

# **TOPICS FOR RURAL SOCIAL RESEARCH**

**John R. Fairweather**

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**Agribusiness and Economics Research Unit  
PO Box 84  
Lincoln University  
CANTERBURY**

**Telephone No: (64) (3) 325-2811  
Fax No: (64) (3) 325-3847**

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## **PREFACE**

There is growing awareness of the importance of the social aspects of agriculture and rural society. Whether it be farmers wondering about changes in their rural communities or marketing people concerned with sales, to many people it is important that they develop an understanding of rural social life. Among these people are members of government organisations such as MAF and this Discussion Paper describes relevant topics of rural social research. People interested in rural research will find the material here to be useful for developing an appropriate research agenda.

**Professor Tony Zwart**  
**Director, AERU**





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## SUMMARY

This report delineates a range of topics that could be included in MAF social research using mainly the suggestions available in the current sociology literature. Suggestions from five MAF personnel were used to supplement the literature. Both sources lead to a list of topics including the farm and the rural community, international linkages and consumers. In addition, there is a need for research on public opinion. The report suggests that an appropriate research strategy should include the development of a rural data base which is supplemented with farm and community studies using the full array of social science research methods. Agro-commodity chains should be examined and rural public opinion regularly surveyed.



## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) has a mission to support land and water-based industries in order to foster economic development. MAF seeks to achieve outcomes which include among others: innovative and profitable primary industries, preservation of the environment, and a "soundly based and lasting development of rural and fishing communities" (MAFTECH Contract, 1989-90). Thus, one important outcome is to encourage healthy rural communities which contribute to New Zealand's economy and culture. To achieve these outcomes MAF delivers outputs in the areas of policy, science, and technology transfer.

Recent developments within MAF have led to the formation of a Rural Affairs Unit. This unit has been developed to more explicitly address the objective of helping rural New Zealand achieve prosperity and wellbeing, and it signals a broadening of scope away from the singular focus on farm production. While the Rural Affairs Unit has many areas of concern, one of them is rural research and the important role that research can play in providing a basis to understanding changes in rural society. The assumption in this study is that effective policy can be based on knowledge of rural society, and by supporting research on rural society MAF can develop effective policy in order to promote healthy rural communities. It is the main objective of this report to review the topics of social research that could be relevant to MAF in the light of its interest in healthy rural communities. Any final decision on what social research is undertaken by MAF rests with MAF itself.

Two main methods have been used in this study, but they have not had equal success. The first method was to draw from the current literature in the sociology of agriculture subdiscipline to spell out a list of possible research topics. This method has worked well because there are a number of articles which review the research agendas in this area. It is a simple procedure to review these agendas and pull out the common themes. This first method forms the basis of this report and it is supplemented with interview data from MAF personnel in order to check that suggestions drawn from the literature were compatible with MAF thinking.

The second method, not developed successfully here, was to review the relevant agricultural institutions in Australia, Canada, US, England, France and Sweden to see what social research they undertake. The main issue was to see to what extent their policy was directed to rural society generally and to learn what social research they used to achieve their objectives. This report does draw on the UK and US experience because it is well documented, but attempts to learn about the other nations via their embassies or consular offices proved unsuccessful. While the questions put to these organisations were simple, they required considerable effort to answer and they needed to be directed to key, knowledgeable people.

The third way of addressing this research topic is to examine the history of MAF to learn about its past involvement with social issues. In part, this method has been used by way of incorporating the findings of relevant research, notably that of Carter (1988). However, no significant original research of this type has been undertaken. In the light of recent

developments within MAF it has proven fortuitous that this cursory treatment of this historical perspective appears not to be a major requirement at present. What is required is the specification of an appropriate social research agenda for consideration by MAF and this report addresses that issue beginning with rural policies in the UK and the US.

## CHAPTER 2

### RURAL POLICY, GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS AND DISCIPLINARY SUPPORT

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews rural policies in the US and the UK and highlights the main changes in recent years. The changes show a move away from a single-minded dominance of agriculture, and in each case the government institutions (the USDA and the MAFF) now take a broad view of rural society and economy. The chapter then goes on to examine the disciplines embraced by government institutions as they have pursued their vision of rural policy. Finally, the overseas experience provides a lead in to the subject of MAF in New Zealand, and a review of the disciplines associated with its development here.

#### 2.2 A Brief Review of Rural Policy in the US and the UK

The aim of this section is to examine past and present forms of rural policy in the US and the UK. However, policy does not develop in a vacuum and to help understand forces for change in policy this section begins with a summary of recent trends in international agriculture.

Agriculture in our present world is both complex and diverse, and yet interrelated. There are some common trends which identify a common context to contemporary agriculture and this context has had an effect on the sociology discipline. Bowler (1989) describes three main trends. First there is an international farm crisis consisting of increased budgetary costs of agricultural support programmes, increased levels of farmer debt servicing, and fallen land values. Bowler accounts for the origin of this crisis in post-1930 state intervention in agriculture, along with farmers and industrialists, to apply new technology to production in order to increase outputs and decrease input costs. He foresees adjustment to this crisis involving continued movement of labour out of agricultural production, followed by the transfer of land and capital out of agricultural production. Second, there are stresses in the international food (and fibre) system caused by the production of surpluses and the unwillingness of producing countries to implement appropriate adjustment policies. Subsidised exports of surplus products from the E.C. have had major impacts on world trade. Third, modern agricultural production methods are accompanied by environmental degradation. Wetland and forest ecosystems have been, and still are, destroyed in the application of standardised production methods; water is polluted, herbicides inappropriately used and, for some people, the methods used for intensive livestock production are unacceptable. Farm crises, trade stresses and environment issues are crucial factors which affect primary production in many countries today.



