interview guide shown in Figure 2. Different approaches to advisory services and farmer education, as well as participatory research initiatives, were also covered in situations where the interviewee had experience with these approaches.

The interviews were performed as semi-structured, qualitative research interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008) with individuals or in focus groups that had been involved in the ANIPLAN project. All the interviews were performed without a translator as such, with one Dutch interview and three Austrian interviews as well as one Swiss group focus interview performed in collaboration with the national ANIPLAN partner who helped in case of language difficulties.

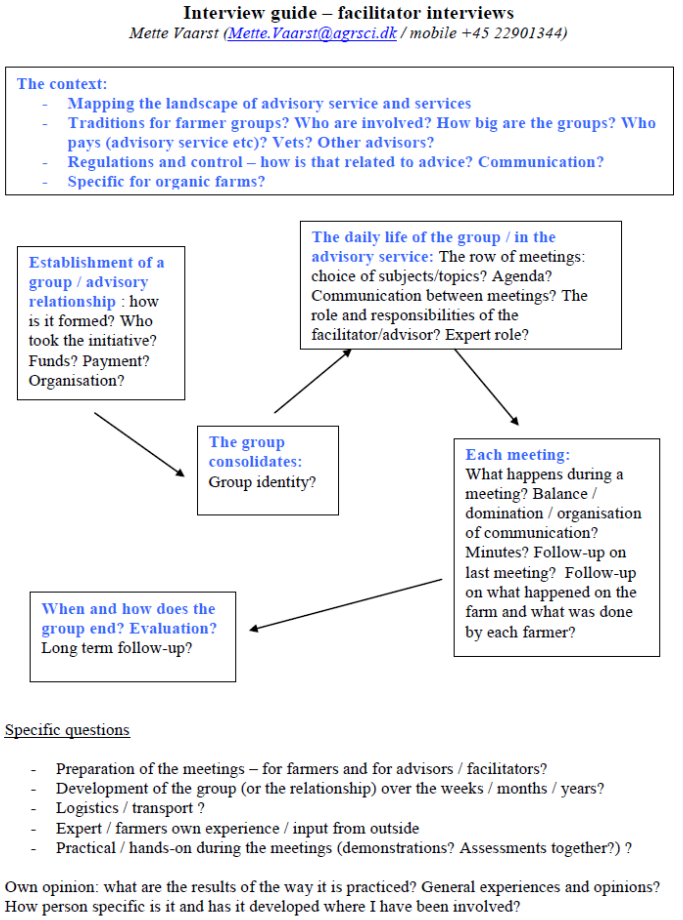

Figure 2. The interview guide used in interviews of facilitators and stakeholders about communication with farmers in different types of farmer groups.

2.3 Analysis of interviews

The interviews were very different in nature, and as such it was not possible to perform standardized analysis techniques such as the grounded theory methodologies or discourse analysis. Most of the interviews were taped (a small percentage were not taped, but notes were written during and after the meeting) and transcribed as either quotations or summaries. Themes were identified and ordered across countries, but it is important to emphasize that the various interviewees did not have the same experiences or the same roles, and hence this may have affected the themes raised in interviews. For example, only two female facilitators raised gender issues associated with the participation of male and female farmers in the dialogue. This does not necessarily mean that these issues were not important in other contexts or countries.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 The importance of dialogue in the health planning process

3.1.2 Moving from a plan to planning

In the example in Box 2 below, the process on the Austrian participating farms is described. This process involved a number of different people in assessing the condition on the farms, going through the results of welfare assessments and facilitating and enabling the farmers with regard to the planning process, and in particular focusing on what they wanted to do on their farm. It emphasizes that the dialogue is very central throughout the whole process.

