EU CAP NETWORK

Examples of approaches to encouraging skills development in agriculture

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April 2024

Funded by the European Union

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1. Introduction

This document presents examples of approaches to skills development for agricultural workers. It was prepared by expert Andrew Moxey in the frame of the EU CAP Network`s Thematic Group (TG) on Nurturing skills for a thriving and sustainable agricultural sector.

The TG had clear and comprehensive objectives. First and foremost, the TG aimed to delve into the needs and opportunities associated with agricultural skills development and their continuous updating. The focus was on the agricultural workforce (both employees and self-employed workers), emphasising the acquisition of (new) skills that are crucial for strengthening the position of farmers within the food-supply chain. This mission was inspired by the European Year of Skills and intended to raise awareness about the skills-related requirements in agriculture.

Furthermore, the TG aimed to underscore the significance and benefits of investing in the development and updating of agricultural skills, including upskilling and reskilling.

An equally important objective of the TG was to identify specific skill gaps and explore the potential of measures within the CAP Strategic Plans and other funding sources at the EU, national, and regional levels to support agricultural skills' developments. These measures aim to foster collaboration, by promoting sustainable development and economic growth in rural communities, also including a focus on the opportunities offered by producer organisations.

All the outputs produced by this Thematic Group, including a collection of initiatives fostering skills and a set of action-oriented policy recommendations, are available on the TG page on the EU CAP Network website.

2. Example approaches to Nurturing Farm Skills

This document presents four short examples of different approaches to encouraging skills development in agriculture. They are intended to help stimulate further discussion rather than to suggest specific conclusions per se. Therefore these particular examples are not intended to necessarily represent best practice, but merely to illustrate different approaches. It is hoped that the information will assist the identification of common opportunities and challenges, as well as providing credible options for future skills development.

Each example summarises the nature of the approach, offers an empirical illustration of its use, identifies some general critical success factors for the approach and how policy support can help, and draws some brief conclusions. Sources of further information and examples are also suggested.

The examples relate to: demonstration farms; exchange visits; professional advice; and collaboration. These are not intended to represent all possible approaches to farm skills development, merely to illustrate some approaches. Equally, other empirical representations could have been used – the ones selected are not necessarily exemplars, merely published cases to illustrate an approach.

Suggested principles or criteria [1] for assessing the quality of support for skills development include the need for:

- Support providers to draw on diverse knowledge sources
- Support providers to cooperate to bridge knowledge gaps
- A stable and growing workforce of appropriate advisors and facilitators
- Advisors and facilitators to receive regular training
- Support providers to have flexibility to adjust their remit
- All relevant topics and client groups to be covered
- A range of support methods, to target different groups and learning styles

Commonly identified critical success factors across different approaches include that:

- The need for and relevance of skills development are communicated clearly and consistently to farmers
- Support providers are trusted and seen as credible and relevant
- Learning opportunities are not constrained by accessibility barriers in terms of travel and attendance
- Recipients of information, advice and training support are treated as customers
- The needs of different groups are recognised and targeted (e.g. by farmer age, education, sector etc.)
- Opportunities for practical, hands-on learning-by-doing are provided
- Financial support is available to encourage participation by farmers with too little money or time to otherwise participate

Importantly, any given approach is unlikely to meet all of these bullet points – there is a toolbox of different approaches, each with their own different strengths and weaknesses. However, individual approaches need not be considered in isolation, but are more likely to be cumulatively effective if used in combination (more than one tool in the box can be used). This reflects the reality that farmers are likely to have different learning styles and to engage in a different way with varying forms of support for skills development.

Consideration also needs to be given to how transferable and/or scalable these different approaches are. This will affect how applicable they are to different situations: for example, to the different types or locations of farming. This depends, at least partly, upon supply capacity, highlighting the importance of the availability of willing and able providers of skills. For example, direct public provision, commercial provision and cooperatives or producer organisations.

