Building capacity in collective action: learning from dairy industry workforce planning and action in Australia

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Abstract: *Facilitating change as part of rural development is increasingly about aligning the action of diverse groups of interests, knowledge-types and practices. Different theoretical perspectives (e.g. social learning, community of practice) inform processes for faciliating change, however the ethical concerns of actors in collective action contexts is less understood. This paper analyses the emergence of joint activity to support entry and retention of dairy farm workers in an Australian context with the aim of exploring the role that ethical concerns have in motivating a particular type of collective action. Using an action research methodology, the paper draws on formalised reflections by the authors on their experiences in two projects: In2Dairy is a partnership initiative between industry, community, training and government sectors to develop a more effective entry level employment pathway onto dairy farms; Farm Manager Skills Retention is a partnership initiative between 2 levels of the dairy industry and a local irrigation organisation to attract and retain senior dairy farm managers in a region experiencing long-running drought and a drift of people away from the region. Ethical concerns such as mutual obligation, responsibility, fairness and social inclusion appear to influence individual and collective action strategies. Mutual ethical concerns provided the principles or operating rules for local ethical collective action. It appears that ethical concerns and frameworks provide particularly relevent guidance for why and how to act together. The relevence and application of ethical frameworks for improved collective action appears largely unrecognised yet offer significant potential for social learning and rural development.*

Keywords: *Ethical collective action, dairy farm workforce, rural development, social capital, social inclusion, capacity building.*

Introduction

We define rural development for the purpose of this paper in action-oriented terms to encompass the activities and policies that empower rural communities and groups to act to improve their situation. Facilitating change as part of rural development is increasingly about aligning the action of diverse groups of interests, knowledge-types and practices involved in the particular domain of rural development interest. Participatory development and social learning approaches have advanced frameworks for collective action particularly in the context of environmental decision making and sustainable agriculture (eg Blackmore, 2006; Woodhill and Roling,1998; SLIM, 2004; Wenger, 1998; Leeuwis and Pyburn, 2002). These frameworks highlight critical processes like: a) agreement or convergence of interests (Ison and Watson, 2007), b) explicitly revealing, acknowledging and working with different worldviews (after Checkland and Davies, 1986), c) the formation of communities of practice and reflexive learning (Paine and Kenny, 2002) and d) concerted action in the area of interest that involves reflection by stakeholders to co-create knowledge in an interplay of practices (Paine, 1999). Yet, according to Hubert (2006), how to involve diverse stakeholders to engage in the co-definition of collaborative action for improving situations remains a primary concern for multi-functional agriculture.

In translating this challenge to that of rural development, we identify three areas receiving limited attention in social learning research for rural development: a) analysis of the conditions for

alignment amongst stakeholders (i.e. why and how people and organisations come together in the first instance); b) analysis of the leadership processes involved in collaborative action (i.e. who is best placed to lead collaborative action in the circumstances and the role of leadership in motivating collective action; and c) analysis of the contribution of different levels of action to the situation (i.e. the nature of the relationship between local and national level social learning). These three areas represent important areas for making progress in rural development given the number of potential collective action agents and increasing demands on policy makers and investors to support and invest appropriately in rural development.

Referring broadly to resource management challenges, Nettle and Paine (2009) report a prevalence of policy frameworks focused on resource use efficiency and best practice, rather than on principles of respect, mutual obligation, responsibility and fairness. These principles represented ethical dimensions of collective action that emphasises the involvement of the right people and their practices not just 'doing things right' (Falkenmark and Folke, 2002). Elements of ethical collective action identified in Nettle and Paine (2009) included: co-learning in the development of systems or alternatives; representing the unrepresented to policy; and engaging different groups and increasing their ability to play their part effectively.

This paper builds on this perspective and aims to explore the role that ethical concerns have in motivating a particular form of collective action and to define some of the critical principles and processes involved. The emergence of collective action in two projects involving the authors in the domain of farm workforce development in the Australian dairy industry are examined. The data for the analysis on which the paper is based comes from formalised reflections on the experiences and actions of the authors in their national roles in the two projects. The questions guiding the reflections included: Why are people working together on this project?; what is supporting and hindering the achivement of the outcomes?; what would we do differently? The data was captured as field notes in de-brief sessions after project meetings. Farm workforce development represents an interesting case for collective action because of the different domains requiring alignment (i.e. the farm business, the education system, the employment system, local labour markets, and local and national policy systems). The paper begins with a brief review of relevent theoretical perspectives on collective action, and an overview of the challenge of farm workforce development in an Australian context. Two projects are then described and analysed with a particular focus on the three areas of interest in advancing social learning frameworks for rural development, namely: the starting conditions for collaboration; the leadership processes involved and the relationship between local action and national support. The paper concludes with the implications of these findings for social learning frameworks and their application for facilitating change in rural development more broadly along with potential areas for future research.