In Austria, the process which had taken place on all farms started with an assessment using the WelfareQuality framework including a farm management questionnaire which allowed the farmer and the assessor to talk about many aspects of the farm. Generally, there was much communication already linked to the assessment, which altogether took 10-12 hours on most farms. One of the assessors described how he had explained to the farmer what he would do at his arrival on the farm, and by lunchtime they had gone through the questionnaire and talked about many aspects of the farm. Before he left the farm, he would also always share some of his main findings with the farmer. This assessor found the communication related to the feed-back of the results particularly important: '*Just to send them something that is also a kind of lack of valuing people. I think you have to go there again and to bring them the results. They get so much paper with the post, MAYBE they will read it, …. , but even I had to think about how can I explain this…. They must know how it comes to these results – if not, it is zero information then, in a way. Even if it's just half an hour or an hour – you have to go through these different points. But – just to send them results then, that wouldn't be enough,…[…]… if they don't have the explanation it will just be useless for them…they won't change just because they have a sheet of paper, and even when you write 'just call me', they won't call me anyway – you have to sit with them. Talk talk talk, explain it again and again and ask what are their opinion. We brought so many things on paper, but the talking between the lines is important… '*

The feed-back report was, in other words, explained and discussed in details with the farmers after each assessment. The report was used as a framework for the written animal health and welfare plan. It consisted of 8 pages (including the front page with a photo from the farm). On each page, there was a table with results dealing with one topic: udder health, claw health, etc.

Under each table there was space to describe the actual situation, and besides this, to describe what the farmer committed him- or herself to do to improve the situation. The farmer was encouraged to write notes during the discussion and the agreed measures for the selected focus areas. In this way, all results were carefully explained to the farmers, but the farmers should only choose some few areas where they felt motivated to improve something before the next visit. Also farmer ownership was ensured, as all goals and measures were written down by the farmers themselves. This document, including the animal based results and the handwritten notes served also as the health plan and as a common memory of what the farmer had committed him- or herself to do.

Box 2. An example of the process as it was performed in Austria in a dialogue between the project partner and the farmers

The health planning process is viewed as a continuous process which involves observing, interpreting, acting and evaluating. This process is a learning cycle as described and used in various ways in relation to problem based learning or learning in practice theories, e.g. as described by Kolb (1984).

This places the dialogue not as a single event but in a continuum. The dialogue weaves the process together in a learning cycle, where common learning and reflection takes place. The dialogue is an important part of learning, and learning happens when observing, acting and evaluating the changes.

3.2 Involvement of external person(s)

The involvement of individuals in the development of health plans who are not directly involved in the farming activities on a particular farm can occur at a number of levels. These 'external persons' can represent various skills and perspectives. An inspector can be regarded

as an external person with external knowledge although not entering into a planning dialogue, and certainly not taking part in a process that may lead to change over a significant time period. However, there are examples to the contrary.

One Norwegian partner reflected over the role of being a part-time district veterinarian and a part-time inspector and how this enabled a dialogue about the inspection results which made it easier for the farmer to include outputs from the inspection into the farm health plan. So, the inspection becomes more relevant to the farmer. In other situations where this dual role does not exist, incorporation of inspection outputs without dialogue can result in the farmer being unable to respond effectively, via the health plan, to the inspection.

The role of the external person(s) should be clear in each situation. Previous work on the health advisory service in Denmark (Vaarst et al., 2002) demonstrated that farmers used their advisors differently depending on the purpose of the involvement: in some cases the farmer wanted expert advice to solve a specific problem, but did not want the advisor to be generally involved in the development on the farm. In other cases, the farmer wanted and needed a 'sparring partner' who was continuously involved in the daily farm management. This is clearly two different ways of involving an external person, and they will be asked to contribute to the dialogue in two different ways. Not all advisors are ready for either of these two completely different styles of being an advisor, and that is a professional choice made by the advisor. On the other hand, the farmer must make the choice which type of advice and dialogue he or she wants. It is paramount for the success of the process that the mutual expectations between farmer and advisor are explicitly agreed on. Otherwise, as several experiences demonstrate, this'mis-match' leads to frustration and stagnation.

