

ROMANIAN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE - WHERE NEXT?

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Abstract: *Given the characteristics of Romanian agriculture dominated mainly by fragmented and atomized structures and low productivity, the need for information and agricultural advisory services is obvious. Today, a large number of farmers are lacking knowledge, experience and skills appropriate for sustainable agricultural development. The objective of this paper is aimed at analyzing the evolution of the Romanian advisory service while identifying the strengths and weaknesses that characterize it. The main conclusion that emerged was, that during the period of integration of Romanian agriculture into The European Union, the development of agricultural advisory service has been full of changes and is best characterized by the word - instability. Although, there were forward-looking main and specific objectives, Romanian advisory service failed to implement most of them. Today, this service is in a process of deep restructuring, without being clear what structures will take its place in the future.*

Key words: *agricultural extension, agricultural policy, Romania*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many countries, have recognized the key role that agricultural consultancy plays in the development of agriculture (Anderson 2007). In addition, the emphasis on the development of this service is also closely related to the rediscovery of the role that agriculture can play in reducing rural poverty (World Bank 2007). Given past experience, it can say that agricultural advisory face the challenge of establishing a well-managed, efficient and responsible system that can meet the needs of millions of farmers involved in complex and diverse agricultural systems (Feder, Willett, and Zijp 2001). How agricultural consultancy was organized and provided to meet these challenges has changed over time. These changes are related to general trends in the process of agricultural development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Given the characteristics of Romanian agriculture dominated mainly by fragmented and atomized structures and low productivity, the need for information and agricultural consultancy service is one obvious. Today, a large number of Romanian farmers lack the knowledge, experience and skills appropriate for a sustainable agricultural development. The objective of this paper covered analysis of the agricultural advisory service stages together with identifying its strengths and weaknesses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Romania, it is recognized that a competitive agricultural sector is largely linked to the existence of an effective consultancy service (Stefanescu 2012, Staicu 2007). Important changes that took place in Romania after 1989 have significantly shaped the evolution of agricultural consultancy service. Thus, the route of this service was conducted in several stages.

“Invisible” stage. In the early years of transition, agricultural consultancy inherited from the communist system was characterized mainly by targeting technical and technological aspects of production. These practices were diluted further after 1990, when

the Romanian agriculture has entered a phase characterized by profound change in land restitution to former owners, which gave rise to more than four million small farms (average size of about 2ha). In addition, restitution process was accompanied by the rapid deterioration of the means of production (destruction of the irrigation systems, farm machinery, farm buildings, etc.) and removal of specialists in agriculture from the system. These passages have resulted in a return to traditional agriculture performed on small areas of land with old technology without modern inputs and expert advices. During that period, the majority of small farmers "were on their own" being forced to adopt individual strategies to adapt to new conditions: relied mainly on informal support networks - friends and neighbors.

Establishing and strengthening stage. Given the experience of countries with developed agriculture and strong consultancy service and the particularities of Romanian agriculture, since 1998, strategies and legislation designed to help creating¹ the organizational structure of the advisory services, were promoted. Thus, in 1998, the National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (NAAC) was created under a PHARE² project in order to initiate the provision of agricultural advisory service to Romanian farmers. Besides NAAC, County Centers for Agricultural Consultancy (CCAC) and Local Centers for Agricultural Consultancy (LCAC) were established. Advisory services has been designed as a centralized system under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), having legal personality, being financed from the both state budget and own revenues. The main objective for which this structure was created was to "provide support to the reform process in agriculture through specific consultancy, extension and training activities, for the organization of modern and competitive farms".

By 2010, public agricultural advisory service in Romania has experienced a series of centralization and decentralization. Thus, in 2001 the public service for agricultural consultancy was decentralized. CCAC and LCAC were put under the control of local government and technical and methodological coordinated by NAAC. NAAC remained subordinated to the MARD. Services provided to farmers suffered while the majority of staff was used to undertake additional activities.

In 2005, advisory service was centralized again and CCAC and LCAC were re-transferred under the authority of NAAC and MARD³. This centralization was followed by a period of advisory service consolidation: NAAC targets have become more comprehensive and agricultural consultants have attended various training courses and participated in various technical assistance programs. Most experts recognized the substantial role that NAAC plied in supporting MARD in the EU accession process. Thus, with this new mandate NAAC had three main objectives: (i) training of farmers and supporting the producers associations; (ii) providing information about EU requirements and sources of funds that can be accessed by farmers; (iii) helping farmers with agricultural business multiannual plans. Advisory service has undergone another change in 2009. NAAC was again reorganized⁴ and CCAC were transformed and named County Agricultural Chambers (CAJ) and was subordinated to the County Councils. That law separated NAAC again to its territorial structures. Thus, the role of NAAC has become just one of technical consultancy as opposed to operational one that it had in the past.

¹ It was established based on Government's Decision no. 676/1998, with subsequent modifications and completions approved by Government's Decision 676/1999.

² PHARE Project RO 9505-01-01

³ Reorganization based on the Government's Ordinance no. 22/2005, approved by Law 77/2005, on the reorganization of the agricultural consultancy activity, NAAC was organized as specialized institution of the central public administration.

⁴ By Government's Decision no.1609 issued on the basis of Law 329/2009 that had in view the reorganization of certain public authorities.

The “dismantling” stage. This phase began in 2010, when under the specter of the financial crisis the government decided to reform the public advisory service by dissolving NAAC⁵. The work of this institution was taken over through merger and absorption by MARD which has established an Advisory Extension and Training Department. Thus, after nearly 20 years, Romania returned to invisible agricultural advisory service. Today, public agricultural advisory service represented by the County Agricultural Chambers, are in a tough situation: staff was not paid and some of the consultants have left. In many counties, agricultural chambers no longer have access to phone and internet. The process of setting up the County Chambers for Agriculture, Food Industry, Fisheries, Forestry and Rural Development and of the National Agricultural Chamber⁶ as private institutions of public interest has changed and been postponed (not yet implemented).

CONCLUSIONS

During the transition period the place and role of advisory services was full of ups and downs and transformations. Although there have been forward-looking general and specific objectives, public advisory service failed to impose on agricultural advisory market. Romania is in the situation of 1998, when the setting up of an effective agricultural advisory service is a necessity. Supportive form and manner of this service will be a challenge. Given the characteristics of Romanian agriculture, dominated mainly by fragmented and atomized structures, low productivity and the need for information and agricultural advisory services, it is necessary that these services be intensified in the future. Under the new CAP 2014-2020 farmers will have to become more efficient and more specialized. Regardless of the path to be followed in the future, policymakers must not neglect the fact that progress in agriculture cannot be made without a performant advisory service. It will have the mission to better meet the needs of farmers and gain their trust as well as offer quality and constant service and supporting them through agricultural policy measures and professional representation.

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⁵ Government’s Emergency Ordinance no.70/2010 with regard to certain measures for the reorganization of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as of certain structures under its subordination.

⁶ Government’s Decision no. 725/2010 with regard to certain measures for the reorganization of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

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