Theorising collective action for rural development

The field of social learning research has developed significantly since Pretty (1998) and Woodhill and Roling (1998) suggested that effective policy should seek socially engaging processes of change in environmental management through bringing together a range of actors and institutions for creative interaction and joint learning. Central tenets remain though, particularly the attention to how learning processes can be facilitated and enhanced through appropriate institutional and policy contexts. There has also been a focus on local involvement and coordination (Noe and Langvad, 2006). The body of work in this area has contributed substantially to the underpinning reasons for social learning approaches and the design of social learning projects to improve situations. There has been less development of the cross-scale processes involved (i.e. how social learning operates between institutional and policy contexts and local concrete action).

Collective action relies on the amount of social capital that exists between groups or can be built over time (Putnam, 1995). The networks, norms and trust between people enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. Particularly pertinent to rural development is the need to build strong ties between groups with different interests. The importance of relationship

longevity, a common sense of identity, emotional intensity, similarity of interests and a willingness to reciprocate support are identified as important considerations in building social capital (High et al., 2005). Facilitating change is therefore dependent on an understanding of the type and level of existing social capital in a situation that can be drawn on – or areas in which social capital needs to be formed. It is this latter area that is of most interest for rural development because it is increasingly likely that situations requiring improvement involve existing groups in an area that are not networked, do not have jointly established norms or significant trust relationships to consider working together. Further, building social capital across scales (i.e. local and national) represents a further challenge. Facilitating change for rural development can be conceived in these situations to be primarily about building social capital.

Another body of research explicitly focuses on the reasons for collaboration itself (Alter and Hage, 2003). Collaborative action, collective action and co-ordinated action are terms often used interchangeably to describe situations where people work together to achieve something of benefit, for the partners and those they represent. Collaboration can have partners aligning their goals into a single agenda, and/or pursuing distinct agendas of mutual benefit. Collaboration could also be simply achieving separate outcomes through a partnership. In reality, keeping self and shared interests in balance is the challenge for effective collaboration. In a study of collaboration in the Australian dairy industry (Paine and Nettle, 2008) it was found that collaboration relied on maintaining the self-interest of partners and required people to see clearly the possibilities of their role for collaborative action to become possible. One of the more important benefits from collaboration identified was the learning that took place including learning how to collaborate better. Thinking about the interests of groups in terms of the impact of self interest on the willingness to collaborate itself, and not just the influence of interests on perceptions of improvements to situations appears to be an important element in rural development.

A framework that brings the key features of both social learning and collaborative action together is the area of practice research that suggests that complex problems require an integrated approach drawing on the skills and knowledge of multiple professional *practices* (Gibbons et al.1994). A professional practice stipulates the actions, materials and concepts that practitioners share in their work. A "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) embodies certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired with the collaborative efforts of groups of learners emerging as sources of learning. Thinking about the interplay of practices rather than an interplay of organisations or perspectives is an important development for facilitating change because it explicitly identifies and works with the actions and roles of people to improve their accomplishment along with the situation of focus. The framework is weaker on articulating the leadership roles required for practice interplay.

Overall, frameworks from the fields of social learning, collaborative action and practice offer a great deal toward addressing the challenges of facilitating change in rural development, particularly how to organise and support learning across organisations and practices. However there are some areas identified that require greater attention including: the starting arrangements or the reasons for people and organisations to come together in the first instance and the principles used to decide to act together (e.g. ethical frameworks); the leadership processes involved in collaborative action (i.e. what does leading practice interplay take and who is best placed to lead collaborative action in the situation) and thirdly: the contribution of different levels of action to the situation when many rural development approaches emphasise devolved governance arrangements. What is the appropriate relationship between national and local? Can they be synergistic?

The Australian Dairy Farm workforce development context

In the Australian dairy farm sector an estimated 28,000 people work on dairy farms, with approximately 12,000 holding a paid position, and many farms are run with more than the single operator or partner (72% in 2008 cf to 34% in 2005) (Dairy Australia, 2009). Although the number of herds has declined with farms exiting, the farms remaining have increased herd size with the national average now at over 270 (Dairy Australia, 2009).