Clearly, a fruitful dialogue can only happen if there is trust between the dialogue partners. Some interviewees had experiences with the trust process which requires time and is closely aligned with some demonstration of the benefits of the relationship. Negative experiences, such as those associated with increased bureaucratic burden on the farmer, can also be influential. Building trust with regard to health planning can also be influenced by negotiation on how to interpret health planning tools, such as data, and how much mutual understanding there is in this respect. This is related to the farmer ownership over the process.

Colleagues, or fellow farmers, can also be involved as the external persons. The advantage of involving colleagues is that they are frequently the best placed to understand the complexity of the farm. Groups of colleagues also represent a significant knowledge and experience base that can potentially contribute greatly to the solving practical problems. This is demonstrated by an experience highlighted by a Norwegian facilitator with experience of the Stable School approach: "*As veterinarian you may know what they should do, but not how – and the other farmers know how*."

Involvement of an external person creates necessary learning by exchange of observations and sharing reflections at the borderline between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the daily farm practice. To enhance this impact it may be necessary to be explicit what both farmer and external persons expect from each other.

3.3 The requirement for farmer ownership

Further to the issue of being explicit about roles in dialogue, it is important that the farmer takes the lead in the process, is central and key to how individuals are involved and takes responsibility for changes, thereby taking ownership of the process. Experiences suggest that farmer ownership is vital if changes and improvements are to happen and are to be sustained.

They may need sparring, coaching and help to organise changes, but only they can actually carry out the changes in practice. This requires ownership not only over the farm, but over the decisions.

This ownership process and function means ownership in identifying the issues, setting goals and acting relevantly, in order to ensure the most sustainable long-term improvement. If the farmer is not ready to take this ownership, then they should be empowered to do so. Empowerment is understood as facilitating a process where people are enabled to take responsibility for their own lives and actions. It is a concept which comes from social work and sciences, building on the idea that special groups of underprivileged people needs to be empowered to have confidence in their own ability to master their life situation.

Under North-Western European farming conditions, increased bureaucracy, economic pressure and expectations from different stakeholders are potential constraints which may require farmers to take ownership over decisions that lead to positive changes in accordance with the wishes of the farmer rather than being merely compliant with, and potentially victim to, these pressures.

In situations where there are more than one person involved in the farming practice, there is a risk that the ownership of the process is not focused on those who have the most, or shared, impact on implementation. In order to create change, there needs to be full involvement (ie ownership), and this may include more than just the farm owner i.e. other family members and employees. Family-run farms often involve people from more than one generation and therefore present potential different interests in changing farm structures or management routines.

Across the various farms involved in the ANIPLAN activities, married couples play differing roles and responsibilities but in most interviews there was reference to 'the farmer and his wife' and rarely 'a farmer and her husband'. In Switzerland, Norway and Austria, an emphasis on the importance of involving the whole family was identified and discussed.

The involvement of both husband and wife was specifically discussed in an interview with a Dutch facilitator, who had made an observation: '*But some [advisors] – if they call a farmer and the wife takes the phone they will immediately ask to talk with the husband. I do not do that – I start talking to the wife, and if I need to talk to the husband, she will know'*, and furthermore that including the wife in the meetings meant that more things were said because the husband often was more reticent about some issues: '*… if this coach is sitting at the kitchen table with the farmer and his wife, then the best moment is when the farmer goes to the toilet, because then she talks, and that is a lot more than he would tell, so most like these meetings most where the wife is present'*.

In the Netherlands, the so-called Dairy Academy had engaged with a number of farmers who would serve as coaches for colleagues, if they needed to discuss new initiatives or needed help or sparring to solve some problem. All these coaches were men, and the interviewee remarked: *' I don't know maybe how to sell the female coaches because all these dairy things they are all male in Holland.'*

In some countries quite dramatic changes over recent decades have resulted in increasingly larger farms with more people involved (e.g. Germany, UK and Denmark). Here, the persons conducting daily farm tasks work may not be the main decision maker. This may create conflicts and underlines the importance of involving all relevant individuals within group

situations or ensuring knowledge exchange among farm employees if only one or few participate in a farmer group. Conversely, participation of many persons from one farm - and in some cases with conflicting views - may not be prove efficient and can potentially negatively impact on group dynamics. Experiences from Danish Stable Schools has raised the issue of inconsistent participation in groups, with some farm staff being replaced by others at different group meetings, with negative connotations for trust and common learning.

