

# VIRTUAL RURAL EXTENSION TO CHALLENGE FRONTIERS

Keys for a successful participatory experience of practices and learning.

The case of Argentina and Uruguay



## CONTEXT

This note collects the experience of a virtual rural extension initiative that initiated at the beginning of 2021, from a virtual meeting of the network *Extensión para Extensionistas* about the challenges of agricultural family businesses. After the event, the *Agricultural Plan Institute* of Uruguay proposes a joint activity with *INTA* Argentina and *Extensión para Extensionistas*, and it is agreed to hold virtual meetings for producers and professionals around the same topic. This note describes the context of the experience, objectives, methodology, results, challenges, and learning, to encourage its adaptation and replication in other contexts.

The problems of family businesses transcend borders, scales, environments, and areas. Within the agricultural sector, family businesses represent 80% of the productive units that contribute to the economic development of Argentina and Uruguay. This initiative forms a virtual community where the target audience is the owners, partners, founders, advisors, managers, potential successors, and anyone interested in issues related to the family business, without distinction of gender or age, in the agricultural sector of these countries.

The recurring problems in Argentina and Uruguay for agricultural production organizations managed as family business are:

- **Generational succession:** the intergenerational crisis during the life cycle of the company, advanced age of current owners and difficulties in managing crises emerging from processes of change.
- **Uprooting:** many young people are outside the company, studying or working in other fields.
- **Gender inequality:** commonly, first-born sons are encouraged to continue with the agricultural business and younger daughters and sons are encouraged to study topics not related to agriculture.
- **Communication:** limited dialogue within the family and the company, on key issues for continuity (succession), aspirations, preferences of different generations and talent management.
- **Reductionist analysis of problems:** a systemic view is usually missing when addressing family business problems.
- **Poorly defined roles:** the overlap of family and business roles generates disorganization and disorder in the jobs and tasks carried out by each member.

out by the authors along with more than 90 members and advisors from family businesses in both countries. The annual budget of the experience is USD 3,330 with 86.5% direct cost represented by professional fees (management, technical support, advice, etc.) for the extension task and 13.5% indirect cost (9% design, communication and advertising; 4.5% operating expenses). The total budget is contributed by the project portfolio of the base institutions of each participating author.



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## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The objective of this initiative is to offer an international, open, participatory, collaborative and permanent space for the knowledge exchange of agricultural family businesses among actors related to those types of businesses, where information, experiences, knowledge and possible solutions are generated to challenges usually faced in said companies.

The specific objectives are:

1. Keep a space for permanent dialogue with the target population through a WhatsApp group.
2. Promote active participation in debate forums, with the purpose of finding various ways to address the problems mentioned in each forum.
3. Co-create solutions to the challenges faced among all participants.
4. Contribute to the development of capabilities in family agricultural businesses.

The result indicators collected through participant surveys and monitoring tools are:

1. Numbers of video views on Facebook and YouTube channels.
2. Number of participations in the different synchronous meetings.
3. Form of participation in the WhatsApp group (intervened or was only reading/listening).
4. Level of appreciation of schedules, duration, topics, dynamics used, and cases presented in synchronous meetings.



## STAKEHOLDERS AND TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience are owners, partners, founders, advisors, managers, potential successors and anyone interested in issues related to agricultural family business, without distinction of gender or age. There are 88 registered with active participation in the WhatsApp interaction space. Video productions uploaded to virtual social networks multiply the reach of the group and provide a research point that will continue to be evaluated by the technical team. The experience made it possible to generate links between INTA technicians, staff from *Extension para extensionistas* and the Agricultural Plan, and subsequently establish alliances with the ATER Network Aurora of Brazil, RELASER, Ministry of Agriculture of Colombia in virtual fairs of rural extension experiences, with the purpose of sharing the experience developed and expand its scope.