### 2.2.1 Rural Policy in the US and the USDA

For most of this century rural policy in the United States has involved agricultural policy with a focus on farmers. Today there are clear indications that the former identity of rural policy with agricultural policy is no longer taken as relevant. Observers in the US seem to have an informed view of recent changes in rural society and they are aware that past rural policies have often failed to recognise underlying changes in economic structure (Otto, et al., 1988). Farm programmes alone are seen now as ineffective for resolving rural economic problems, even though farm programmes have dominated federal policies for rural areas (Reid, 1989). Recognised now is the fact that in the United States manufacturing, mining and services account for more rural employment than farming. The key point is that the basic structure of farming and rural social and economic organisation has in many areas changed significantly from a homogenous farm production to a diverse rural economy in which farming is no longer the dominant economy.

In addition to the slowly-moving changes in the rural economy has been the impact of the farm crisis in recent years, which has had two main effects. First, it has hastened some of the trends, particularly the movement to off-farm work with all the implications this has for the nature of farming and rural community life. In particular it has highlighted the large number of non farm workers. Second, it has focused attention on the rural situation so that the ongoing changes are now more widely described, understood and appreciated.

The result of these two impacts has been the formulation of a distinctively new rural policy which is sensitive to the economic realities of rural society. Thus, Reid (1989) advocates that rural policy should be based on all economic sectors. Reid (1989) argues that policies that aim to frustrate existing trends will foil and worsen the plight of those dependent on them. Better policies are those that promote economic change and are focused on manufacturing, agriculture and natural resources, and which help individuals cope with change. Kornacki (1988) recognises that the rural economy is still dependent on a narrow set of economic opportunities that involve production typically of tradeable goods with prices vulnerable to international events. Thus, policies should aim to help adjustment and economic diversification along with improving personal skills. Federal government is seen as having a major role because the entire nation has a stake in the welfare of rural communities (Stinson, 1989). Sensitivity to change is a key element and Moore (1989) emphasises adaptability and flexibility.

Linked to these developments in rural policy is the recognition that there is a complex relationship between farming and the rural community. There are recent books on this topic including Agriculture and Community Change in the U.S. (Swanson, 1988), Agriculture and Beyond : Rural Economic Development (Summers et al., eds. 1988), and an annotated bibliography entitled Interdependencies of Agriculture and Rural Communities (Leistriz and Elstrom, 1986).

The USDA has played its part in the development of US rural policy, in part by undertaking rural research and publicising it with a number of its own journals. Its interest in rural development is pursued with Rural Development Perspectives. Recent publications include studies of rural economic activity (Drabenstott and Gibson, 1987), rural underemployment

(Lichter, 1987), and retirement (Kuehn, 1986). Another outlet is the Agricultural Economic Report series which has a broad focus on economic and social issues. Recent publications include research on non-metro America (Hady and Ross, 1990), the influence of farm financial stress on rural America (Petruilis et al., 1987) in which rural America is analysed by region and reliance on farming, and involuntary exits from farming (Bentley et al., 1989). Other relevant USDA publications include detailed studies of farm structure (Brooks et al., 1990) and historical data on the rural economy (Majchrowicz, 1989).

While rural policy in the US no doubt is derived from a number of sources, one important source is the USDA itself. The selected publications referred to above show that the USDA presently takes a broad view of rural society and regularly provides research output on a variety of rural social issues. This output contributes to understanding current changes in rural economy and society and is an important base for developing a realistic rural policy.

### **2.2.2 Europe, UK and the MAFF**

The rural situation in Europe is difficult to gauge because of the diverse patterns of development in the constituent countries. Some authors think in terms of general patterns or, at least, different stages along a similar line of development. In keeping with this approach the European Commission has promulgated programmes to promote the development of the rural economy and linked this with support for small-scale producers. The main aims are to avoid serious economic and social divisions and to preserve the European model of rural development, namely family farms and balanced town and country planning. The approach taken typically is broad including agriculture, forestry, environment, energy and research considerations. Foundational to this approach includes the generalisation that there is, or at least has been, a steady rural to urban migration.

Detailed analysis of contemporary Europe shows a more complex pattern of social and economic changes (Hodge, 1988). For example, there have been changes in the location of manufacturing employment with older industrial areas losing people, and accessible non-metro areas gaining people. Some rural areas achieved the highest increase in number of jobs. However, not all rural regions are growing and there is much variation. In addition to employment changes there is counterurbanisation as people chose to live non-metro lifestyles. Thus, with respect to future developments, Hodge sees that regional development will occur at different rates in different areas with remote areas facing fewer development options, and it is those areas that will be the targets of rural policy.