It has been proposed that a further principle be added to the original ANIPLAN principles stating the need for all relevant persons taking action, responsibilities and decisions on the farm be involved in the health planning processes which aim at changes, and ways to this involvement must be identified in each case. .

3.4 The need for external knowledge

The term 'external knowledge' can be interpreted as:

1) Knowledge or information about the farm, which is not solely developed by the farmer and/or a result of his or her interpretation, but describes aspects of the farm based on factorial knowledge (e.g. measurements like somatic cell count in the milk or number of disease treatments) or evaluations or assessments performed by people from outside the farm.
2) Sources of external knowledge which serve as inspiration and stimulation for the farmers e.g. technical information on specific aspects of farming obtained from journals, the internet or other dissemination and media tools.

A number of the advisors and facilitators interviewed who had had experience of discussing their own observations and assessments with the farmers emphasized the importance of demonstrating this to the farmer. In Denmark, the project partner had taken photos of housing system during the completion of assessments and used these to illustrate welfare related issues to the farmer. This was a very strong and clear demonstration of certain issues that may have influenced particular welfare parameters or outputs, especially with regard to the housing system. However, the interviewee felt that this particular source of external knowledge needs to be delivered in moderation, with evidence selected strategically, so as to avoid excessive criticism. An Austrian project participant would always take the farmer to the places where he had found something which he did not find optimal, so that the issue could be clearly demonstrated to the farmer.

Learning takes place when it is relevant to the learner, and when reflection is involved. Reflection can take place in each individual, but is often greatly enhanced in situations where more people with different skills, experiences and knowledge come together and interact. In the reflection process, the learners interpret and negotiate meanings. This process leaves everybody more informed and skilled to meet the challenges which they are surrounded by.

3.5 The need for a health plan to be a written document

Many of those interviewed stressed that preparing written plans was not a very easy process and it was a general experience that farmers seldom read the reports. However, in The Netherlands, a farmer group approach gave the farmers the task to write down their "*moments of enlightenment"* associated with the group that they had attended, and this gave the whole group of about 12 farmers a "*whole and rich picture"* of all the things that had happened in the group.

One of the starting points in the project was a conclusion that 'the animal health and welfare plan as a document' did not have any value in terms of stimulating to improvements on the

farm, unless it was connected to an active planning process. This puts into perspective a variety of obligatory advisory services (such as in parts of Switzerland and animal health plans, such as in United Kingdom. N.B In Denmark, the introduction of regulations pertaining to veterinary advice was introduced towards the end of the ANIPLAN project).

In Austria, compliance checklists are managed by the Tier Gesundheits Dienst TGD service, covering housing, feeding, disease levels and other aspects of the herd health. Often the local veterinarian is involved in the process of assessing the farm, talking to the farmer and giving advice, and there is a great variation between vets as to how they do this in practice, and how much dialogue is involved in the process. One of the Austrian interviewees had previous experience from farms where these checklists did not lead to dialogue, and was seen mostly as a formality.

A negative experience of having a formal check list without a process was described by one of the Austrian interviewees who had experience with how the health service occasionally did their inspections: *They come to the farms, they don't even go into the housing, they just go – they have to go to the farmer and they go to the kitchen and make their crosses –and it's not so that the vet goes with the farmer to check just one animal – they have a sheet and – you make the crosses and then you can put it online or on paper and – ok, if you are the main vet of this farm you should know the problems of the farm, but if you go there for insemination you don't see the problems, all the problems. You don't check it – but just to make crosses on a sheet and then they have to pay for it, and the only result they get is that they can do injections after that, it's the legitimation.'*

The interviewee who represented the Health Service had also very positive experience on how it worked, and he emphasized that the farmers and veterinarians were actually encouraged to take the opportunity to make a process of planning and dialogue when going through the forms. It is one of the intentions of the checklist to stimulate the dialogue and give the process practical importance, but according to interviewees, this does not always happen, and it is only a formal requirement that the checklist is updated.