[1] Adapted from Birner, R., et al., 2009. From best practice to best fit: a framework for designing and analyzing pluralistic agricultural advisory services worldwide. Journal of agricultural education and extension, 15(4), pp.341-355. https://doi.org/10.1080/13892240903309595 and Prager, K. et al., 2017. Criteria for a system level evaluation of farm advisory services. Land use policy, 61, pp.86-98. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LANDUSEPOL.2016.11.003

3. Example #1: Demonstration farms

3.1. Introduction

Agricultural know-how is often better expressed and interpreted through direct experience of its application. Therefore tacit knowledge is passed from generation to generation on the same farm through observation and continuous learning-by-doing. However, on-farm demonstrations to visitors from elsewhere can offer a similar approach to highlight and further develop such transferable insights and capabilities.

Farm demonstrations have a documented pedigree stretching back over two centuries, but can take a variety of forms. For example, they can be hosted by private corporations, by government research institutions and by individual farmers. Equally, the demonstrations can be one-off events or part of a programmed series of events. They may be topic-based or thematic, skills orientated, educational, craft or socially orientated, vocational and recreational all of which may affect their applicability, transferability and value. Contemporary labels or titles for different forms of demonstrations now include, for example, field schools, monitor farms [for example using smart technology to assess animal behaviour], lighthouses and living labs (the latter being more research orientated and extending beyond farmers to wider society).

Demonstrations work by providing opportunities for observation of and for hands-on interaction with practical applications of knowledge, facilitated by practitioners and/or experts. Demonstrations to groups of farmers also provide opportunities for social interactions. These interactions can build networks that provide further opportunities for peer learning to take place which is sustained beyond the demonstration itself. This is important given the short-term nature of individual demonstration events.

The effectiveness of a demonstration depends upon a range of factors, including farmers' perceptions of their relevance and the credibility of chosen sites and topics, but also the demonstration's presentational style and clarity. Practical organisational factors also matter: for example, in terms of pre- and post-event communications, travel accessibility, facilitators' skills, having a mix of learning activities and participants' comfort (food and drink matter)!

3.2. Critical Success Factors

Drawing upon published evidence and several specific EU-funded projects, and reflecting the points listed on page 2, some critical success factors for demonstration projects have been suggested:

- *Clarity of purpose*: It is essential to set and communicate **a clear and appealing objective or benefit sought**, so that visiting farmers know what to expect and are motivated to participate. Such examples could be to showcase ways to use a new technology or reduce environmental damage. To achieve buy-in – an acceptance to support and participate in the project, this needs to be seen as **relevant** by farmers (rather than just by sponsors or experts) and communicated clearly to the target audience through **pre-event marketing**, ideally with a registration system to monitor and manage final attendance relative to site capacity.
- *Practicalities*: Choose **a site that is accessible** in terms of travel (being away from base has an opportunity cost [of foregoing the benefit derived from an option other than the one chosen] as well as a cash cost) but is also credible in terms of similarity to the target participants' own farms. Plan an event to include a mix of formal and informal activities, to **cater for different learning styles and social interactions** (but ensure there is enough time for each activity). Make sure that **site facilities** can cater for the size of the demonstration group. For example, this could include car parking, on-farm transport, refreshments, washrooms and audio-visual equipment (also include contingencies for e.g. bad weather). It is of course important to ensure **that the benefits of taking part are demonstrated** clearly throughout the activity.
- *Personnel and process*: Use a team of motivated and **appropriately skilled staff trusted by farmers** as impartial facilitators seeking to provide relevant information and advice. Make sure that for example slides, photos, videos and (with permission) contact details from the event are shared promptly along with simple take-home messages. Seek **post-event feedback** and point to other events and support.

3.3. Policy support

Policy support for demonstrations was previously available within Member States' Rural Development Programmes and continues to be available under the new CAP, for example through European Innovation Partnership (EIP)-Agri Operational Groups. Research support is available for instance through the Horizon 2020 EU funding programme, succeeded by Horizon Europe. Such support can be used to plan and prepare, train and hire credible facilitators, to develop communications and learning material, contribute to participants' travel costs, and fund farmers to host demonstrations on their own farm.

3.4. Conclusions

On-farm demonstrations have a proven track record of encouraging farm skills development. Direct observation and hands-on interaction suit learning styles of many (but not all) farmers and their staff, and events can also extend peer networks. However, demonstration effectiveness depends upon appropriate design and delivery, both of which can be helped through policy support for organising and hosting events.