Rural events in the UK are better known to us. Population changes include increased numbers of middle-class people living in rural areas resulting in tensions between them and working-class people who have lived there for a long time (Hudson and Williams, 1986). Typically, newcomers want little change while existing residents want improved services. Other issues include conservation, housing and employment. As in the US there is awareness in the UK that agriculture is not the most important element of rural policy and this recognition is reflected in environmental policy (Green, 1988). Until the 1980s it was believed by many that agriculture was the only means by which the countryside, landscape and wildlife were created and maintained. This viewpoint then received well-documented critique, so that now the MAFF has to have regard for the conservation of the environment. Green considers it possible that agriculture in future may entail both countryside management and food production, while Grant (1990) can foresee the MAFF combining with the

Department of Environment to form a Department of Rural Affairs. As Munton (1988) puts it, the key question now is, How will agriculture retreat from its heyday?

In this context the MAFF has broadened its focus and examined farming and the rural economy (ECOTEC, 1989). That report shows that the results of change in agriculture are greatest where the farm workforce is a high proportion of the total workforce, where the farm workforce has many hired workers, and where there is a dispersed settlement structure. Also being examined is the pattern of direct public support to rural areas with a view to explore options for alternative systems of public support (Hill et al., 1989). These two examples illustrate the breadth of MAFF focus in the UK.

### **2.2.3 The Trend Away from Agriculture**

While this brief review of rural policies in the US and the UK does not do justice to the complexity of recent developments it does show clearly that in both countries there is a retreat from the farmer dominance of agriculture. It is fair to say that post World War II policies emphasised production and this emphasis meant that agriculture was the touchstone of rural policies with most rural issues bent or warped to fit in with the productionist viewpoint. Now however, agriculture is seen no longer as sufficient for rural policy because the singularity of focus has been found wanting: in the US because rural communities no longer uniformly represent agricultural interests or activities, and in the UK because environmental pressures and concerns have demanded more than consideration of only agriculture. While other factors must have been important in the decline of agriculture's central place in rural policy, it is clear that the suitability of a narrow productionist view has outlived its usefulness.

## **2.3 Changing Disciplinary Support for MAFF**

Changes in the MAFF and its recent orientation to environment and rural society raise questions about the relationship between academic discipline and the Government ministry. What has this relationship been and how has it changed? The following discussion briefly examines the disciplines that have been and are still linked to MAFF, and compares this to France in order to illustrate the main points.

Brun (1990) describes agricultural economics in the UK as having been based on the neoclassical paradigm, using econometrics as the dominant technique. This approach has been fairly uniform across different institutions. However, Brun argues that in the UK, where agricultural economists actively teach compared to France where teaching and research are quite separate activities, there is greater adaptability in response to student demands. Thus, in the wake of the agricultural crisis and high unemployment, British agricultural economists are asking questions beyond their discipline, and are moving beyond the market as they grapple with unemployment, nature conservation and alternative land uses, for example. There is decreased attention given to agriculture and econometrics. Thus, for example, Coleman (1990:174) states:

Given the pressures now facing agriculture in Western Europe, it is obvious that much more interdisciplinary research collaboration is needed to achieve the right balance of aims of countryside management.

But why was agricultural economics so important to MAFF historically? This relationship between discipline and government institutions, dates from post-war goals of food security and cheap food for urban consumers. With these goals in mind, it was agricultural economics which provided the technical means of achieving them via a focus on farm adjustment and diffusion of innovations. Hamilton (1990) goes further and argues that the absence of a British rural sociology, when comparison is made to France, occurred because there was no demand for knowledge about rural society generally. The rural population was small, unproblematic and insignificant compared to agriculture, production and food. Thus, there was little attention from sociologists, agricultural economists, or MAFF personnel to issues relating to rural society generally or the impact of changes in agriculture on rural society, culture, politics or environmental change.

Hamilton further explains the narrow British academic focus on agricultural economics by reference to two factors. First, sociology itself only became significant in UK universities in the 1960s and its main focus was on urban centres. Second, the political power of the farm lobby was high and dominated the identification of issues such that production was the central focus and other social issues did not become general policy issues. The result was an absence of a rural sociology in the UK.

The pattern in the UK reflects the specific institutional and political forces bearing on the development of research. In France, a different pattern emerged (Charlot, 1990). France urbanised later than the UK so there was a greater presence of, and sensitivity to, rural people. Many senior political leaders passed through the agricultural ministry, and others drew upon a rural background. In the UK, the position of minister of agriculture is not a step on to higher office. Further, in France, academics generally have to have some knowledge of rural affairs. Further, this knowledge was seen as vital because the government wanted to encourage urbanisation, and because the popular view was that rural people were a brake on national development. Mendras developed a school based on the theory that peasant culture was a hindrance to modernisation. Opposed to this view, Servolin developed a school emphasising that peasants were incorporated into capitalism rather than being an as yet unassimilated group. The result of these institutional factors in France was a rich rural research focus yielding detailed studies in rural anthropology, politics, sociology and economics.

Looking at both the UK and France, one can see that disciplines relevant to practical policy issues came to the fore. In the UK, production and security were dominant and agricultural economics provided useful inputs and the MAFF embraced this discipline. In France, rural society itself was the subject of attention and many disciplines were seen as relevant. In the current UK context, the post-war goals have been supplanted by newer issues relating to environment and competing land uses. There are competing views of land and conflicts over land use. No longer is there a single guiding policy goal to which everyone adheres, and with competing interests it is necessary to embrace sociology, politics, anthropology and economics rather than economics alone. The UK situation indicates that the MAFF is changing, and disciplines other than agricultural economics are becoming more relevant to contemporary rural and political life.

