

Social principles for agricultural extension in facilitating the adoption of new practices

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Summary

An understanding of the social context of agriculture, the social nature of farming, and the socio-cultural and socio-psychological basis of adoption is needed if agricultural extension is to be effective in facilitating the adoption of new practices and enabling change. Some 27 principles are presented, with the key points being to acknowledge that farming is a social activity, to recognise the diversity of farmers, to appreciate that adoption is a socio-cultural process as well as a social-psychological process and not simply a process of communication, and to reflect on what all this means for extension practice. To be effective in enabling change, extension staff need to consider adoption and extension as social change and social learning processes.

Introduction

Agriculture has too long been thought of as a technical activity involving the application of science and the linear transference of the products of that science via a top-down process of technology transfer. It is not. Agriculture is farming, and farming is people. The future of agriculture is dependent on the survival of healthy, viable and vital rural communities that have resilience and dynamic capacity to respond to a wide range of issues. This chapter seeks to outline the key social principles relevant to enabling change in individuals, family farm businesses, communities and industries involved with primary industries and natural resource management (NRM).

The principles were developed out of a personal reflection on now over 25 years of research into the social dimensions of farming. This research program started with a study of the socio-economic correlates of adoption of soil conservation technology on the Darling Downs as part of a Masters degree at the University of Queensland (Vanclay 1986) and continued with a PhD at Wageningen University in The Netherlands (Vanclay 1994) which looked at the wider socio-political context of agriculture and extension in Australia. It involved many consultancies and academic research projects, as well as the supervision of many PhD students across a range of topics in rural social research, especially relating to the concept of 'styles of farming' (Howden *et al.* 1998; Howden and Vanclay 2000; Mesiti and Vanclay 2006; Vanclay *et al.* 1998, 2006,