**What is Social Innovation?**

Innovation in social networks is inextricably linked to other forms of innovation such as technological innovation and is an important consideration when considering how to cascade and increase the adoption of the latest innovative practices and technology to the agricultural industry.

As highlighted in our first piece of written evidence towards this enquiry, adoption of the latest innovation and technology both in terms of research and development and thinking will be crucial to maintaining agricultural products productivity and efficiency. The uptake and adoption of innovative technologies and techniques has been driving agricultural progress for centuries. Productivity improvements in terms of increased crop yields and animal performance have enabled farming to keep pace with population increases. Based on global projections, the rate of improvement will have to increase dramatically to keep the world’s population fed.

**Social Innovation and Knowledge Transfer:**

Innovation in social networks play an important part in knowledge transfer, with social networks being integral to innovation adoption and behaviour change processes.

In order for knowledge transfer to be effective, any knowledge transfer project or programme should comprise of three main elements:

1. Explanation of the why; why is this piece of technology or new practice important to the farm businesses, or wider society. Explanation of the why helps set this in context to the individual farm business and allows the individual to understand what the benefit is to the farm business.
2. Demonstration of the how; by specialists, trusted advisors, or peers so that questions around practical application can be answered and the individual undertaking the innovation or new piece of technology can build confidence in its use.
3. Establishment of wrap around support networks to offer continual advice and support during the implementation phase, acting as a ‘nudge’ support service to encourage individuals to implement change.

Quality Meat Scotland operates and manages a range of knowledge transfer programmes and networks for the Scottish Agricultural Industry with the aim being to increase the rate of uptake of new technology and innovative practices. Our flagship programme, Monitor Farm Scotland, 100% funded by The Scottish Government, has been running in multiple locations through rural Scotland since 2016. The programme consists of 9 farms, located from The Scottish Borders, right up to The Shetland Isles.

The Monitor Farm Programme gives a structure from which innovative practices, research and development and economic development of farm businesses can be channelled in a way that is appropriate to the local farming community. With a strapline of ‘farmer led, farmer driven’ the ethos very much is on bottom up peer to peer learning, supported by professional facilitators and topic specialists that provide support, advice and guidance to the host farmers and members of the associated community groups.
While the primary outcome of the Monitor Farm Scotland programme is to develop the profitability and sustainability of farming businesses, a secondary outcome has been the development of new social networks that play an important role of embedding change and innovation. These social networks also play an important element in the legacy of the individual Monitor Farms, with past programme participants continuing to operate Monitor Farm activities years after the formal programme has ended.

**What our evidence base has highlighted:**

Evaluation of the Monitor Farm programme has evidenced that knowledge transfer programmes play a critical role in creating new networks within rural communities, and that innovation within our social networks is an important element that must be considered when developing a strategy and recommendations to increase the uptake of new technology in the Agricultural industry.

Particularly since the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak, as the agricultural industry and associated rural communities have contracted, the traditional network providing social support and peer to peer interactions has also reduced. This has led to a widened sense of isolation and a breakdown in traditional social networks, such as through auction markets. Evidence is building around the impact that the loss of these social networks has on mental health and wellbeing alongside the reduction in peer to peer support of business change and innovation implementation.

Quotes from individuals who have participated in Monitor Farm activities highlighting this include:

“Build on social need in the area (loss of Elgin livestock mart means there is nowhere local to meet)”

“Bringing people together from different enterprises that wouldn’t necessarily meet in a business setting”.

“I really value the social aspect as I work on my own and benefit from both the management group and the business group”.

**Changing How Farmers and Communities Work Together**

In order to embed innovation, new technology and practice change within farming businesses, we must also consider how we create new social support networks within rural Scotland.

These support networks should work as part of an integrated knowledge transfer strategy. As communication methods have modernised, virtual support networks have helped to create new ways to network and support farmers through innovation and technological change. Social media has played a particularly important role in recent years, linking up individuals regardless of where they reside physically.

Therefore, stimulating social innovation remains an important consideration when considering how to increase the uptake of technology and innovative practices. Some suggestions on how this can be done include:

Creating virtual networks: In recent years virtual networks have demonstrated their value in connecting people in remote communities, reducing the barriers that distance can give when individuals are looking to implement innovative practices. This can be done through open forums, such as ‘The Farming Forum’ or on social media platforms such as Facebook, or through more bespoke, closed forums, such as Whatsapp messenger chats set up by a ‘connector’ individual who
brings together likeminded individuals to discuss a specific subject or interest. The development of and access to high speed broadband is critical to the future roll out of virtual networks.

Regionally tailored knowledge transfer strategies channelled through a central hub: By creating ‘hubs’ within specified geographical locations, such as through Monitor Farm networks, you can replicate physical hubs that used to exist within the community, and give individuals a physical space to come together to network and ‘reach into’ whilst they are implementing an innovative practice or new technology. This has the secondary benefit that regionally specific opportunities and issues can be discussed and channelled at identified communities, thus increasing the reach both to groups of farming individuals, and the reach outwards of these groups of farming individuals, as they can tackle issues collectively.

Development of innovation action networks that support innovation: By considering social innovation alongside regional economic development goals, small action networks can be developed between farmers who come together to consider barriers and design farmer led knowledge and skills interventions to remove the identified barriers, giving them the skills and information they need to implement change on the ground.

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