Further, it will not be sufficient to have "...interdisciplinary research collaboration..." noted earlier (Coleman, 1990) if the disciplines have fundamentally different assumptions which prevent any agreement over basic approaches and beliefs. (This problem is complex and not

addressed in detail here).

#### **2.4 New Zealand, MAF, and Changing Disciplinary Support**

The case of MAFF and the earlier paucity of rural sociology in the UK seems to have been repeated in New Zealand. There is no well established rural sociology in New Zealand, and despite the importance and general popularity of agriculture and rural topics, there is little scholarship in the area. Even cursory examination of available literature shows a lack of attention to rural social organisation, or social relations of production, and there are few monographs (Carter, 1990). Much of the available rural sociology has been done by people from other disciplines. However, the absence of abundant literature belies the history of MAF in New Zealand, for that history shows a recognition of rural sociology, albeit in a way that did not produce tangible results.

Carter (1986) documents how by 1944 the then Department of Agriculture established a Rural Development Division in which was located the Rural Sociology Section. The main orientation of the Division was towards farm women, the supporting discipline was home economics, and the Division liaised with the Women's Division of Federated Farmers. Three factors underlaid the Department's rural programme (Carter, 1986). First, home science was transplanted successfully from the US to Otago University in 1929 and graduates were available to the Rural Development Division. Second, in addition to this source of appropriately trained specialists, the Department of Agriculture began in 1938 to include women's pages in its Journal of Agriculture in response to the success of women's pages in other competing journals. These pages publicised the farm women's point of view. Third, during the war years Department officials were involved with schemes for women to work on farms as part of the war effort, and they had direct contact with the difficulties facing farm women. These factors resulted in the formation of the Rural Development Division with an orientation towards women.

The Rural Sociology Section was meant to have had a research orientation. Carter (1988) shows that in 1945 an aborted survey on house design undermined later attempts at research. Further, while the head of the section, Viggers, was appropriately trained in rural sociology all the field officers were women with home science training completely unfamiliar with social science. Little research was done and the institutional structure reflected the reality of farming in which production was a male activity supported by one part of the Department, and reproduction of the household was a female activity supported by another part of the Department. The duration of the Rural Development Division was limited and it was changed to the Home Science Section in 1957. Thus, rural sociology from the US was a 'failed graft' (Carter, 1988) and the Rural Development Division reflected the interests of the WDF. Like the situation in the UK, the Department of Agriculture in New Zealand responded to, or some would say was captured by, specific pressure groups. Each direction involved specific goals which required disciplinary support, and in the case of farm women, that discipline was home economics.

Turning now to farm production we can examine the disciplinary support used by the Department of Agriculture, and then the MAF. It is self evident that in the New Zealand case farm production for export has been a national goal for much of our history. During the 1940s and 1950s Fawcett was Director General of Agriculture. He was a general

economist, supported by a small team of economists in the Department. By 1955 specialist degrees in agricultural sciences were important in Departmental recruiting, and new recruits had agricultural economics as part of their training. In 1960 Lincoln College appointed B.P. Philpott as Professor of Agricultural Economics and he helped align agricultural economics to national policy (Johnson, 1990). In 1963 the Agricultural Development Conference emphasised the importance of agricultural exports. By 1969 this production orientation manifested in the formation of the Economics Division so that over the last two decades, agricultural economics was the dominant discipline used to solve problems generated within the productionist framework of MAF.

However, the Economics Division was not concerned exclusively with economics and there was recognition of social issues. In the mid 1970s assessments of irrigation projects included a social component. Also occurring in the 1970s and 1980s were the appointment and educational support of personnel trained in the social sciences. This led to MAF publications addressing the issues of social research and rural development (e.g., Gillies, 1979), and to liaison between MAF and other people interested in rural development. Information from these sources did much to bring social issues to the attention of government even if there was little official action (Pomeroy, 1991). By the late 1980s pressure from rural groups for a Ministry of Rural Affairs was not accepted. But within MAF there was official recognition of the rural community by way of specific outcomes documented in the MAF Corporate contracts of 1990-91 and 1991-92. MAF now has an explicit task of monitoring changes in the socio-economic structure of rural communities (Pomeroy, 1991). Finally, by 1991 MAF social research culminated in the establishment of the Rural Resources Unit. Before and during these recent pressures for change MAF has provided support for university research, some of which brought a social science perspective to farming and the rural community.

The decades of the 1970s and 1980s were for MAF a period of initial dominance by economics and a growing awareness of social sciences. Consequently, the early social scientists in MAF were not always understood. Further, while recognition of the social science developed this did not mean that its potential contribution was recognised. To some degree there has been a need to address the issue of the specific character of rural research, and the present Discussion Paper is an example of this endeavour.