3.5. An illustration: Scottish Monitor Farm [2]

Monitor Farms are a type of demonstration farm, involving regular repeated visits to the same site over several years by the same group of farmers. Host sites are commercial farms, with the host sharing detailed information about farm objectives and performance with other farmers in the same area. Moreover, hosts also agree to make management changes following open discussion with group members. Discussions are normally supported by a professional facilitator, often with separate expert advice also provided.

The concept is that the host farm serves as a real-life demonstration of how new knowledge can be used to improve performance over time. Regular group meetings over several years allow group collaboration benefits to emerge and the results of management changes to become apparent. Importantly, Monitor Farms are farmer-led and farmer-driven, their clear focus is on pushing participants beyond their comfort zone to engage with the process of change. Skilled facilitation is key in achieving this.

Scotland started to introduce Monitor Farms in the early 2000s (borrowing the idea from New Zealand). The Lothian Monitor Farm (actually two neighbouring arable farms) was funded using the EU's Knowledge Transfer and Innovation Fund (KTIF) and organised by the Agriculture and Horticultural Development Board (AHDB).

The Lothian Monitor Farm appears to adhere to many of the good practice criteria such as those cited on page 2. For example, **pro-active recruitment** attracted about 40 regular participants, helped by the site's **accessibility and representativeness** for the local area. Equally, **active participation** is encouraged, with visitors having **a diverse range of opportunities** to contribute and learn.

Providers draw upon a **range of knowledge sources**, including guest speakers, and receive **appropriate training** themselves.

Participants' feedback indicates that they are benefiting in terms of gaining **relevant new knowledge** that can be applied on their own farms. By offering a **series of related events** rather than stand-alone demonstrations, the Monitor Farm provides time for **peer networks** to form and for changes to be observed first hand. Monitor Farms are spread across Scotland, offering **local accessibility across a wide geographical area** and a **range of farm types**.

Selection criteria for host farms focus on a willingness to learn and adjust management practices and to openly share information with others, rather than already being an exemplar farm. Experiencing the process of change itself is of interest, not just the end performance. Support for Monitor Farm identification, organisation and facilitation is contracted and provided by well established industry bodies including levy boards, co-ops and government-funded advisory services or by specialist contractors.

However, it is clear that much depends upon the **facilitation and practical organisational skills** of the support team running the Monitor Farm programme, and upon participants' perception of the relevance of the host farm to their own farming context and the **credibility of facilitators**. Moreover, **recruiting hosts willing** to discuss their management decisions and performance with strangers openly can become increasingly challenging once initial enthusiasts have been used. This implies that monitor farms may not reach all farmers.

3.6. Useful sources of further information

Material presented here has largely been derived from Volume 27, Issue 5 of The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension on the topic of "On-farm demonstration: Enabling peer to peer learning" (particularly Adamsone-Fiskovica, 2021).

The European Commission has funded, and continues to fund, research projects involving farm demonstrations. For example:

- https://agridemo-h2020.eu/
- https://nefertiti-h2020.eu/
- https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101060212
- https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/projects/plaid-peer-peer-learningaccessing-innovation-through-demonstration
- International networks of demonstration farms include: https://www.lighthousefarmnetwork.com/

[2] Selected from several examples published by the PLAID project https://zenodo.org/records/3444499 https://plaid-h2020.hutton.ac.uk/sites/www.plaid-h2020.eu/files/PLAID%20-%20WP5%20report%20-%20Observations%20and%20lessons%20from%20CS%20-%20formatted.pdf

4. Example #2: Exchange Visits

4.1. Introduction

Although on-farm demonstrations provide opportunities for visiting farmers to experience hands-on learning with others, even a series of demonstration events cannot replicate the more continuous learning-by-doing of actually working on a farm. By contrast, exchange visits whereby one or more individuals are hosted by another farm for an extended period of time to take part in day-to-day activities do offer opportunities for such immersive learning (and equally for mentoring by an experienced host).