The dairy industry has not been without attempts to improve the farm employment situation. In a review of 20 employment projects interventions in the Australian dairy sector (Nettle and Johnston, 2006) expected outcomes and impacts were less than desired. The main reasons identified for this were: limited continuity in projects (i.e. projects focused on short time frames or one-off training or awareness events); projects lacked integration toward strategic outcomes and change; projects did not address or link to "whole of employment system" issues favouring one component only (e.g. dairy industry awareness in schools); and projects had limited monitoring and evaluation to be able to track their contribution. This situation, along with a strategy development process (ACCIRT, 2004), formed part of the business-case for the establishment of a co-ordinated national change management program in the people area: The People in Dairy (TPiD) (www.thepeopleindairy.org.au) (see also Crawford et al. this conference). This program was established in 2006 by Dairy Australia, the dairy farm R&D service organisation funded through farmer levies and the Australian federal government.

Approaches to workforce development

In reviewing reasons for an inability of Australia's workforce planning processes to address real issues of workforce inequity (e.g. skills shortages; unemployment) Buchanan and Briggs (2003) suggest that a lack of systemic models-in-use for workforce development were to blame. They identified the need for workforce development to account for business settings; institutional and policy frameworks; modes of engaging labour (labour hire); structure of jobs (job design and work organisation) and the level and type of skill formation occurring in a region. The interaction between these interlocking forces needed to be understood in any approach to skill formation and workforce development for a particular region or sector.

Two projects in the Australian dairy industry are used as case studies to explore the nature of collective action in a) supporting the entry paths for disadvantaged workers into sustainable dairy farm jobs, and b) supporting the retention of people to meet dairy workforce needs in a region suffering from long-running drought and large numbers of farmer exits. The results below include the formation of partenrships and early collective action in farm workforce development.

Project 1: In2Dairy: supporting the entry of disadvantaged workers into sustainable work in the dairy industry

Background and context

The Australian dairy industry has been involved in many initiatives over the last decade designed to engage new entrants, particularly at the 'entry' level on-farm (see Nettle, 2006). Some of these initatives have sought to involve disadvantaged job seekers in 'taster' experiences and/or employment programs to match the needs for relatively inexperienced farm staff and to access government funding that provides incentives or schemes for initatives that seek to place disadvantaged job seekers in work. Disadvantaged job-seekers in an Australian context are defined on the extent to which people are unable to access labour markets and the support required to engage in labour markets. This includes migrants (non-english speaking background); disabilities, social problems, long-term unemployment, etc). Results of initiatives had been mixed, mainly because of the variable nature of farm-level demand for employees; the multiple stakeholders needed to be involved in such projects (with varying levels of dairy knowledge or commitment to dairy outcomes); and the inadequate way social problems of disadvantaged groups were addressed. Further, many farmers reported being "burned" by poor experiences with this particular segment of workers, particularly when they were referred to them from job network agencies.

Pre-conditions for working together

In the middle of 2006, with the establishment of a people-focused national program, The People in Dairy, conversations between a key social welfare group in Melbourne, Victoria (Brotherhood of St

Laurence- BSL) and Dairy Australia (DA) began. These conversations, initiated by BSL, centred on the issues and needs of the dairy industry for entry-level workers, and an exploration of a possible fit between these needs, social welfare outcomes from having people in interesting and supportive work and economic outcomes for the State of Victoria through a more robust dairy industry. The BSL and The People in Dairy initiated conversations with a regional dairy group (MurrayDairy), the dairy industry's vocational training arm (the National Centre of Dairy Education - NCDEA), and the federal government's welfare and workforce agency (Centrelink) to explore the possibilities for joint work. These tentative discussions focused on what had and had not worked in the past from projects focusing on matching needs of the disadvantaged with farm needs for entry level positions. This exploration generated a list of "things we would have to get right" to avoid past mistakes, and galvanised resolve amongst these participants that "something" could be developed that would be worth pursuing (Nettle and Oliver, 2008).

These initial discussions led to a period of two years of planning, involving: developing the content of entrant and employer training; the processes of finding, engaging, matching and supporting entrants and employers; conceiving appropriate partnerships and roles amongst agencies with expertise in the dairy, training and employment services; costing the process of achieving sustainable employment outcomes in-full; and, canvassing appropriate funding sources (all levels of government and non-government philanthropic trusts) (see Nettle et al 2008). A feasibility study was funded by the Victorian state government and this study documented and evaluated all these dimensions in detail.