Various forms of animal health plans exist in UK, and they are often detailed documents dealing with all aspects of the farm with notes on what action the farmer should take. As part of the ANIPLAN project, Nicholas and Jasinka (2007) analysed the requirements of health planning agreements practised within 15 different British organisations. All covered assessment and monitoring of health status, risk of disease, development of disease prevention strategies and management, in combination with other aspects such as analysis of collected data or encouraging the use of alternative medicine. However, in many cases the link is often not apparent between the plan and the advice or communication from advisors, as is the case with the Austrian system discussed above. Atkinson & Neale (2007) stated that large and complicated documents are often not used by the farmers in practice. Nicholas & Jasinka (2007) also mentioned studies in the UK showing that farm records were rarely reviewed in relation to developing the animal health and welfare plan, even when recorded. Pocock (2005) emphasised that to merely have the plan is not sufficient.

Across Europe, the amount of bureaucracy related administration that a farmer has to deal with has increased dramatically over the past decades, particularly with regards to record keeping associated with quality control, subsidies and legislative requirements e.g. related to prevention of animal cruelty or environmental effects of agriculture. This was highlighted in the interviews as being a significant distraction to the practical aspects of farming and a negative factor with regards to the acceptance of health plans. With regard to the application

of animal health plans in Britain, many farmers do not value existing health plans, and the assessments on which they are based can be of poor quality (Bell et al., 2006; Burke, 2006; Huxley, 2005).

In conclusion, more or less obligatory health plans in terms of checklists and documents which are necessary for inspection have proved to be less effective than they were intended. They are frequently perceived as being bureaucratic in nature rather than as useful guidelines for the farmer. Introduction of a process element, and in particular dialogue, was an early conclusion from the ANIPLAN project regarding the potential for health plans to be seen as more than just a regulatory requirement.

3.2 Characteristics of farmer groups

3.2.1 Providing a social outlet

Many of the interviewees said that many farmers were lonely and that joining a group provided a social outlet. Perhaps the changing social structures in many parts of Europe mean that groups are increasingly meeting the needs once provided by village and neighbour networks.

In the participating countries, a number of different types of farmer groups existed, with different aims, backgrounds and practices. Some farmer groups are initially based on farmers' need with an objective and desire to exchange experiences, knowledge and learn things together. One example of such groups could be the Danish so-called 'ERFA-groups'

In Denmark, the ERFA or 'Farmer Experience Exchange Groups' have been used for decades. These are often groups of 10-15 farmers from similar farms (e.g. dairy farms with a certain housing system and/or breed), which meet on regular basis on each others' private farms. The group would normally be run by an agricultural advisor, who acts as a form of coordinator and professional expert in the field. Often, an external specialist expert (e.g. in farm economy, buildings, feeding etc.) will be invited and give a lesson on a certain topic. This approach is very different from the FFS in that it involves one or more 'experts', and because it focuses on a topic rather than the specific farm and identification of potential areas for improvement. In The Netherlands, 'Dairy Academy groups' have been formed to serve as a platform for dialogue with research institutions and research to identify future research needs.