Exchange visits take many forms, varying greatly in terms of their purpose, duration, location and degree of formal organisation. The vast majority involve an individual being placed on a host farm for a period of time ranging from a few weeks to a year or longer. Typically, this involves younger people (notably students), partly because they tend to have fewer responsibilities and can be 'spared' from a farm business and also because exchange visits are often included as discreet components within formal education courses (i.e. student placements).

Shorter exchanges of less than two weeks also occur, but participants tend to be older or to be part of a group visit. The peaks and troughs associated with the seasonality of agricultural production can offer opportunities for shorter, focused or specific exchanges but can also restrict opportunities for travel during busy work periods.

Differences in the duration and the age and/or number of participants highlight 'fuzzy' boundaries between exchange visits and other parts of the spectrum of approaches to skills development. For example, short exchanges (e.g. study visits) are similar to a condensed set of demonstrations while long exchanges resemble traineeships and apprenticeships. Shorter exchanges tend to focus on learning specific skills, notably leadership and management, while longer exchanges seek or tend to provide a broader foundation – including experiencing living in a different culture and learning a different language. In all cases, peer networks are created and can extend opportunities for sharing knowledge beyond the duration of the exchange itself.

Exchange visits have a documented pedigree stretching back over a century and hundreds of examples exist around the world, involving thousands of participants each year. They can be organised informally between individuals or, more typically, through formal organisations that provide a registration, vetting and matching service for participants and hosts. Organisers can be public bodies but also private corporations or community entities, making arrangements for both outbound (sending people to other countries) and inbound (receiving them from other countries) participants. Funding for travel and accommodation (plus hosting) can be in the form of fees paid by the visitor, sponsorship by businesses or community entities, reciprocal arrangements between countries/organising bodies, or public support.

The effectiveness of an exchange visit depends upon a range of factors, including practical organisation. For example, travel arrangements, insurance cover, the mutual suitability of exchange between a participant and their host, clarity of purpose and agreed structure for learning, and post-exchange follow-up to assess learning outcomes.

4.2. Critical Success Factors

Drawing upon published evidence, and reflecting the criteria listed on page 2, some critical success factors for exchange visits can be suggested:

- *Clarity of purpose*: It is essential to agree on and communicate **a clear objective**, so that visitors and hosts know what to expect: for example, that they will have to learn a specific set of technical skills. This clarity matters not only in terms of how subsequent effectiveness is assessed, but also in how learning opportunities are designed and delivered.
- *Practicalities*: Prior to a visit, **potential participants and hosts need to be identified and vetted** for mutual suitability. This may involve for example online registration but ideally also some form of interview or even a site visit. Pre-visit guidance needs to be offered and a structure for learning agreed. Thereafter travel, including visas and insurance, needs to be arranged.
- *Personnel and process*: Although exchanges can be arranged informally, **dedicated professional administration** offers efficiency advantages. The use of online registration services and inbound-outbound partnering with equivalent bodies in other countries offers further efficiencies. **Post-visit assessments** of experiences and subsequent impacts should be undertaken and **long-term contact maintained** to continue to assess impacts but also to use alumni as a pool of future hosts and/or sponsors. [3]

4.3. Policy support

Many exchange visits occur without explicit policy support, being arranged either informally within farmers' personal networks or more formally by corporate or community entities. However, policy support plays a role through offering guidance to organisations arranging exchanges, as well as potentially providing explicit funding within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) for farmers but also for farm advisors. Direct public organisation of exchanges is also possible, most notably through the ERASMUS+ programme.

[3] Nuffield Scholarships (https://www.nuffieldscholar.org/) do this and also offer leadership training.

4.4. Conclusions

Exchange visits have a proven history of success in encouraging farm skills development, particularly for younger people. Prolonged stays on host farms provide extended opportunities for continuous learning-by-doing and building cultural and social ties. More focused, shorter duration visits can also usefully provide exposure to new ideas and ways of doing things and are often better suited to older and groups of farmers less able to spend time away from their business. However, exchange visits need to be planned and organised well and their effectiveness depends upon their learning opportunities for participants.