The history and character of the MAF in New Zealand appears to match that of the MAFF in the UK. In a similar way it is the current new issues and goals which are reawakening the interest in non-economic research issues. For example, recent climatic disasters and the farm crisis have enforced a view that encompasses the rural community as a whole. Farm financial crisis raises questions about the flow-on effects to the rural community and what effect changes in rural community may have on agriculture. In this way it is made clear that farm production is linked to rural community and those people concerned about production are forced to ask questions about rural community. Further, as in the US, there is a growing awareness that more than agricultural production occurs in rural areas in New Zealand. For example, recent research on social organisation at Methven (Fairweather and Campbell, 1990) shows that the tourist industry has had a major impact on the pattern of farmer adjustment to the recent economic downturn. No longer are Methven's fortunes tied to primary production. Finally, tourism, conservation and recreation all create diverse pressures and complicated issues that impinge on MAF's responsibilities. In the light of this complexity it is likely that disciplines other than agricultural economics alone will prove

valuable to MAF in future.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Rural policy changes in both the US and the UK show a trend away from agriculture as the key element of policy. In both countries the current issues are complex and the simple aim of agricultural production is suitable no longer. Diversity in rural economy and society, and diversity in demands over rural issues, are making for clear demands for rural policy more finely attuned to these demands. While agricultural production still plays a role, it no longer dominates rural policy. Parallel to these changes have been changes in the disciplines used to support government institutions, and agricultural economics and other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and political science are seen as relevant in an era of competing demands over rural resources. In New Zealand similar changes are occurring and it appears that a position of dominance of agricultural economics in agricultural policy is now moving to embrace other relevant disciplines in the light of growing complexity in rural issues.

Since it is clear that sociology can make an important input into rural policy it is now relevant to review developments in sociology in order to describe current research issues as defined by the discipline. This description of needed research topics forms the terrain from which it is possible to delineate the range of topics that could be included in MAF social research.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIOLOGICAL INDICATIONS OF APPROPRIATE RESEARCH TOPICS

#### 3.1 Introduction

The following discussion begins with an overview of the main changes in the disciplines of rural sociology and the sociology of agriculture, changes which are related to dynamics in international agriculture. The disciplinary changes have culminated recently in a number of review articles which form the basis here of a description of both needed research topics and conceptual approaches to research. This report cites the review articles only. The objective has been to look for the common themes among the five main reviews in order to map out the appropriate topics for research. However, while the topics are separately described this does not mean that they are intrinsically separate in their mode of action: each topic is related to the others.

The productionist ethos in agriculture prevailed from early in the twentieth century until the 1970s at least, in many countries. During this time the sub-discipline of Rural Sociology in the United States played an ancillary role to production by specialising in research that examined the diffusion and adoption of new techniques. By the late 1970s there were criticisms of the productionist ethos, and disillusionment with international development efforts (Buttel et al., 1990). These events were paralleled by a critical rural sociology which had as its main focus the sociology of agriculture founded on a rejection of the assumptions of rural sociology (see for example, Newby (1980)). During the 1980s research in the sociology of agriculture flourished, and by 1990 Buttel et al. (1990) were able to prepare an important review of literature in this area. The review included an account of the current major trends, and major gaps, in this by now well established field. Concurrently, other authors have reviewed research priorities (Share et al., 1991) research agendas (Bowler, 1989; Swanson, 1989) and surveys of rural research in New Zealand (Carter, 1990). All these sources are informed by the sociology of agriculture literature and all are useful in specifying both appropriate topics for research and appropriate approaches or concepts for research. It must be emphasised that while the following research topics are oriented to the sociology discipline they can form the basis for a description of a range of topics that could be included in MAF social research. This issue is taken up in Chapter 4. In the meantime the sociology of agriculture review articles form the basis of a listing of research topics.

#### 3.2 Research Topics

In presenting research topics it is useful to provide some kind of ordering and in the following discussion an order is developed that reflects the author's approach. The order begins at the level of the farm and rural community, and extends via the community and the state to the international food regimes, and ends at the level of the consumer (see Figure 1). This arbitrary order reflects a changing focus beginning with a narrow view on farms and community and then broadening to encompass the international context. However, the lines of connection between these levels are very strong and definite. The hierarchy employed to introduce the research topics is not meant to imply that farmers are necessarily protected by the state, for example, or that international factors are somehow diminished in importance compared to regional factors. The first topic is structural change.



**Figure 1**  
**Research Topics Presented in an Arbitrary Order**

Subject Level	Topics
Consumers	Consumption patterns and food preferences
International linkages	Food regimes and commodity chains
Government	Policy analysis
Farm and Rural Community	Technology and environment Rural social life Structural change

### 3.2.1 Structural Change

This topic is defined here, broadly, to include:

1. The overall position of landownership, farm numbers, farm types, farm size distribution and regional variations as all these change over time
2. The forms of social organisation of production. For example, the character and proportion in the farm population of family farms, corporate farms, or other forms
3. The rural population, demographic, economic and social data, including regional variation.

The topic of structural change is very important because it provides a baseline from which changes in farming and rural population can be observed and at least partly understood. This topic is addressed using typically quantitative data over time derived from available official statistics and other sources. Other methods, such as ethnographies or interviews, are more suitable for developing an understanding of different forms of production.

### 3.2.2 Rural Social Life

This topic provides the human complement to data on structural change. Generally, there is a need to document the everyday life of rural people and farmers, and included here would be accounts of the meanings of social existence from the subjects' points of view, in particular the meaning of rural life and an account of its culture. Comparisons could be made to urban people and their perceptions of both urban and rural life. Of particular interest would be the study of the changing role of women on farms and the structure and dynamics of the division of labour within the farm household, or in other forms of production. Also important is the experience of work in all its forms and the manifestations of the rural labour market. Another relevant issue is the needs of rural people, including

objective analysis and perceptions of the delivery of services.