## ACTIVITIES

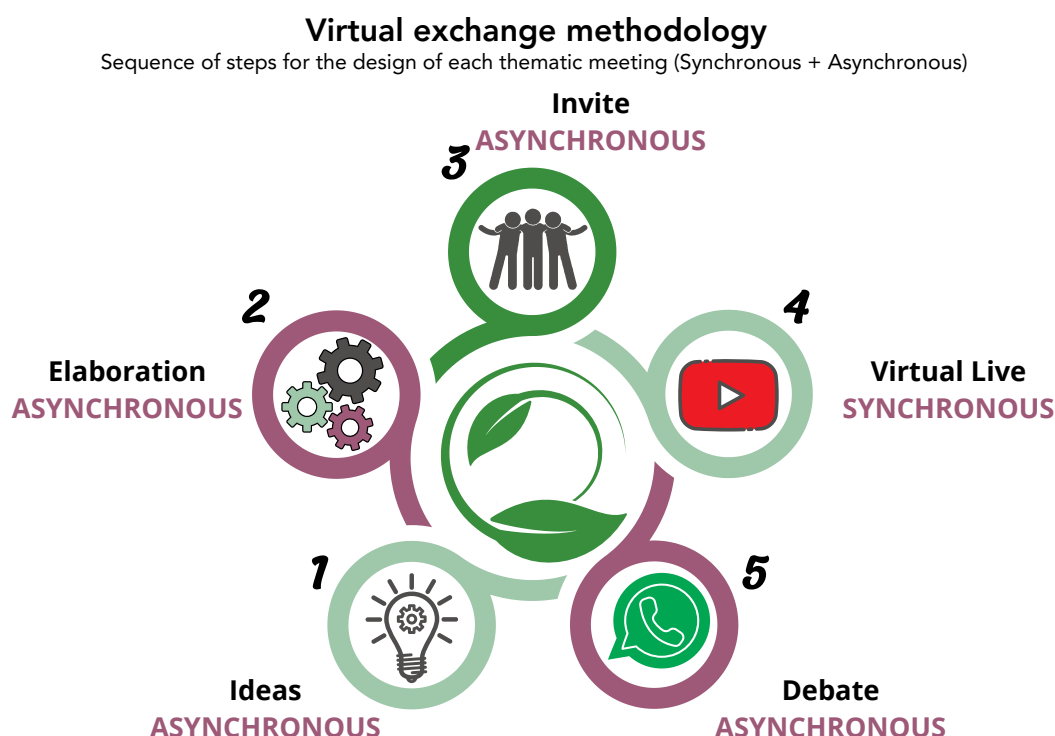
A process of synchronous and asynchronous linkage between actors interested in the topic was designed, with the following tools:

- Virtual or live events via zoom: Each event includes a testimony or case from each country related to the topic raised, and is broadcast live on 3 YouTube channels and a Facebook channel. This open format allowed us to create a WhatsApp group and incorporate more participants into the group. Prior to each event, those interested in participating register in a Google form to receive the link to the event.
- WhatsApp group after synchronous meetings: In this voluntary group, we promote debates, exchanges of knowledge, ideas and opinions of the participants on the most outstanding aspects of the previous synchronous meeting. Each action on WhatsApp was measured with the device's analytic tools. At the end of the cycle of four synchronous meetings, a survey on the entire process was carried out

- YouTube repositories of recorded meetings: The communication teams of each participating organization upload the recordings of each synchronous meeting to the web. The live impacts on YouTube are analyzed from the metrics offered by the platform.

The first participants in the process joined the proposal upon receiving information about the activities, through the virtual social networks of each organization (*Extensión para Extensionistas*, *Agricultural Plan* and *INTA*). As time went by, subscription of new participants to the initiative was incremental and stimulated by the process itself, and word of mouth among recipients interested in the topic.

The virtual exchange methodology used involves the following steps: Ideas, elaboration, invitation, virtual live and debate.



- **Idea** brainstorm is an asynchronous process that arises from community discussions in the WhatsApp group, and can come from technicians or participants.
- The **preparation** of the virtual meeting is developed by the technical team, consulting the participants through the same WhatsApp group, and includes the design of the meeting, the recording and collating of testimonies, and the provision of transmission devices.
- The **invitation** is developed by the technical team, through a dissemination flyer and invitation through virtual social networks, with the support of the communication area of each institution. The other members of the community also used these pieces of communication to invite other interested parties. The invitation includes a Google Form registration to sign up for the Zoom live event.
- The synchronous **virtual live** events are developed on the Zoom platform for those registered for the event, and are transmitted simultaneously on the YouTube channels of INTA and Plan Agropecuario, and on Plan Agropecuario's Facebook. The meetings last 80 minutes. At the beginning of each event, the process and activities that have been carried out in previous meetings are explained. Family testimonies are included from each country, lasting 10 minutes each, and a space to answer questions and reflections from the guests.
- Asynchronous **discussions** occur in the WhatsApp group during the week following each synchronous event, moderated with challenging and open-ended questions arising from and during the event. In these debates, the families who presented their testimonies are invited and the participants outline topics for subsequent meetings. At the end of the exchange on each topic, one of the technical team member prepares a summary of what was discussed that is shared in the group.



