

CURRENT STATUS OF THE AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY AND EXTENSION SYSTEM IN ROMANIA

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The former Romanian public agriculture advisory system

The former Romanian public advisory and extension system consisted of a National Agency for Agricultural Consulting (ANCA), with headquarters in Bucharest, and its network of County Centers for Agricultural Consulting (OJCA) established in Romania's 41 county capitals and Local Centers for Agricultural Consulting (CLCA). The ANCA system was created in 1998 within the framework of an EU-financed project under the PHARE program, with the aim to initiate the provision of agricultural consultancy services to Romanian farmers.

At the beginning, the Government considered this new institution merely as a condition for the EU integration. But progressively, the Government transferred missions to the ANCA and the OJCA and CLCA (in particular the information and the training of farmers), so that they became a tool for the agriculture policy. At that time, the agriculture extension was conceived as a centralized system, under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture (Szlezak and Mazens, 2006).

In 2001, the public agriculture extension system was decentralized. Concerning the administrative and financial aspects, the OJCA and the CLCA were put under the local authorities of the counties (districts) and the local communities. Concerning the technical aspects, the ANCA kept a role of coordination, especially for the information and the training of farmers. Under the changed circumstances, the quality of the advice work for farmers was questionable due to the large-scale use of OJCA and CLCA extension staff to undertake non-extension activities.

In 2004, the system was centralized again and the OJCA and the CLCA were re-transferred under the authority of the ANCA and the Ministry of Agriculture. Since then ANCA, OJCA and CLCA have actively undertaken a wide range of training and consultancy activities, among others aimed at accrediting farmers for accessing EU subsidies.

The new mandate of ANCA included three major fields: (i) train the farmers and support the producers associations, (ii) provide farmers with information regarding the EU requirements and sources of funds that can be accessed in order to meet these requirements, (iii) assist the farmers in elaborating farm multi-annual business plans.

Missions to back up the reform of the advisory system

Looking to the improvement of advisory system, in early 2006, a consulting foreign mission on the strategy and implementation plan for the reorganization of the Romanian agriculture extension system (comprising two experts from France and Austria, working on behalf of the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture), recommended “co-management” to be introduced (Szlezak and Mazens, 2006). In a first phase, the farmers’ representatives and the administration should share the management of the ANCA and the OJCA, so that the farmers’ interests are taken into account. In a second phase, the management of the agriculture extension service will be taken over completely by the farmers’ representatives, under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture. The juridical structure could have been Chambers of Agriculture (like in France or in Austria), which had to be created by law. The report stressed that before any decision is taken, it is important that the Ministry of Agriculture, the ANCA, the OJCA and the farmers’ organizations become aware that a Chamber of Agriculture is more than an agriculture extension service: it is a public institution lead by elected farmers’ representatives, which has two missions: an advisory mission and a mission of services to the farmers.

Late October 2006, a second mission (two experts from Netherlands and Germany), draw a set of proposals for a medium term strategy to better attune Romanian extension to the needs of farmers and the requirements of the EU Common Agricultural Policy. The report noticed the proposals developed to have integrated service supply delivered by to-be-formed Agricultural Chambers (Doorman and Eissen, 2006). The concept of integrated service supply was in line with EU policy; however, the use of the term Agricultural Chamber for a service organization diverged, at that time, from common EU practice. The concept of Agricultural Chambers as used elsewhere in Europe implies farmer-managed organizations. As the term was used in Romania, however, Agricultural Chambers would be agencies managed by either the Ministry or local authorities. Even though farmers would be represented in governing boards or councils, the proposed organization would not actually be farmer-managed, as a result of which the term Agricultural

Chambers could create confusion and would not be in line with practice elsewhere in Europe.

The experts proposed separate paths for developing farmer organizations—agricultural chambers and for developing service supply. Developing farmer organizations, including agricultural chambers, was to take place gradually and “organically” in the medium and long term. Service reform, especially to prepare Romania for EU access, was urgent and therefore, short term. However, it should be noted that in spite of these separate paths, public service reform should aim at introducing farmer participation and representation in determining policy and strategy for service supply. The preferred model for the development of agricultural support services was that of a “one-stop shop” for services and overall farmer–state–EC interaction, including consultancy and control functions.

Moving to Chambers of Agriculture

Back to the governmental decision to reform the public advisory system, in September 2010, the process was reversed once again through the “Law on Decentralization of Selected Institutions under the Sub-Ordination of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests, and Rural Development through the Reorganization of Agricultural Directorates for Agriculture and Rural Development and Setting-up of Agricultural Chambers”. This Law detached the National Agency for Agricultural Consulting (ANCA) from the OJCA and CLCA, the last two being incorporated for the second time under the regional councils (county and local administration). ANCA’s role had thus transferred to a purely technical advisory rather than an operational one and finally the Agency was completely dismantled. Few of its former staff is now still working within a small Compartment of consultancy, extension and training in the Ministry of Agriculture, under the Department of Agricultural Policies.