The topic of rural social life is important because it is a necessary complement to the structural data. Structural data in themselves fail to account for the human side of changes in agriculture and rural society, and attention to structural data alone would lead to a distorted understanding. Appropriate methods include surveys, interviews, ethnographies, and life story analysis.

### **3.2.3 Technology and Environment**

This topic includes description of technology change in both farming and allied industries, and the social impacts following changes in technology. In addition, the use of technology can be linked to farm structural changes and to rural community changes. For example, biotechnology may lead to major changes in the character of production, and its application could be a telling example of the way farmers' control over their production process is changed. Off-farm technology changes such as with telephones and fax machines have impacts for rural dwellers. Also relevant are the political and economic processes by which agricultural technology is developed, applied and adapted by farmers. No longer adequate is the view that technology by itself impels innovation or that technology change is necessarily benign. Needed is careful analysis of who benefits from new technology. A related issue is the impact of technology, or farming systems as a whole, on the physical environment, and an examination of who pays for environmental damage. An important issue for research is examination of all the environmental consequences of farming technology along with assessment of who benefits and who pays.

### **3.2.4 Policy Analysis**

This topic includes study of both agricultural and rural policy in terms of historical analysis and interpretation of past policy, and evaluation of present policy. Typically, evaluation requires research to assess whether desired outcomes are achieved. Another issue is the relationship between agricultural policy and rural development generally. There is evidence that agricultural development does not necessarily encourage rural development. The topic of rural development entails formulating viable policies. Underlying policy analysis is the need to explicitly conceptualise the relationship between the state and agriculture (Bowler, 1989; Buttel et al., 1990) and to question the assumption that policy is derived from a rational policy process. It is this questioning of agricultural policy which underlies its importance for study.

### **3.2.5 Food Regimes and Commodity Chains**

This topic includes description and explanation of the agro-commodity chains that link farms to the national and international economies. It is the economic setting in which farmers operate that is crucially important to farmers and their future. While New Zealand farmers have always been linked into international trade, this fact does not belittle its influence or make study of recent changes in the international commodity markets any less relevant. Important elements for study are agribusiness, and the role of credit and finance. This topic is important because international factors have a direct impact on farmers and form the immediate context to on-farm decisions.

### **3.2.6 Consumption Patterns and Food Preferences**

This topic flows from the foregoing because it directs attention to the role that consumers can play in influencing production, and illustrates the connection of farm production to (distant) city consumption. Consumer preferences, to a greater or lesser degree, are important to food and fibre processing industries as they attempt to both influence and respond to consumers' preferences. The sociology of food and eating is a new sub-discipline which examines a number of topics on the relationship between food and people. Relevant here is the way food is a product attached to which are meanings derived from particular cultures, so that food is not seen merely by consumers as the sum of its biological components but is a cultural product in itself. This topic is important because agricultural products have to be marketed into ever-changing market references.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

This review of the sociology of agriculture has led to the specification of a hierarchy of research subjects beginning at the level of the farm and rural community, extending through government and international linkages to consumers. Six research topics cover this subject matter and each one includes many issues for research. This chapter has not attempted to spell out in detail what these issues entail because the main objective is to provide an overview of the main research topics as they are defined by sociologists. One can expect that not all these topics would be relevant to MAF. However, this list is broad and provides the basis from which to select topics appropriate to MAF, and it is this subject that is addressed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### TOPICS APPROPRIATE FOR A MAF SOCIAL RESEARCH AGENDA

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter the argument begins with a review of appropriate social research topics as seen by a group of five MAF personnel. These topics are specified briefly, and it will be shown that these correspond almost completely to the research subjects as derived from a review of sociology literature. The chapter goes on to specify an appropriate research agenda for MAF and spells out suggested foci for research.

#### 4.2 Social Research Perceptions of Some MAF Personnel

In undertaking this research it was considered necessary to interview MAF personnel in order to learn of their perceptions of social research needs appropriate to MAF. Accordingly, five people were interviewed, including three at Head Office (John Askwith, Stuart Morriss and Ann Pomeroy) in Wellington and two at Lincoln (John Greer and Grant McFadden). While this group by no means represents MAF on this issue, it can give an indication of MAF preferences for social research. All five people have had experience with social issues and can give relevant input into formulating an appropriate social research agenda. Figure 2 lists the topics stated as worthy of research by the five MAF personnel and, as earlier, the order of study proceeds from the lowest part of Figure 2.

##### 4.2.1 Rural Community Needs

There are two key issues here:

1. The process by which a community identifies and ultimately acts in response to perceived need. This topic relates to rural community organisation and is focused on local politics, including the process by which need is defined and what groups play a dominant or other role in the definition of need. Appropriate methods would include community studies and ethnographies
2. Rural perceptions of standard of living. Of interest here is relative perception of standard compared to urban people. At issue is whether rural people believe they are missing out on the benefits that urban people have, and this entails perceptions of the advantages of the rural life style. Appropriate methods include opinion surveys of both urban and rural people.