4.5. An illustration: Travel to Farm [4]

Travel to Farm is a long-standing exchange programme operated in Denmark. It is run as a not-for-profit entity, backed by several agricultural organisations – the Danish Agricultural and Food Council, the Young Farmer's Club, the Danish Association of Agronomists, Danish Horticulture and the Association of Agricultural Colleges in Denmark.

Around 60 visitors a year are placed with a Danish host farm for four to 12 months, working alongside the farm manager and their family or other workers on a daily basis. Placements are available on livestock, arable and vegetable farms. Visitors must be agricultural students aged 19–29 and have some prior farm experience (and a driving licence) as well as a clear idea of what they wanting to learn. Applications are made through partner organisations in other countries and then these applications and hosts are matched.

Visitors are paid a monthly pre-tax salary of around €1 500 (plus overtime) for a 37-hour week but have to pay various participation fees amounting to approximately €1 200 for a year-long exchange, plus €260 per month for accommodation. The first month is a probationary period, and either side can cancel their participation with a month's notice after that.

Travel to Farm appears to adhere to some of the good practice criteria listed on page 2. For example, **opportunities for learning by doing** are central to the programme and there is a **pool of appropriate host trainers**. Moreover, providers are seen as **credible and relevant**.

The length of the Travel to Farm initiative is testament to the enduring appeal and effectiveness of its approach. However, as with all exchange programmes, potential participants need to be aware of its existence. Moreover, they need to have **access to funding** and the **freedom to devote an extended period of time** to the project.

4.6. Useful sources of further information

Material presented here has largely been derived from a three-volume (plus Appendices) 2015 report to the European Commission: "Pilot Project: Exchange Programmes for Young Farmers."

Slightly out of date lists of Exchange Visit opportunities are available here: https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/thematic-work/generational-renewal/exchange-schemes-young-farmers_en.html

[4] Derived from https://www.t2f.dk/trainee-in-dk/. See also https://vdocuments.mx/young-farmersa-needs-in-denmark-european-young-farmersa-needs-in-denmark.html?page=18

5. Example #3: Professional Advice

5.1. Introduction

Farmers may seek advice from a variety of sources: for example, family and friends, neighbours and other peers, and non-farming professionals such as accountants and lawyers. Indeed, such sources of advice often dominate, reflecting their relative ease of accessibility. The degree of formality can vary enormously, from casual conversations through to programmes of scheduled meetings and direct or face-to-face mentoring.

However, professional farm advice offers some advantages. In particular, professional advisers are typically more likely to be aware of emerging research insights and policy signals relating to changing best management practices. Moreover, they should have a better appreciation of how multiple perspectives need to be combined to give a whole farm view, encompassing a range of technical matters, but also business management and strategic planning.

Professional advice has a long pedigree and is, alongside other factors, credited with delivering the significant agricultural productivity gains achieved across many countries in the latter half of the 20th century. Specifically, the widespread provision of publicly funded advice (but also private provision by, especially, input suppliers as well as independent consultants) encouraged the rapid adoption of new technologies and management practices.

More recently, advisory provision has become more pluralistic (fragmented) with public provision less prevalent and greater reliance being put on a variety of private providers. Moreover, reflecting dependency upon policy support payments, advice is often less directed at skills development than at correctly completing application forms to secure funding.

At the same time, evolving societal demands upon land management (e.g. emissions reductions, nature restoration) are widening the breadth of skills advice required. This means that farm advisers need to stay abreast of increasing complexity, implying that they themselves require ongoing (re)training and/or that farms may need to engage with a team of advisors rather than with one individual adviser. Certification of approved advisers is used in some contexts to signal their appropriateness.

The effectiveness of advice depends upon a range of factors, including farmers' perceptions of its relevance and the credibility of advisers. Given that the range of required advice is increasing, this poses a challenge in terms of recruiting enough appropriately trained advisers who will be accepted by farmers. Moreover, acceptance may be gradual, emerging over time as trust is established through multiple interactions and engagement with farm advice needs to be ongoing and long-term. Even so, long-term advisory relationships can also lead to familiarity, reliance, complacency and to a lack of engagement with new ideas. Consequently, monitoring advisory effectiveness is often difficult.

