

A participatory approach to improving farm logistics

Problem

Farmers that want to grow different crops and serve several market channels need to deal with complex logistics on the farm. Farm advisors usually offer technical expertise on cropping systems. This expertise is often not accepted by farmers as the right kind of knowledge to support farm-level decision making for this type of farm management.

Solution

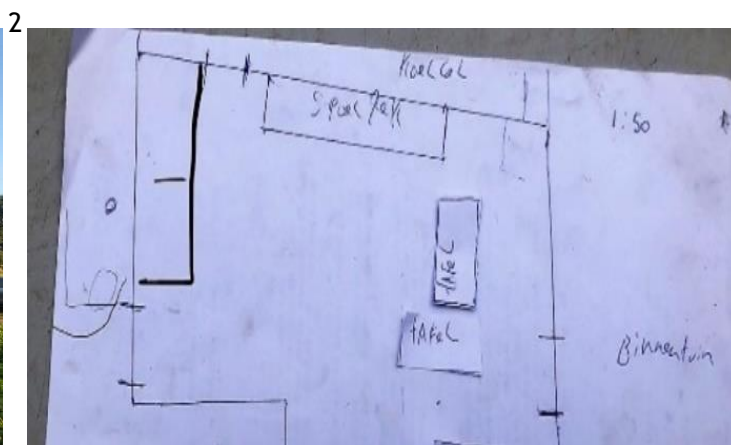
Invest in a network in which farmers feel confident, set up peer-to-peer learning tools, and share results and solutions.

Outcome

Farmers learn and can adopt lessons learnt directly on their own farm. Farmers feel more confident about their own approach. They are able to sustain their diversified farms, which contribute to a healthy natural environment and to their own economic stability.

Practical recommendation

- If a farmers organisation or advisory service experiences the need for such a network, one can start by inviting farmers to become part of a learning network.
- It is easier to connect to an existing (farmers) organisation rather than starting from scratch. By using their established media network, it will be easier to reach interested farmers.
- Accept that the group needs time to establish itself. In the beginning, some farmers may drop out, others may join later.
- The group should be small enough that farmers can get to know each other.
- Do not look for identical farms, look for farmers who are motivated to maintain diversity. Sometimes a two hectare vegetable grower can inspire a 100 hectare arable farmer even though they generally do not visit each other's farms.



Picture 1: On-farm meeting (Photo: Niels Heining, Bionext). Picture 2: Drawing of a vegetable sorting and cleaning facility with flexible elements that can be moved around (Photo: Rick Sloot, de Es).

- Even motivated farmers need some support to maintain the network in busy times. Appoint an external process leader. This could be a farm advisor, consultant, scientist or government officer. He/she has the role of making notes and sharing them with the group, picking dates, but also leading discussions during the meeting and finding resources that inspire. Invest time into using knowledge-exchange tools. Also invest time into creating a safe environment within the network where comments and questions are accepted and not taken as criticism.
- It is this support and facilitation that can be difficult to fund, as it is not research and not direct advisory work. Governments can support farmers networks and knowledge exchange by creating subsidies for these kinds of activities.
- One example of knowledge exchange tool is a farm excursion where the host farm is asked to prepare a farm description and present a problem area. Visiting farmers are asked to reflect on the problem area indicated. Take time to discuss suggestions presented and check later if suggestions have led to changes. Some topics can also be discussed online, for example, presenting pictures or drawings to consider the most efficient lay-out of your vegetable sorting and cleaning facility (picture 2).
- Another example of a knowledge exchange tool is the “give a day, get a day” system, where a farmer invests a day in working on another farm and receives a day’s work from the other farmer. At the end of the day the farmers discuss their observations. Ideally, lessons are also shared with the rest of the network.

Further information

Further readings

- The market gardener, Jean Martin Fortier <https://www.themarketgardener.com/>
- Dutch translation and adaptation; Zo krijg je een rendabele kleine tuinderij, Taco IJzerman <https://janvanarkel.nl/zo-krijg-je-een-rendabele-kleine-tuinderij/>

Weblinks

- Ben Hartman, a vegetable grower developed a system to critically reflect on the processes on your farm. Lean farming: <https://www.claybottomfarm.com/>

About this practice abstract and DiverIMPACTS

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DiverIMPACTS: The project is running from June 2017 to May 2022. The overall goal of DiverIMPACTS - Diversification through Rotation, Intercropping, Multiple Cropping, Promoted with Actors and value-Chains towards Sustainability - is to achieve the full potential of diversification of cropping systems for improved productivity, delivery of ecosystem services and resource-efficient and sustainable value chains.

Project website: www.diverimpacts.net

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