## RESULTS

The main challenges encountered were:



- Consolidate the core implementing team, based on different experiences and living in different countries. Consolidation took time, patience, active listening and empathy, during a periodic, rigorous and constructivist sequence of fluid virtual exchanges via Meet or Zoom. This allowed us to know each other, understand each other, and achieve compatibility of interests, institutional missions, and build common goals.
- Maintain motivation among participants of the virtual community. For this, topics of interest are raised, flexibility is encouraged with synchronous and asynchronous activities during the cycle, and motivational messages are sent, through short audios of no more than 60 seconds, suggesting topics for debate. These messages are sent by the technical team and by the participants. Other motivating pieces for the debates were short videos and images, linked to the topics.

At the moment, the products of the process are:

- 5 synchronous meetings, with an average of 120 participants in each meeting following the live event and 9,261 visualizations updated as of July 11, 2023.
- 5 videos of the meetings, available on the Facebook and YouTube channels of the recording repository of the Agricultural Plan, INTA and the network Extension para Extensionistas.
- 10 testimonies (5 from each country) used as material for live events and debates. These products are also used for other training and extension activities such as courses and conferences on this topic.
- 1 active WhatsApp group, currently with 88 members, reaching 120 participants at some times.
- 1 bulk diffusion with 694 people registered for the virtual live events, from Paraguay, Brazil, Colombia, Spain, Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay.
- 1 extension critical debate team to improve participation in virtual settings, with the technical team and extensionists. The team emerges parallel to the development of the community and addresses topics such as participation, beliefs, learning styles, and extension strategies for virtual spaces. Its results are shared on virtual social networks and in the meetings that each professional on the technical team holds in their own organizations.

The main results were:

- After the different synchronous activities, between 30% and 50% of the participants continued discussions in the WhatsApp group.
- In the WhatsApp group, 32% were encouraged to intervene and the rest were reading and listening to the comments.
- Based on their experiences, 81% of the participants said that they received interesting ideas and concepts, 51% reflected and 28% were encouraged to talk about the topic with their families.
- Some reflections expressed by the participants were:
  - "During the 4 days I was left thinking and that is something wonderfully positive."
  - "There is always a way, for every problem. With help, fresh ideas are found."
  - "I found different experiences and situations experienced by the participants. I really find a very participative group".

**5**   
VIDEOS

**4**   
CHANNELS

**9261**   
VIEWS



## LESSONS LEARNED

- ✓ The Covid pandemic crisis was a great opportunity to use technology and information tools that were not widely used.
- ✓ There is the potential to expand the scope of strategies and our work from virtuality. It is possible to carry out extension and promote development and innovation in virtual settings.
- ✓ Internet connectivity and equipment for virtuality are a condition for expanding the strategy in the territories.
- ✓ It is necessary to take into account that not all participants master the virtual technologies that are proposed for exchange; therefore, this aspect must be considered when designing and managing the spaces.
- ✓ It is necessary to have tools and working conditions (physical location, schedules, etc.) to adapt to the virtual work modality.
- ✓ The use of these methodologies (synchronous and asynchronous) facilitates access to knowledge, since participants can enter or dialogue at different times of the day and through different means.
- ✓ The technical team was integrated into the transformation process that promoted the space. The facilitation of reflection and change processes feeds back our own perceptions, reflections, and creativity. It became evident that the objective of contributing to the transformation of family businesses with coherence requires being coherent when it comes to facilitating and accompanying processes, which in turns gives place to our own internal personal transformation.
- ✓ The use of testimonies from family businesses (real cases) to address and analyze concepts and problems facilitates interaction between peers.
- ✓ The systemic approach is well received by the audience to understand the complexity of family business systems.
- ✓ Participatory, constructivist processes have great power to reflect and transform concepts, beliefs, and ways of approaching reality.



## REPLICABILITY, SCALABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The experience is replicable to deal with, accompany and assist in any topic of interest. Scaling up requires the following:

- A multidisciplinary team to ensure the diversity of approaches and coherence with the methodology and expected results.
- Mass communication tools to facilitate sharing information.
- Specialized staff in design and digital marketing.
- Resources for connectivity (internet, zoom, etc.).

The sustainability of this type of strategies is assured when the target audience is involved in the design of the proposals. This was possible through the synchronous events that convened the discussion topics. Additionally, being recorded and broadcast on the different YouTube channels allowed more participants to join the WhatsApp discussion group after each synchronous event. The debate group, with inputs from all participants, defined the future themes that are seen in the sequence. Each topic developed in the synchronous meetings arises from the debates that the participants gave in the WhatsApp group.