Effectiveness also depends upon the mode of delivery and accessibility. One-to-one, face-to-face meetings on-farm are considered optimal, allowing interactions within the physical context of the business. However, they are costly and therefore advice may also be provided online and/or through off-farm meetings. The latter may be one-to-one or as part of a group, highlighting that the dividing line between advice and other forms of knowledge exchange (e.g. demonstrations) can be fuzzy. Off-site meetings incur travel and opportunity (alternative) costs for farmers, which can deter engagement further.

5.2. Critical Success Factors

Drawing upon published evidence and on several specific EU-funded projects, and also reflecting the points listed on page 2, critical success factors for providing farm advice have been suggested. These include:

- *Communication*: Farmers need to perceive a need to engage with professional farm advice. This requires **clear and consistent messaging from policy and industry leaders about why farmers should engage** with professional advice, emphasising its role in helping them to meet forthcoming challenges more efficiently. Equally, advisory services need to **communicate how, when and where farmers can engage** with them for particular purposes. Within this, **different target audiences** (some of whom may be "hard to reach") require different communication strategies.
- *Practicalities*: The uptake of advice partially depends upon **lowering barriers to engagement**, making it easier for farmers to access advice. This applies particularly to smaller and/or more geographically remote and/or time constrained farms for whom the private costs of paying for advice and/or having to travel to access it can be disproportionately high. Hence uptake can be encouraged by using public **funds to cover advisers' time** and by making **advisers available** close to or (ideally) on-farm, and/or by using public funds to cover farmers' travel costs and the opportunity costs of time spent away from the farm.
- *Personnel and process*: Farmers need to trust the source of advice. Typically, this means that individual advisers need to fit the profile expected by farmers and to build trust through repeated interactions. This highlights that the **recruitment and (re)training of the "right type" of adviser** is fundamentally important, but also that provision of advice (and monitoring of its effectiveness) needs to be maintained over extended periods of time. Such provision implies a need for a greater number of (possibly certified) advisers and/or mixing one-to-one, face-to-face on-farm meetings with off-farm, one-to-many meetings and using online communication to manage overall demands on advisers and budgets. Equally, the advisory service providers themselves need to **draw upon a diverse range of knowledge sources** and be sufficiently flexible to **use different modes and work with or organise other providers to offer a more complete service**.

5.3. Policy support

Support for farm advice has been and continues to be provided under the CAP, in particular through the mandatory Farm Advisory System (FAS), which encompasses advice to farmers and (importantly) the training of farm advisers. Such activities are underpinned by EU and domestic funding and reach a large number of farmers each year. However, participation targets are often not met and EU level expenditure is persistently below budget ceilings. Use of professional advice can potentially be made a condition of accessing other policy support, essentially encouraging uptake through regulation rather than simply via exhortation.

5.4. Conclusions

The provision of professional farm advice has a proven track record of encouraging farm skills development. Trained advisers can help to expose farmers to new knowledge and to guide their understanding of how it may be applied to their particular farming circumstances. However, farmers need to perceive advice as being relevant and to trust advisers as credible. Uptake may also be constrained by accessibility barriers. Policy support can seek to improve uptake via recruiting and (re)training advisers to improve their availability and perceived credibility.

5.5. An illustration: Farm advice in Italy [5]

Historically, advisory provision in Italy was dominated by regional public bodies. However, this system has been replaced from the year 2000 by more pluralistic provision involving a mix (which varies regionally) of public bodies, farmer groups, private companies and independent consultants.

The weakening of public provision has resulted in some, less profitable, sectors essentially receiving less effective support while other, more profitable sectors, have switched to private provision. This is despite 18 of the 21 Italian regions planning to make use of the advisory measure (M2) under the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme (RDP). In some cases, support was 100% funded, in others 60% of participants' costs were covered (implying 40% co-financing by recipients – farmers, farm workers and foresters, as well as advisors seeking training).

Implementation has suffered from various delays, resulting in an initial budget of approximately €312 million being reduced to approximately €160 million. This reflects difficulties in appointing approved advisory bodies, but also relatively poor (and below target) uptake – something that was also experienced in the previous RDP period of 2007-2013.