**Figure 2**  
**List of Social Research Topics Specified by Five MAF Personnel**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Subject Level</b>
Marketing	Pomeroy	Consumers
Labour market reorganisation	Askwith Pomeroy	International linkages
Farm structure and policy targets	McFadden	Government
Rural Community	McFadden Morriss Pomeroy	Farm and rural community
Farmer decision making	Askwith Greer McFadden	"
Farm succession	Greer McFadden	"
Changing farm labour relations	Askwith Greer	"
Environmental issues	Greer McFadden Pomeroy	Public perceptions and opinions
Urban perceptions	McFadden Morriss	"
Rural community needs	Askwith Greer McFadden	"

#### 4.2.2 Urban Perceptions

The main issue with urban perceptions focuses on what urban people want for agriculture and the rural community. Their involvement in rural affairs derives from their own use of rural areas (e.g., for recreation) and from their concerns over appropriate development, including environmental issues and their view of appropriate costs of living. Awareness of urban perceptions would be an important guide to MAF policy. Appropriate methods include public opinion surveys.

### **4.2.3 Environmental Issues**

Of concern here is farmers' awareness of environmental issues in their day-to-day management. While a general awareness of environmental problems may exist it does not mean that these are translated into on-farm practice. Further, it is well known that farmers often claim to have a steward role but we do not know if this embraces modern environmental issues, and whether they accept the significance of issues identified by urban people. At issue is farmers' willingness to change management in ways that are compatible with sustainable agriculture. Appropriate methods include surveys and in-depth studies of management practices.

### **4.2.4 Changing Labour Relations on Farms**

The main focus with this topic is the pattern of adjustment in work as farmers have responded to increased economic pressure. One element is the effect on the farm household of using less hired labour, and similarly, the effect of either the farm men or the farm women taking off-farm work. There is a quantitative side to this topic which is a concern with measuring the size and significance of new ways of organising work (surveys), and a qualitative side which is a concern about the subjective response to changes in work (interviews, case studies, ethnographies).

### **4.2.5 Farm Succession**

How farms are passed on to new farmers or family members is a complex process but one that has some general patterns which are not understood fully at present. In addition to learning about the general pattern is the issue of the ways in which the general pattern is modified by the present economic climate in which farming careers are seen by some as unsuitable. It is possible that some parents remain trapped on their farms, while in other cases, new entrants are not available. Appropriate methods include surveys, interviews and analysis of official data.

### **4.2.6 Farmer Decision Making**

For MAF personnel a major issue is understanding the management decision making of those farmers who do not seek professional help. It appears that this group are motivated by unorthodox factors, and they appear to have different sources of information on which they are making decisions. Appropriate methods include focusing study on all types of farmers in ways that are sensitive to unorthodoxy.

### **4.2.7 Farm Structure and Policy Targets**

Given that farmers are a diverse group and that many are not traditional, full-time farmers, it is becoming relevant to consider who is the appropriate target of policy. If in some areas there is a large proportion of part-time farmers who collectively account for a significant proportion of total production or a significant proportion of land used, then it becomes necessary to formulate policy in ways that account for diversity. Appropriate methods include analysis of official data by way of defining the significant structural changes in all regions of New Zealand and using other techniques to better understand the non-traditional types of farmer.

#### **4.2.8 Rural Community**

Paralleling the above concern over structural changes in farm production is a concern over changes in rural communities, including an account of which are growing, which are declining, and why. An additional focus is the relationship between farming viability and community viability. Related to this issue is the regional pattern of growth or decline that is sustained by dynamics within and between rural communities within a region. Appropriate methods include analysis of official data, community studies, regional studies and comparisons of selected communities in order to examine the effect of agricultural linkages on community development.

#### **4.2.9 Labour Market Reorganisation**

It is well known that farmers and rural communities are influenced by changes in the industries that transport, process and export primary products. Some key issues here are the social and economic impacts of wharf and meat industry reorganisation which has altered significantly the conduct of business in these areas. More general is the issue of labour market deregulation and its impacts in rural areas. Appropriate methods include the historical study of agro-commodity chains in which key changes and their impacts are accounted for using both official data and interviews.

#### **4.2.10 Consumer Preferences**

A key issue here is to observe changing patterns of food consumption in terms of both perceptions of food, in ways that are sensitive to cultural variations, and in terms of marketing strategies. Awareness of consumer preferences can be enhanced by research and can be used by farmers and policymakers to either change production goals or modify consumer preferences. Appropriate methods include surveys and cultural analyses.

### **4.3 A Possible Social Research Agenda for MAF**

Figures 1 and 2 show first the arbitrary hierarchial order of research topics specified by proponents of the sociology of agriculture sub-discipline, and second, the order specified by the MAF personnel. Comparison of the two figures shows a remarkable correspondence: there is a similar range of subject levels extending from the farm and rural community through international linkages to consumers. Both groups recognise the interconnectedness of farming with the rural community and beyond, stretching ultimately to the consumer. Both groups cover a wide range of topics and share overlapping interests. For example, MAF's interest in labour market reorganisation in the processing industries would be matched by the sociologists' interest in food regimes and commodity chains. MAF's interest in farm structure and policy targets matches the topic of policy analysis. The comparison shows some differences. First, the subject level of government is omitted from the MAF personnel list, although the topic of farm structure and policy goals is similar. Perhaps MAF personnel are interested in policy evaluation in order to improve the effectiveness of policy but because they are so close to this topic it was not singled out as a topic for study in itself. Second, the MAF personnel list includes a group of three topics fitting into the subject level of public perceptions and opinions. Naturally, for those concerned with policy, a broad base of intelligence regarding public opinion is important to their endeavours in a democratic society.

