



Members of the AgriSpin cross visit team interview farmer Thomas O'Connor about the farm partnership on his farm.

AgriSpin – supporting innovation

TEAGASC was a partner in the EU-funded AgriSpin project, which aims to strengthen agricultural innovation support systems.

Support services for agricultural innovation are context dependent and there is no 'silver bullet' solution that is always appropriate across different countries, types of innovation or farming systems. However, we now have a far better understanding of agricultural innovation support services, how they link with innovation processes, and ways to strengthen such activities so as to underpin 'best-fit' innovation support services (ISS).

These were some of the high-level conclusions of the recently completed Horizon 2020-funded project 'AgriSpin – Space for Innovations in Agriculture'. The project, in which Teagasc was a partner, sought to identify best practices for innovation and ISS in European agriculture and was delivered by a consortium of 15 partners from 12 countries over two and a half years beginning in March 2015.

Exploratory case studies

The AgriSpin project took an action-research approach using exploratory case studies. Data was gathered on practical innovation experiences using a series of 13 cross visits to 12 countries, during which multi-actor teams of AgriSpin partners consisting of between seven and 10 researchers, practitioners and policy makers studied three to four innovation cases identified by the host partner. Each cross visit lasted three to four days, during which the visit team interviewed key actors, visited farms and firms, and engaged in collective analysis of the data gathered during the visit. As a result, a rich database of 57 cases across Europe, focusing on innovation processes and how to support them, was developed and analysed. The methodology for conducting the cross visits centred on the use of the spiral of innovation (Figure 1).

When analysing an innovation, the cross visit team focused on understanding the actors involved at each stage in the spiral, the activities carried out, the pitfalls encountered, the barriers overcome and the particular help needed. It was critical to identify at what stages the support was offered, what the support entailed, and how it helped to move the innovation process on to the next stage.

Key findings

Across the 57 cases, the different roles of innovation support providers at different phases of the innovation process are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Role of ISS in different phases of the innovation process.

| Innovation phase | Role of innovation support service providers (ISSP) |
|--|--|
| Early phase (e.g., initial idea, inspiration, planning) | Provide space and resources for key actors to interact and establish relationships through sharing knowledge, motivations, etc. |
| Final phases (e.g., development, realisation, dissemination and embedding) | Service provision is more standardised, with many services oriented to farmers to ensure the scaling up and embedding of the innovation. |

The diversity and intensity of innovation support needs depend on two dimensions: the level of technological change required to achieve the innovation; and, the level of attitudinal and organisational change needed to co-ordinate the innovation actors. In addition, as support services may be provided by a large range of service providers, the ISS depends on their characteristics (e.g., their mandate, reputation and resources). The mechanisms used to align the ISS to fully support innovation are largely dependent on the degree of concentration or fragmentation of the ISS. Networking, facilitation and brokerage functions are crucial for all actors across all phases of the innovation process. Notwithstanding the need to draw general conclusions, the case studies confirm that ISS remain case specific and, therefore, recommendations to improve them are concerned with 'best fit' as opposed to 'best practice'.

In Ireland, three diverse cases were studied during a cross visit: 'Bovine Economic Breeding Index'; 'Collaborative Farming'; and, sustainable beef production from the 'Greenacres Calf to Beef Programme'. All three were considered to be excellent multi-actor cases, well established and



Figure 1: Spiral of innovation.

supported by science and intermediary services. The degree to which they demonstrated the value of institutional support was noted. It was also noted that in the Irish context, innovation support could exploit the creativity of actors more. Thus the question was asked: "Could the dependency relationship of strong Teagasc-centric support be improved by more interdependence among actors?"

Key conclusions from AgriSpin

There were five key cross cutting conclusions from the project:

- Communication, negotiation, networking and co-operation skills of actors are increasingly important for successful innovation support processes.
- The capacity of ISSPs or innovation brokers to form and maintain networks with practitioners to support innovations at the territorial or value chain scale is decisive for successful innovation. A specific skillset for innovation brokers was identified and a training programme has been developed to impart those skills.
- Service provision is dependent on the institutional context and especially on how fragmented or concentrated the agricultural knowledge and innovation system (AKIS) is in each country/region.
- The personality traits of support actors (e.g., responsiveness, empathy and awareness) towards innovators are key characteristics that link them with innovators, create conditions of social embeddedness and provide the breeding ground for trust to be developed.
- Above all, the role of funding bodies is imperative in creating an enabling environment for both service providers and innovators with regard to funding opportunities, management and the general approach towards innovation.

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Further information

For more information on AgriSpin, including innovation resources, see: www.agrispin.eu.

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Authors

Kevin Heanue

Evaluation Officer, Business Planning and Performance Evaluation Department, Teagasc, Athenry, Co. Galway
Correspondence: kevin.heanue@teagasc.ie

Tom Kelly

Director of Knowledge Transfer, Teagasc Head Office, Oak Park, Co. Carlow

Mark Gibson

Knowledge Transfer and Communications, Teagasc, Athenry, Co. Galway

James Maher

Curriculum and Standards Officer, Teagasc, Kildalton, Co. Kilkenny