Recently the Romanian Parliament adopted the Law for Agricultural Chambers for agriculture, forestry and rural development (Law nr. 283/28 December 2010), giving green light (since the concept of Agricultural Chambers implies farmer-managed organizations), to the organization of the election process for farmers’ representation. The process still lasts (and quite long so), to be launched. However, when this will happen, at the beginning will be difficult for the farmers’ representatives to play coherently their part. It requires a certain period of time to learn to take into account the collective interest, to deal with the politicians and the administration, to manage an agricultural chamber (Szlezak and Mazens,

2006). It takes a certain time for these structures to develop sufficiently through organic growth and evolution and to be able to carry out a range of complex executive functions. Forcing this process would carry a major risk of agricultural chambers coming to be controlled and possibly abused by small but economically and politically powerful interest groups instead of representing and serving the interests of Romania's farmers (Doorman and Eissen, 2006)

To date, the former county OJCA's and local level CLCA's network continue to perform as Chambers of Agriculture subordinated to the local public administration of the County Councils (and under the technical and methodological coordination of the Ministry of Agriculture), although the present usage of the term agricultural chamber does not correspond with its original meaning and is therefore not in line with common usage in the EU. The county level chambers' human resources comprise (in all 41 county offices) a number of 360 staff with an average of 7-9 staff/county office. At local (village) level, there are 500 offices with 1 staff/office. The ratio number consultant/beneficiary is 1/4700 (including subsistence farms) or 1/1764 (taking into account only the farms registered into the National Farm Registry). In terms of quantity, it is obvious that the consultancy staff is inadequate to cover even a minor proportion of Romania's farmers. Experience elsewhere in Europe has shown that coverage of between 1 and 1.5 full time equivalents (FTE) of professional expertise is required to adequately serve 100 farmers – i.e., one consultant for between 65 and 100 farmers (Doorman and Eissen, 2006).

Other agricultural advice providers

In terms of private agricultural advice, there are many independent bodies providing mostly specialized consultancy in more or less narrow fields. On a continuous changing advisory market, there are quite successful stories of some private companies (e.g. RGIC, Romactiv, Romair, etc). A recent assessment of the current supply and demand for advisory services to the agricultural population in some regions in Romania (OSC, IRES, 2010), identified three major demanded advice areas such as (i) backing up the farmers to access EU Rural Development Program funds by identifying the issue, writing up the proposal and take care of the bureaucratic procedures of the application's submission, (ii) technological crop production and livestock keeping advice (carried mostly by the input supply firms) and (iii)

consultancy for juridical, cadastre issues, feasibility studies, marketing, management (farm and assets), training etc.

Another group of advice and extension providers consist of the qualified staff in the Agricultural Research Institutes but the topics are focused and specialized in the field connected with the research area of each institute. Some of the research institutes have organized special extension compartments (e.g. in Animal Biology and Nutrition Institute Balotești, National Research and Development Institute for Soil Science, Agro-chemistry and Environment Protection Bucharest, Agricultural Research and Development Institute Fundulea), but the advice and extension work is carried more as activities scheduled within the frame of research grants and projects (particularly the work packages of training and dissemination), and less on a fee basis at farmers' request.

Recognizing the need for high quality agricultural services to facilitate compliance with the obligations of EU membership, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was involved in continuation of assisting Romania to set up a modern agricultural knowledge and information system, the aim being not only to establish an EU compliant system, but also to develop national institutional capacity for implementing the new requirements and to improve the flow of information on EU requirements and standards related to production. The Modernizing of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (MAKIS) Project, financed through the World Bank Loan no. 4758-Ro, had, through the component "Support for Advisory and Information Systems", the objective to set up Training and Information Centers (TIC) in the main regions in Romania, as knowledge resource bases for improvement and updating the professional capacity of the extension, food safety and research specialists to better serve the needs of farmers' knowledge and technologies related to production, quality control, food safety processing and marketing, in order to permanently know, adapt and meet EU requirements.

MAKIS' set TICs were established and are functional and fully integrated to, and hosted by (i) the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences-USAMV Bucharest (for the South and part of the South East region of Romania training needs), (ii) the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences-USAMV Cluj (North-West Region and the Central Region), (iii) the University of Agricultural Sciences Banat - USA Banat Timișoara (West Region, part of the South-West Region and part of the North-West Region) and (iv) the University of Agricultural and Veterinary

Sciences “Ion Ionescu de la Brad”-USAMV Iași (North-East Region and part of the South-East Region). All four TICs have proved good capacity of accommodation and training facilities and qualified training staff and can provide, at the end of each of the training courses, post-university certificates/diplomas for participants, upon successful completion of the training (Ștefănescu et al, 2011).

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