3.2.2 The concept of Stable Schools

The Farmer Stable School concept developed when a large group of Danish organic dairy farmers faced a common goal to phase out antibiotics from their herds. This was a complex goal which could be reached in several ways, but with very little experience of how best to achieve this through participatory means. In order to establish a good common learning environment the concept of Farmer Field Schools (FFS) was adjusted to Danish organic farmer conditions. Farmer Field Schools (FFS) is a concept for farmers' learning and empowerment through knowledge and experience exchange. The concept was developed and used in Indonesia as a sustainable way of learning and developing farming for small-scale rice farmers. This learning approach, which is based on innovative, participatory and interactive learning, has been adopted in many 'developing country' situations. In the Danish project, ideas were built from experiential learning and action research. The results from the Danish experience of Stable Schools show that crucial changes took place during the project period and these successes can be partly attributed to the farmers' ownership over the common goal and the advice from the group based on the articulated goals for each participating farm. The farmers' change process towards a common goal may be viewed as an equal common learning process.

When discussing the success of the various groups, it is important to consider the original purpose of the group. For example, some farmer groups may be formed by an advisory organisation to disseminate knowledge, or by dairy companies to ensure that their producers have high standards of animal health and welfare, hygiene and/or production, or in some cases as a loose social gathering of farmers with the aim of gaining and sharing common knowledge. In the Stable School approach, 5-6 farmers meet periodically, in rotation, and over a set period of time to discuss specific problems, as well as to present success cases, with the aim of other farmers providing advice. The process has a facilitator who does not offer advice (Vaarst, 2007; Vaarst et al., 2007). The Stable School approach was a key element of the ANIPLAN project to test the role of communication in farmer groups as a means of contributing to the health and welfare planning process.

3.2.3 Facilitator experiences with Stable Schools

Interviews were conducted with some of the facilitators of ANIPLAN Stable Schools. Some expressed concern that farmers may offer advice to others that is incorrect and even potentially harmful, and in such cases, an 'expert' intervention' is justified. However, whilst this concern also existed among some facilitators in Denmark, practical experience working with this approach has demonstrated that farmers themselves tend to be very knowledgeable and give different views and experiences which, taken together, resulted in a more balanced discussion (Vaarst et al., 2007). The emphasis on farmers' own responsibility and ownership over the process is crucial. A Danish facilitator (not particularly connected to ANIPLAN) described 'decoding' from the expert role as being the most challenging and difficult role, and this is particularly true when the facilitator also acts as an advisor outside the Stable School environment. This situation might be best avoided if a facilitator does not also have an advisory role. Some facilitators said that they sometimes steer the discussion by asking questions that they find relevant. A British facilitator, who was a well-known expert in lameness and leg disorders, worked as facilitator in two farmer groups using the Stable School approach, and told *"Lameness has come up a number of times in the discussion and they usually arrive at something sensible. They do consider things that I just 'oh-no' but as soon as you interject it just disrupts the whole dynamics. And I've seen meetings almost fall apart just because I have said a little bit. I shut up and then the meeting recovers"*.

One Danish facilitator of Stable Schools also participated in a group as the last person to contribute in each round of verbal contributions from farmers. When doing so, experience suggests that it is important to do this in the same manner as other farmer contributors i.e. add additional comments rather than repeating what others have said, or starting to speak against some of the other group participants' advice. This places the facilitator more as equal in the group, and not as the one with 'the expert knowledge'. Some facilitators said that they use their professional skills and knowledge when formulating the meeting agenda together with the host farmer.

3.2.4 Farmer involvement and ownership

Ownership has been identified as the critical element in the successful development and implementation of animal health and welfare planning (Lisborg et al., 2005; Vaarst et al., 2007). Therefore, it is critical that if this is to be achieved through a group process, participants should be motivated to involve themselves fully and not have any feeling of compulsion. Learning only takes place through the participants' active participation and joint reflection. The success of each group is dependent on this active participation by everybody. If one group member fails to fully participate, the dynamic and equality within the group is threatened. Farmers who are not really motivated to implement change are more likely to become reluctant participants and recipients of the group process.

