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An Application of
Soft Systems Methodology
in the On-Farm Labour Situation
in the New Zealand Dairy Industry

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Agricultural Science in Farm Management
at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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Abstract: The Farmer First Research (FFR) programme at Massey University has the primary aim of researching and adapting the application of soft systems approaches to ill-defined and complex problem situations in the New Zealand dairy industry. The labour situation on many New Zealand dairy farms was identified as problematic for a large number of people in the dairy industry. A number of poorly understood, interrelated problems comprise the situation that is viewed differently by people in the situation. A soft systems approach was applied to the on-farm labour situation to obtain an understanding of the situation that would assist people to define action to improve the situation.

From a review of six soft systems approaches, Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) was selected for application in the on-farm labour situation. A partial iteration of the most recent articulation of SSM (Checkland and Scholes 1990) was undertaken. A rich description of the problem situation was developed from problem-owner interviews and secondary data sources. The information obtained was analysed to identify the elements of structure, process and climate in the situation. Also, an analysis of the intervention and analyses of the social and political aspects of the situation was made.

Livestock Improvement Advisory, the farm management group within Livestock Improvement Corporation in the New Zealand dairy industry, are strongly involved in servicing the needs of dairy farmers. This group have the resources and ability to improving components of the on-farm labour situation and were allocated the role of primary-decision taker for the SSM inquiry. On the basis of their role and influence in the problem situation five relevant human activity systems were selected from the rich description. The five relevant systems were modelled to assist Livestock Improvement Advisory to debate and define action to improve the on-farm labour situation.

Key Words: Soft Systems Methodology; on-farm labour, relevant human activity systems, Livestock Improvement Advisory, New Zealand dairy farming.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER ONE

The Research and Problem Context ........................................ 1

1.1 Introduction ..................................................... 1

1.2 The Research Project Context ................................... 1

1.2.1 The New Zealand Dairy Industry ............................ 2

1.2.2 Livestock Improvement Advisory ............................ 3

1.3 The On-farm Labour Situation in the New Zealand Dairy Industry ... 3

1.4 Soft Systems Approaches ....................................... 4

1.5 Problem Statement ................................................ 5

1.6 Research Objectives and Strategy ............................. 5

1.6.1 Research Project Objectives .................................. 5

1.6.2 Research Strategy ............................................ 5

1.7 Research Thesis Structure .................................... 6

## CHAPTER TWO

Systems Thinking and Approaches ..................................... 8

2.1 Introduction ..................................................... 8

2.2 Systems Thinking and the Concept of a System ............. 8

2.2.1 Hard Systems Thinking ....................................... 11

2.2.2 Soft Systems Thinking ....................................... 13

2.2.3 Critical Systems Thinking and the Critique of Soft Systems Thinking .................. 17
2.3 A Framework for Considering Systems Approaches .................................. 21
  2.3.1 The System of Systems Methodologies and Beyond ......................... 21
2.4 Soft Systems Approaches and the Choice of an Approach ................... 25
  2.4.1 Six Soft Systems Approaches .................................................. 26
  2.4.2 Social Systems Design ............................................................ 27
  2.4.3 Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing (SAST) ....................... 28
  2.4.4 Social Systems Sciences (S^3) .................................................. 30
  2.4.5 Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) .............................................. 32
  2.4.6 Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA) ...................... 36
  2.4.7 Strategic Choice ....................................................................... 38
2.5 The Selection of a Soft Systems Approach ........................................... 41
2.6 Summary ......................................................................................... 42

CHAPTER THREE
Soft Systems Methodology ................................................................. 44
3.1 Introduction .................................................................................... 44
3.2 Soft Systems Methodology: Some Fundamental Ideas ....................... 44
  3.2.1 Social Reality ........................................................................... 44
  3.2.2 Weltanschauung ...................................................................... 45
  3.2.3 Human Activity Systems .......................................................... 47
  3.2.4 Learning .................................................................................. 48
3.3 The SSM Process of Inquiry: An Overview ........................................ 49
3.4 Finding-out ..................................................................................... 54
  3.4.1 Structuring the Unstructured Problem Situation ......................... 54
  3.4.2 Cultural Stream of Inquiry ....................................................... 56
  3.4.3 Expressing the Rich Description ............................................... 59
3.5 Modelling Purposeful Human Activity Systems .................................. 62
  3.5.1 Selecting Relevant Systems ...................................................... 62
  3.5.2 Naming the Relevant Systems in Root Definitions ...................... 65
  3.5.3 Constructing the Root Definition as a Conceptual Model ............ 68
  3.5.4 Testing a Conceptual Model of a System .................................. 72
3.6 Taking Action to Improve the Situation .......................................... 75
  3.6.1 Comparison and Debate ........................................................... 75
  3.6.2 Defining and Taking Action ...................................................... 79
3.7 Constitutive Rules for SSM .............................................................. 81
CHAPTER FOUR