An appropriate conclusion to make in the light of the correspondence of research topics between sociologists and MAF personnel is that appropriate social research for MAF could include the following five subject levels namely: farm, rural community, international linkages, consumers, and an additional topic of public perceptions and opinions. Knowledge of these subjects would be relevant to formulating effective policy aimed at fostering healthy rural communities.

It is relatively straightforward to specify the five subject levels relevant for an appropriate social research agenda for MAF. The sociology of agriculture literature reviewed in Chapter 3 gives a good description of research in each of the subject levels. Perhaps more important now is to outline a strategy by which these subjects can be studied. This section of the report suggests four foci for research which, if successfully studied, would yield data on most of the subject levels and research topics. The general strategy would be to establish a quantitative data base and then supplementing this with both farm and community studies to provide a more detailed picture of current changes. The third element is study of commodity chains which is taken to include the linkages between the farm and the consumer. The fourth element is public perception. The following outline of a research programme gives some details relevant to each of these four elements.

#### **4.3.1. A Rural Data Base**

A rural data base would provide breakdowns of all available official data series for urban and rural locations and for regions or counties. The main objective of the data base would be to provide a description of changing farm and rural community structure. Farm structure would include analyses of size, ownership, land use and distributional data for all farms in New Zealand. Rural community structure would include population, employment and age data for rural areas. These two aspects of structure are crucial to an informed understanding of farm and community change and would provide an accurate description of the 'rural' sector in New Zealand. In addition to providing a baseline of understanding rural society, the rural data base would be important for policy formulation. Without the development and maintenance of this data base, researchers and policymakers will have only partial knowledge of past and present trends and they will face the obstacle of needing baseline data but not having the time to undertake appropriate analyses.

#### **4.3.2. Farm and Community Details**

The data base would be largely quantitative, and since it would be based on official data it would not be able to reflect recent changes or new developments. Nor would it address broader issues of research that are not captured by survey questions. For example, it would be necessary to add to farm structure change data such topics as the study of farm social organisation, labour relations, decision making or succession.

These topics should be addressed using the full variety of research methods available to social scientists. Similarly, rural community structure data, while giving a good description of rural communities, does not tell us how they work in any detail. Ethnographic studies of selected rural communities would provide flesh to the structural data.



### **4.3.3. Agro-Commodity Chains**

Included here is the analyses of off-farm structures and changes. The social, economic and technical aspects of all the organisations that exist between the farm gate and the consumer are the key components of agro-commodity chains. These organisations play an important role and have important effects on farms and rural communities. These chains must be included in any research that endeavours to describe and explain what our rural society is like and why it changes. Included in agro-commodity chains is the topic of consumer preferences. Research would focus on particular commodities and develop a systematic understanding of them before going on to examine similarities and differences among a number of different chains.

### **4.3.4. Public Opinion Surveys**

This last part of the proposed research programme is designed to cater for the particular interest MAF has in responding to both urban and rural public opinion. These surveys would use random samples of urban and rural people and focus on issues topical at the time. The results could be publicised widely in much the same way as John Pryde's farmer opinion survey was used as an annual source of data for farmers and policymakers. The public opinion survey would be an important way for MAF to ensure that it was responsive to public opinion in general and rural opinion in particular. Establishing a regular survey would provide a formal way for rural people to express their views to governments.

## **4.4 Conclusion**

This Discussion Paper has established that agricultural production by itself is no longer the foundation for rural policy. In the US and UK recent changes illustrate this finding, and a study of some MAF history in New Zealand shows supporting evidence that a broader agenda for MAF now is relevant and that disciplines such as sociology, with a broad focus on rural society, can provide relevant theory and data.

A review of the sociology of agriculture literature revealed six main research topics falling under four subject levels. The views of five MAF personnel showed that they define social research topics in ways that are similar to the sociologists. Five subject levels would be relevant for a MAF social research agenda, namely, the farm, rural community, international linkages, consumers, and public perceptions. Understanding these subjects would be important to any organisation seeking to learn about rural society or seeking to develop effective policy to support rural society. In a strategy for organising research which covers these subject levels, this Discussion Paper suggests research should be founded upon a rural data base which is supplemented by other studies.

Finally, it should be noted that while the discussion above gives an emphasis to sociology, it should not be concluded that other disciplines have no place in this proposed programme of rural research. To the contrary, the second chapter makes it clear that many disciplines can make a contribution to understanding rural society and contribute to a MAF social research agenda. Rural issues are complex and demand contributions from economics, geography, anthropology, history and sociology to name the more obvious disciplines. Each of these disciplines can link into the topics for research noted earlier.

Given the complexity of changes in New Zealand rural society it is timely for MAF to consider an appropriate social research agenda. With the precedent set in other countries and current recognition given to the relevance of social research, MAF is already embarked on a new direction for policy formation. This Discussion Paper sets out a list of topics which could be relevant to MAF in the light of its interest in healthy rural communities.



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