Sometimes, one farmer can stop the process in a group, by refusing to be open about his or her own farm, especially the difficult issues. A Dutch facilitator had had the experience with a well known and large scale farmer, who had signed up with a group. To quote from the facilitator "*and he said to me, I am not going to talk about my difficulties in that group – I don't want them to know. And I asked 'well what is the big deal? What can happen? We are not going to present the figures with the names, so what is the big deal? Think about it'. And well, he turned over. But the one with the biggest ego was the one who said 'no' – and he was a kind of the chairman of the group".*

'*They did not want to talk about these social personal aspects of leading their farms, so there also I had to kick their ass because that is also a part of work. But we managed it, and it was a very interesting process.'* They found out that it was an important part of farm activities and they changed from not wanting to talk about it to actually getting a lot out of it.

Different traditions and perceptions within the various farming communities and regions exist with regard to the openness and mutual trust with which farmers communicate with each other. Based on the ANIPLAN project participants' experiences there are likely to be regional variations in the tradition of openness with regard to farmers sharing knowledge and information with other farmers (Vaarst & Roderick, 2009). The degree to which this occurs may be influenced by previous history of personal and business contact between individual participants, and the nature of this contact i.e. either positive or negative. Some farmers who have participated in Stable Schools have explicitly expressed afterwards that it was an advantage that they had had little or no previous contact with the other group members (Lisborg et al., 2006).

3.2.5 Who pays, and for what?

In the different countries, there are differences in the method of payment of advisors and some farmers may be unwilling to pay an expensive advisor who facilitates rather than advises. Some farmers perceive that they pay for 'expert knowledge' and not just for a 'good process' not even in cases where they obviously benefit greatly from the latter. In a number of countries funding opportunities exist for training and education programmes, which also include the establishment of farmer groups. However, the availability of advisors – both agricultural and veterinary – is very different between countries, and as discussed elsewhere in this report, advisors who are knowledgeable about organic animal husbandry are in short supply. In some countries, most farmers use advisors who are privately employed e.g. in companies or in private veterinary practices, whereas in others, established advisory systems exist partly supported by organisations, general membership or the government.

Some facilitators had problems with their role because they also wanted to be experts: '*They could choose their groups – and then they saw that there was a group about animal health and they said 'well I know a lot about animal health – I would like that network' – but I thought that I am so busy with the role of facilitator that I would hire some experts and I like to split the role. But I think that in the study groups – I am not sure but I think that the facilitator also has the role of an expert.'*

4. Further discussion: Practical guidelines on successful communication in farmer groups

The following guidelines have evolved in part from the general responses received from those interviewed, but also through detailed workshop discussions between ANIPLAN participants. Throughout the project, experiences with animal health and welfare planning have been collected along with experiences from colleagues who in some ways have also been involved

in farmer dialogues. These collective experiences have enabled an improved understanding of the developed principles better from a range of different perspectives.

4.1Clear and concise guidelines

The purpose of the dialogue and process must be agreed on. It must be clear for everybody who participates in the dialogue process that the farmer has the responsibility to conclude what he / she wants to do on the farm. The role of external persons must be clear, and not mixed e.g. between inspector and advisor. It must be clear for everybody what is expected from who.

4.2Clarity and purpose of data

Any data used in the planning process must be explained and understood by all involved, including the conclusions that are drawn from the data. Otherwise there is a risk that the data will not be used appropriately, and the person who is not familiar with the data, may be alienated from the process and unable to participate in meaningful dialogue about the data.

4.3 Clear and concise written communication

Meeting notes should be a true reflection of the outcomes based on the farmers' conclusions and important points from the discussion which led to the farmer's conclusions. The written documents are the common memory which will create the foundation for evaluation of the effects of the actions, and therefore it is important to agree on them. All meeting notes should therefore be confirmed.

4.4All relevant persons should participate in the planning process (proposed principle 9)

On many farms, there are several people involved in the decisions and in the practical actions. They should all somehow be involved in planning dialogue. Although it may not always be possible for all to be actively involved in group participation, the key outputs and decisions need to be effectively communicated to those who are likely to influence the impact of implementation. Equally, the views of all relevant persons need to be considered in the dialogue process.

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