The Research Project and the Use of SSM in the On-farm Labour Situation

4.1 Introduction

4.2 The Research Project

4.3 The Scope of the SSM Inquiry Process

4.4 The Application of SSM in the On-farm Labour Situation

4.5 Finding-out

4.5.1 Analysis of the Intervention and Selection of Problem-owners

4.5.2 Obtaining Information from Secondary Data Sources

4.5.3 Obtaining Information from Interviews

4.5.4 Analysis of the Situation's Structure, Process and Climate

4.5.5 Analyses of the Social and Political Aspects of the Problem Situation

4.5.6 Construction of the Rich Description

4.5.7 Naming Relevant Human Activity Systems

4.5.8 Selection of Relevant Systems

4.5.9 Root Definition and Conceptual Model Construction

4.6 Summary

CHAPTER FIVE

The On-Farm Labour Situation Expressed and Structured for Debate

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Analysis of The Intervention

5.2.1 Client, Problem-solver and Decision-takers

5.2.2 Problem-owners

5.3 Social and Political Aspects of the Problem Situation

5.3.1 Social and Political Aspects at an Industry and Regional Level

5.3.2 Social and Political Aspects at a Dairy Farming Community Level

5.3.3 Social and Political Aspects at a Farm Business Level

5.4 The Rich Description Expressed

5.4.1 Rich-Picture of the On-farm Labour Situation

5.4.2 The On-farm Labour Situation: A Recurring Concern
5.4.3 Industry, Regional and On-farm Factors .......................... 122
5.4.4 The Traditional Incentive of Dairy Farm Ownership .............. 128
5.4.5 Cultural Frameworks of Dairy Farming ............................. 130
5.4.6 Changes in the Role of Women and the Employment
Expectations of Young People ........................................... 131
5.4.7 The Image of Dairy Farming ........................................ 133
5.4.8 Qualifications, Recognition and On-farm Training ............... 134

5.5 The Problem Situation Structured for Comparison and Debate ...... 137
5.5.1 The Decision-taker: The Role Of Livestock Improvement Advisory
in the Problem Situation ................................................. 137
5.5.2 Intervention by Livestock Improvement Advisory to Improve the
On-farm Labour Situation [Model 1] ...................................... 139
5.5.3 Management of the Employment Relationship [Models 2 and 3] 142
5.5.4 The Promotion and Improvement of the Dairy Sector Employment
Image [Model 4] ............................................................ 149
5.5.5 On-farm Training [Model 5] .......................................... 153

5.6. Summary and Conclusion ............................................... 156

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion and Reflections .................................................. 157
6.1 Introduction ............................................................... 157
6.2 Research Summary and Conclusions ..................................... 157
6.3 Evaluation of and Reflections on SSM .................................. 160
6.4 Evaluation of the Research Method and Methodological Lessons from the
Use of SSM ........................................................................ 162
6.4.1 Selection of Soft Systems Methodology .............................. 162
6.4.2 The Scoping of the Application of SSM in the On-farm Labour
Situation ........................................................................... 163
6.4.3 Obtaining Problem-Owner Perspectives ............................. 165
6.4.4 Analysis of the Information Obtained ................................. 166
6.4.5 The Research Journal .................................................... 166

6.5 The Appropriateness of Soft Systems Approaches in the New Zealand
Dairy Industry ................................................................. 167

6.6 Future Research ............................................................. 168
REFERENCES ................................................................................................. 170