Increasing number of topics or participants using a strategy like this one should not require significant increment of economic resources. The critical center of the implementation lies in the consolidation of technical teams with critical, constructivist, participatory capacity, willing to negotiate with the environmental conditions, typical of the diversity and psychosocial dynamics of group work.





## RECOMENDATIONS



To change and understand the different realities, it is recommended that extensionists adopt a systemic view and facilitate the knowledge of all participants without distinction of gender, generation or training.



It is harder to create individual processes in participants of virtual settings, in relation to the topic being covered. It is necessary to develop strategies that allow these personal exercises to be executed remotely and asynchronously. It is recommended to plan the activities, with time guidelines, use trigger questions and resources that encourage reflection.



It is essential to understand the “other” in the process design in a different way, given the distance and non-presence. Active listening must be exercised to understand and design actions based on the level and type of relationship of the participants with each topic being addressed.



Technical assistance and extension in virtual settings forces extensionists to leave their comfort zone at the time of design and action. Virtuality operates with different logics and times than in-person spaces, and what we normally do in person cannot be transmuted to virtuality. Participatory processes mediated by virtuality take time that cannot necessarily be defined in advance. Therefore, to keep them active, we must develop a capacity for permanent reflection on what is happening, constantly adapting actions.



It must be understood that the times that people need to go through the change processes that are put into play are extensive. This understanding is necessary to define the future of strategies and processes from virtuality. It is recommended to plan considering longer times than usual strategies and processes.



It must be recognized that participatory processes are exponential and therefore, the steps and actions must also be adapted to accompany said growth, promoting participation, but at the same time respecting the cadence with which they are manifested in virtual environments. It is suggested to avoid discharge-based, self-referential interventions that seek to confirm judgments or past habits and patterns. Allow room for the new.



Understanding and capitalizing on the advantages of centralized “sharing” process designs will make joint work broad and meaningful for those involved. It is recommended to promote spaces for the practice of sharing. The experiences lived and told by a peer have a greater impact on the other person and on oneself.



In participatory group processes, knowledge is built, exercised, and learned efficiently. It is recommended to be attentive to the temporal differences that each process demands.



We know that network linkage formats have a greater potential for transformation than hierarchical organizations. This implies a review of the configurations or linking styles that extensionists have in relation to the processes. It is recommended to review or self-analyze the level of commitment assumed with this type of proposals.



The feedback from the participants in the WhatsApp group are central elements to understand its logic. It is recommended to summarize, record, and analyze participants' feedback and convert them into inputs, in the form of communication pieces such as audios, graphics, videos. This provides feedback for reflection, contribute to the transformation of pre-existing concepts and beliefs, promote dialogue and expression of interests.



SERIES OF VIDEOS AVAILABLE ON THE WEB FROM SYNCHRONOUS MEETINGS





## TESTIMONIES

Dialogue is essential in every organization, but knowing how to listen to each other and knowing how to understand others is even more important. The best thing is to show what one does and give the other the space to express themselves, to tell their ideas. In this way you can improve and that is the way to achieve continuity.

**Pablo Vicario - Argentina**



Watch video

I joined the Generational Relay group in 2021 since I do not have direct descendants or close relatives who could follow my work, therefore, thanks to them, psychological and moral support, I was able to find the right decision to join another family rooted in the field that wanted to expand.

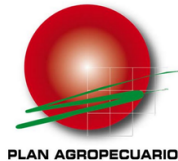
**Carla Braidá - Uruguay**



Watch video



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PLAN AGROPECUARIO

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## Good Practice Note Series

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP) and the DeSIRA (Smart Innovation for Development through Research in Agriculture) initiative, together with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) and the Latin American Network of Rural Extension Services (RELASER), are committed to contributing to the strengthening of national agricultural innovation systems (AIS) for the transformation towards sustainable food systems in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In 2021, a Joint Rapid Assessment on Strengthening Agricultural Innovation Systems in Africa, Asia and Latin America was conducted to analyze the innovation environment to identify and document initiatives to strengthen AIS, in the context of the TAP-AIS project, funded by the European Union through the DeSIRA initiative.

The report presented challenges and opportunities for innovation, especially through the improvement of functional capacities and the ways in which regional, global and national organizations can support this task from the approaches and tools of the Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP).

The publication of this series of Good Practice Notes is an attempt by RELASER and IICA to document cases that have tried to address the development of an effective AIS by addressing their challenges in Latin America.

The same effort was made in the Asia Pacific region, whose best practice notes can be found [here](#).



## The TAP-AIS project

This publication was developed in the context of the TAP-AIS project (2019-2024), funded by the European Union and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

For more information, see:  
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