The local collective action

The local action of the project involves 9 main processes:

a) Strong and clear support from dairy farmers in a region for a new approach to entry-level employment – and commitment to play their part.

b) Program support and training materials for farmers and disadvantaged job-seekers..
c) Finding potential entrants through an effective community engagement strategy and canvassing potential entrants into the project.
d) Gaining feedback on the career interests of potential entrants: to be responsive to the needs of the local job seeker participants, including their more medium to longer term plans.
e) Program support and training materials for entrants cover work readiness, industry skills and safety on-farm, entry-level agricultural traineeships and post-placement transition support to sustainable employment on-farm.
f) Funding and income support, based on a philosophy that the costs involved in placing a disadvantaged person back into the labour force through the project needs to be shared between the main beneficiaries: the Australian and Victorian governments, the local community, and the farmers.
g) Addressing potential obstacles – transport and accommodation issues for entrants are addressed so that no logistical reasons remain a barrier to involvement
h) Evaluation of both the suitability and replicability of the pathway is conducted whether the pathway model is the right one and whether it works in more than one location; whether the right partners are at the table and in the right mix; whether the shared investment funding approach is efficient and effective.
i) Organisational structure and administrative arrangements: The steering group at a local level is also being assessed in its capacity as the "sustainability link" for the dairy industry.

Despite receiving funding to proceed with the project in Northern Victoria in 2007-2008, long-running drought in the region and a large number of farm exits reduced the confidence of the regions dairy sector to launch and trial the project. A joint decision was made by the steering group and national program partners to return funding and look to re-apply for funds to run the project in a different region.

The National Collective action

The national partners (The People in Dairy and the BSL) continued their relationship by maintaining a connect with the context and needs of dairy regions and ongoing searches for government funding schemes and new policy developments in employment services that would enable the developed project to run. A meeting was called in the new region (south-west Victoria) after consulting with different groups to determine the organisations and people in that area who could contribute and want to be involved. The experience in developing the project together with the Northern Victorian region had consolidated the critical steps in the mind of the partners and clearly delineated the key contributions required by the different people and organisations, allowing new proposal development to be fast-tracked. This meant local partners had greater confidence in being involved as they had a clearer idea of how to contribute.

Looking Back: To what extent did ethical concerns distinguish the pathway of collective action?

The intent and action of the different partners are summarised in Table 1. Overall the ethical principles guiding the national partner organisations reflect strongly the design features of the project (e.g. the nature of local and national collective action, the funding arrangements, the amount of support in the project to employers, employees and local organisations).

Table 1. The guiding principles for involvement and action by the different partners involved in In2Dairy project

Partner	Guiding principles for involvement and action
The welfare organisation (see: www.bsl.org.au)	*1. Social shareholding*: Disadvantage in society is considered a result of the intersect of economic, social and cultural conditions. Welfare programs therefore need to reflect the nature of this intersect by searching for economic, social and culturally aligned pathways for reducing disadvantage. Further, society should invest or hold a share in decreasing the level of disadvantage because of the returns or benefits that flow are economic, social and cultural. *2. A whole-of-person approach* to reducing disadvantage by recognising that individuals often fall through the cracks of current government and social programs; *3. Seeking innovative trials/pilots* to build examples to advocate and influence government policy (e.g. New ways to improve outcomes for disadvantaged people whilst meeting sector goals (e.g. business outcomes) and societal goals (e.g. people in work); *4. Act locally*: a recognition that it is local communities that knit people together and where action must be centered; *5. Have a sound business model*: must consider how much to support supply and demand.
The national dairy program (see: www.thepeopleindairy.org.au)	*1. Fairness and supported change:* In effective working relationships (see Nettle et al, 2006) what is perceived as fair between employer and employee is important. In the area of disdvantaged workers, it is was viewed as being unfair to match employers and employees without support. Projects had to be designed on the basis of employer needs for entry level skills; matches needed to ensure employers provided good working conditions and were acknowledged for their teaching and support role. *2. Sustainability:* Farm workforce needs vary from season to season and the level of unemployment in society also varies. The dairy industry recognised the need to be developing capacity to respond to this variation as routine practice. Therefore, searching for the sustainability of dairy farm workforce pathways is important. *3. Win-win and practicality* : The dairy industry is looking for practical benefits for farmers and projects in which people might stay in the industry and participate in training and apply their skillsover time.
The training sector (see: www.ncdea.edu.au):	*1. Learner-centred models:* in training and an interest in how they interact with workforce development. *2. Meeting expressed industry needs: look for* direction by the dairy industry for training services.
Job services	The arrangements for job services is contracted between the organisation and the national government. In general, organisations recieve payments from the government for every person placed into employment with payments varying given the level of disadvantage. Organisations often partner in projects because it: *1. Makes certain aspects of their work easier: e.g.* bringing potential employers to their door.
Community organisations	*1.* A fully deployed workforce in a region *contributes to economic* development, *2. Ensuring people are supported in all areas of life to contribute to society.*
Government	*1. Supporting innovative models for delivery of outcomes: i.e. people into work.*