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I The Action Research Cycle ..................................................... 181
APPENDIX II The Emerging Methodology .................................................. 182
APPENDIX III The Process of SSM ............................................................. 183
APPENDIX IV SSM's Epistemology: the language through which its process makes sense .............................................................. 184
APPENDIX V Bibliography ........................................................................ 187
APPENDIX VI Analysis of Structure, Process and Climate ....................... 193
  VI.I Elements of Structure Identified in the On-farm Labour Situation .... 193
  VI.II Elements of Process Identified in the On-farm Labour Situation .... 197
  VI.III Elements of Climate Identified in the On-farm Labour Situation .. 200
APPENDIX VII Analysis of the Social Aspects of the On-farm Labour Situation .............................................................................. 204
APPENDIX VIII Analysis of the Political Aspects of the On-farm Labour Situation ...................................................................... 208
APPENDIX IX Rich Pictures of the On-farm Labour Problem Situation ...... 211
APPENDIX X Named Relevant Systems .................................................... 218
# LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure 2.1  | The use of methodology to guide thinking about the world which leads to purposeful action by people in the world | 9 |
| Figure 2.2  | The soft systems use of a model of a system | 15 |
| Figure 2.3  | Problem situations and systems methodologies | 22 |
| Figure 2.4  | Problem contexts and systems methodologies | 26 |
| Figure 2.5  | The seven-stage model of Soft Systems Methodology | 33 |
| Figure 3.1  | Three uses of the concept Weltanschauung in SSM | 46 |
| Figure 3.2  | Possible human activity systems that may be relevant to the purposeful activity involved in a Guerilla band, Newspaper publishing and a Prison | 48 |
| Figure 3.3  | The idea of rational thought and action, organised by systems methodologies such as SSM | 49 |
| Figure 3.4  | The 'developed' representation of SSM | 51 |
| Figure 3.5  | The basic structure of SSM | 53 |
| Figure 3.6  | The model used in analysis two | 58 |
| Figure 3.7  | An example of a rich picture diagram for the ozone hole | 60 |
| Figure 3.8  | An example of the generation of a primary-task and issue-based root definition relevant to a prison | 64 |
| Figure 3.9  | A system's typology to guide relevant system selection | 65 |
| Figure 3.10 | The idea of a 'transformation process' applied to a public library | 66 |
| Figure 3.11 | Example formulation of a root definition | 67 |
| Figure 3.12 | A contingent relationship; 'B' contingent on 'A' | 68 |
| Figure 3.13 | The necessary basic structure of a conceptual model of a purposeful system | 69 |
| Figure 3.14 | The necessary structure or an operational and control subsystem of a conceptual model | 70 |
| Figure 3.15 | Root definition paired with the conceptual model in Figure 3.16 | 71 |
| Figure 3.16 | A conceptual model paired with the root definition in Figure 3.15 | 72 |
The Formal Systems Model .............................................................. 74
Exploratory, diagnosis and design mode of comparison .......................... 78
Constitutive Rules for SSM ............................................................... 82
Conceptual model of a relevant human activity system to complete this research project .............................................................. 85
The scope of the SSM process undertaken in the on-farm labour situation .............................................................. 88
A systems model of a relevant human activity system to 'Use SSM in the on-farm labour situation' .............................................................. 90
A section of interview transcript and a sample of the structures, process and climate elements identified in the transcript .............................................................. 97
Portion of rich picture constructed from analysis of interviews and secondary data sources .............................................................. 101
A component of the list of relevant systems grouped under the general problem area 'Poor Image for Dairy Farming' .............................................................. 103
An example of the CATWOE structural components of a root definition .............................................................. 105
The conceptual model constructed from the root definition (Figure 4.7) of the relevant system to 'choose an income-providing option' .............................................................. 107
A rich picture summary of the on-farm labour situation in the New Zealand dairy industry .............................................................. 119
Trend in milk solids payout to dairy farmers since 1950/51 .............................................................. 123
Trend in the number of herds and herd size since 1974/75 .............................................................. 124
The idealised pathway for a dairy farm career .............................................................. 128
Root definition for the relevant system to define Livestock Improvement Advisory's intervention to improve the problem situation .............................................................. 140
Conceptual model of a relevant system to define and implement action to improve the on-farm labour situation .............................................................. 141
A root definition for an employment relationship establishment and management system .............................................................. 143
Conceptual model of an employment relationship establishment and management system .............................................................. 144
Conceptual model of subsystems A and B of conceptual model 2 .............................................................. 145
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.10</td>
<td>Root definition for a relevant system to service the employment needs of dairy farmers</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.11</td>
<td>Conceptual model of a system to service the employment needs of dairy farmers</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.12</td>
<td>Root definition for the relevant system to promote dairy farm employment</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.13</td>
<td>A conceptual model of the system to promote employment in the dairy sector</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.14</td>
<td>Root definition for a system to develop and implement a collaborative dairy sector training strategy</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.15</td>
<td>Conceptual model of a relevant system to develop and implement a collaborative on-farm training strategy</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AI</td>
<td>The action research spiral</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AII</td>
<td>The emerging methodology</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AIII</td>
<td>The 'developed' version of SSM</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AIV</td>
<td>The system to use SSM</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AV</td>
<td>A rich picture developed from a single interview with a problem-owner</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AVI</td>
<td>A rich picture developed from a single interview with a problem-owner</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AVII</td>
<td>A rich picture developed from a single interview with a problem-owner</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AVIII</td>
<td>A combined rich picture developed during the SSM inquiry</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AIX</td>
<td>A combined rich picture developed during the SSM inquiry</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure AX</td>
<td>A combined rich picture developed during the SSM inquiry</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Tables

Table 4.1 The positions and affiliations of people interviewed during the study .......... 93
Table 5.1 Problem-owners in the on-farm labour situation in the New Zealand dairy industry ................................................................. 111
Table 5.2 1995/96 Herd and farm size analysis by region ........................................ 125
Table A I The social systems analysis of the on-farm labour situation ....................... 204
Table A II The political systems analysis of the on-farm labour situation ................. 208
Table A III Primary-task and issue-based relevant systems grouped under nominal problem areas headings from the on-farm labour situation .................. 218