Where to now?

Funding to pilot the process in a new region was successful and within three months new people and different organisations met as a steering committee in the new region (South-West Victoria). The project had begun at the time of writing, to achieve the goal of at least 16 disdvantaged workers into sustained employment on dairy farms. The group includes local organisations (a local dairy development group; a local job placement company; a local arm of a national centre for dairy education) and national organisations (the BSL, TPiD and the author as researcher/evaluator).

Project 2: Retaining dairy farm skills in a region experiencing social shifts out of farming

Background and context

The Riverina dairying area is located on the Lower-Murray Darling Basin in NSW and Victoria. The region has faced a challenging production environment over the last ten years with decreasing water allocations from prolonged drought, increased feed prices (including water for irrigated fodder) and, in the last nine months, declining price for milk. Along with the entire Lower-Murray Darling Basin, milk production has been in steady decline over this period from a reduction in farm numbers. However, this broad picture of dairying in the Riverina and Northern irrigation areas is far from the full story. The remaining farmers, are more often than not, committed to the future of dairying in the region and have a highly developed adaptive management capacity to cope with the challenging production environment. However, there are many reports in the region of experienced farm managers, sharefarmers and skilled farmhands leaving the region because of perceptions of declining security of work and concerns about the production future of the region. This shift in skills represents a concern to farmers looking to secure the resources they require to sustain their business in the short-medium term.

A project in the region to enhance employment skills on farm was funded through a local irrigation development group and the local dairy industry support group (MurrayDairy). Unsure of how to deliver the project in the extreme conditions, the local region contacted the national People in Dairy program for funding and input to the design of the effort. Having developed some understanding of the pathway for local-level attraction and retention from efforts at the entry-level in In2Dairy, the national program manager thought the issues of retention of experienced people could be addressed by using the frameworks from earlier work from other regional studies (Nettle and Oliver, 2009). This framework included the questions that had to be asked to decide who needed to be involved and when, in farm worforce planning and action.

At a regional meeting to discuss possibilities for a project in the area, a small initiative was worked out between the local stakeholders with the national dairy program to work together to attract senior managers back to the region and retain those thinking of leaving through a “skills retention package” (a small regional marketing program). This was conceived in recognition that farmers require support to secure skills in the region, particularly at the production manager level, and that there was potential for people who were selling farms but staying in the region to consider becoming farm managers.

The local collective action

The local action in this project involves supporting farmers in retaining the skills they need in the region to support their farm business goals. The activities include:

a) Gaining dairy farmers’ expressions of interest to be engaged in a retention initiative for production managers and have positions to offer.

b) Identifying *potential* production managers from the region and outside who are uncertain or unsure of their future. Understand their career interests through interview.

c) Setting up an experience/activity for potential employers and potential production managers to interact with one another and hear about opportunities in the region, the types of positions and workplaces available in the region in the short-medium term.

d) Understand and address potential obstacles for retaining production managers in the region – that can be acted upon locally, nationally or in combination.

The national collective action

The national program provided resources to conduct local interviews with potential farmers and senior managers in order to help design the interactions between employers and potential employees and evaluation of the initiative.

Looking back – to what extent did ethical concerns distinguish the pathway for collective action?

The guiding principles for action by the partners in this project is outlined in Table 2. Overall, mutual concern for the sustainability of the regions farmers and identified synergy from pooling resources and expertise guided the purpose and approach taken.

Table 2. Guiding principles for action by the partners in the retention project

Partners	Principles guiding involvement and action
The local dairy industry	1. Concern for the ability of the region to re-organise in the face of resource limitations (regional resilience) 2. Concern for providingeffective support to people in difficult circumstances.
The local irrigation organisation	1. A commitment to dairying in the region 2. Human resource limitations seen as a key issue for future growth.
The national dairy program	1. Projects need to account for both employer and employee perspectives and offer mutual benefit. 2. Responding to regional needs improves the visibility of a national program

Where to now?

The project had begun at the time of writing to achieve the goal of at least five retained managers in the region. To achieve this, the project will work with ten farm employers and 15 potential farm managers.

Discussion: A cross-project analysis

The motivation and impetus for collective action in both projects was different: The In2Dairy project was developed from an outside offer to the dairy industry to partner in potentially mutually beneficial activity. This was timely, given both a high level of dissatisfaction with the results of previous attempts at making progress in the dairy industry and the establishment of a national-level development program in the dairy industry that enabled the development of the partnership. In this project, the social infrastructure (skills, knowledge, and roles) was available and known from previous expereinces, but with little co-ordination, resourcing and leadership to mobilise these resources collectively to make sufficient progress locally. The Farm Manager Skills Retention project on the other hand was developed from local concerns and an acknowledged lack of local social and financial infrastructure (funding, expertise) to act meaningfully on the issue. The engagement with the national program to help deliver the project brought not just funding and expertise but a platform to try new things, have local concerns acknowledged as worthwhile acting on – and an ability to reflect lessons from local activity to other regions.

The capacity to bring people together for collective action in both projects largely rested in the national partner organisations. These organisations remained engaged in working in this area without specific funding to do so. It was ongoing conversations between these two strategy-focused organisations that continued to refine ideas, bring together different groups from their respective domains and bring potential funding partners to the table to benefit regions.

The capacity to act rested in local groups, but required national support: The local knowledge and expertise to act in the domain already existed in both regions, however, the networks and capacity were not shared or co-ordinated. Once this was established through the impetus of the national partners, the extent of learning and quality of the mutual contribution increased.

The decisions and choices made in design and delivery of both projects were guided by ethical concerns and ethical frameworks applied by the national partner organisations: For instance principles applied included: Activity had to work locally (BSL); had to be of mutual benefit to those involved e.g. farmer and employee (TPiD), had to involve finding the right people and groups to engage with to support delivery (BSL); and, had to be based on a sound business model (BSL) that supported sustainability or replicability (TPiD).

We define some patterns of activity that explain the contribution of ethical frameworks, leadership and synergy between local and national scales as important features of the collective action in these cases. The identification of mutual prospects (i.e. disadvantaged outcomes and dairy industry workforce need) functioned as the platform for building the social capital required to act effectively. However the mutual ethics i.e. fairness; social inclusion; mutual obligation, person-centred approaches) strongly influenced the type of action and the rules or tests for action. Then, the joint exploration of possibilities and contributions from local and national levels and the growing respect for different expertise (i.e. social work and farming and training) appeared to lead to an increase in both regional and national social capital in workforce development (new and more bridging and bonding ties). Finally, ethical leadership was also important and involved knowing when the conditions for action were not right, yet staying committed in the long-run despite set-backs. It would therefore appear that in considering how to involve diverse stakeholders to engage in the co-definition of collaborative action for improving situations (after Hubert, 2006), the attention to the ethical concerns and ethical practices of collaborating actors is perhaps more important than has been previously acknowledged.

Conclusion

Facilitating change in rural development is enhanced by applying frameworks of social learning in situations of collective action. We have identified that the contribution of social learning to rural development can be enhanced by considering ethical frameworks in the design of social learning arrangements, leadership requirements and how to support synergy between local and national scales of action and influence. Further, recognising the capacity of mediating organizations to lead, design and support ethical collective action processes is important and remains a capacity largely unrecognised and unsupported in rural development. In the examination of the contribution of different theoretical frameworks for rural development (i.e. social learning, social capital, collaboration and practice theory), the focus on collective action as joint performance from an interplay of practices appears particularly relevent to the challenges of farm workforce development. However, the ethical motivations guiding individual and collective action, the type of action and the possibilities that emerge from this action have not been the focus of these frameworks. This represents a risk for interpreting the results from social learning arrangements if not identified or articulated in multi-stakeholder contexts. Ethical frameworks represent more than the worldview of participants and are embedded in the routine action of rural actors and their organisations. For this reason, further research is suggested in the context of rural workforce development to track the capacity building process in acting collectively in workforce planning and action in a sustainable way in regional groups across the Australian dairy industry. Ethical collective action appears to be an important innovation for different domains of rural development, one that embodies a systemic approach and, in doing so, adds value to complex and uncertain rural development situations.

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