Low uptake of advice may reflect a lack of adherence to the good practice criteria listed on page 2. For example, **poor communication** of relevance and **poor accessibility** mean that **not all farmer groups are reached**. Equally, **budget delays and reductions** may have constrained the **recruitment and training of advisers**. Although recipients' satisfaction with advisory support received is gauged via a telephone survey, more detailed **evaluations of the effectiveness** of support is generally lacking.

5.6. Useful sources of further information

Material presented here has largely been derived from the "Evaluation of CAP's impact on knowledge exchange and advisory activities", "AgriLink – Agricultural Knowledge: Linking farmers, advisors and researchers to boost innovation" and "Prospects for Farmers' Support: Advisory Services in European AKIS (PRO AKIS)."

Other relevant references include https://www.h2020fairshare.eu/ and https://scar-europe.org/images/AKIS/Documents/report-preparing-for-future-akis-in-europe_en.pdf.

[5] Selected from several country-specific examples published by the AgriLink project: https://old.agrilink2020.eu/countries/italy/

6. Example #4: Collaboration and Producer Organisations

6.1. Introduction

Collaboration between farmers has a long history. By acting collectively, better input and output prices can be sought through enhanced bargaining power. In addition, logistical and marketing efficiencies can be sought through rationalisation and the shared use of common infrastructure and equipment.

However, collaboration also offers opportunities for the sharing of information and experiences to improve skills. By understanding their members' motivations and circumstances better than other service providers, collaborative bodies can help to identify and articulate skill needs (the demand side). Moreover, because their interests should (as member-owned bodies) be aligned with those of their members, these groups are well placed to design and deliver the information, advice and training perceived as relevant and credible by their members. Hence collaborative groups can supplement and/or substitute other skills development services (the supply side).

Collaboration can take many forms. These include the most cited form of Cooperatives (co-ops), but also associations and private farmer-controlled businesses. When collaboration occurs horizontally between farmers, bodies are referred to as Producer Organisations (POs). When collaboration occurs vertically along supply chains, bodies are referred to as Interbranch Organisations (IBOs).

In 2018, there were over 3 700 recognised POs across the European Union, of which more than half were in the fruit and vegetable sector. Numbers also vary somewhat by Member State. For example, France has more than 750 recognised POs, but Estonia has none. There were also 71 recognised associations of POs. Many POs are small, but a few are relatively large. Similarly, there were more than 130 recognised IBOs, also varying in size and sector. [6]

As with other providers of information, advice and training, collaborative bodies may adopt a range of approaches to skills development. For example, this may include using professional advisers, arranging exchange visits and running farm demonstrations. As such, the same generic considerations noted in the preceding case studies still apply to any particular approach deployed by a PO or IBO.

However, differences do arise from the distinctive nature of member-owned bodies. In particular, whereas other service providers may have their own motivations (e.g. profits, particular research topics), collaborative farmer bodies exist to pursue the interests of their members. Therefore, provided that adequate governance arrangements are in place, POs and IBOs can offer advantages in terms of being trusted by farmers to focus on genuine needs (although agreeing among members as to what those are is not necessarily straightforward).

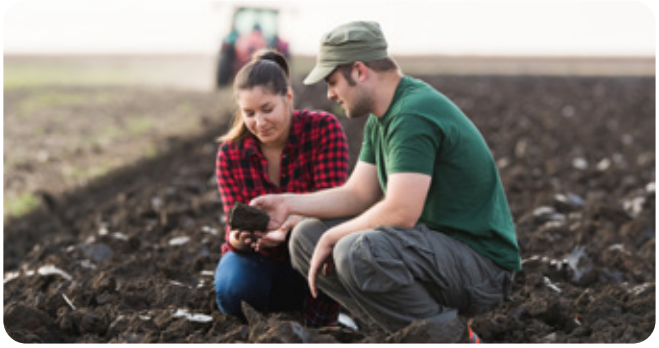
6.2. Critical Success Factors

Drawing upon published evidence and several specific EU-funded projects, and reflecting the bullet points listed on page 2, some critical success factors for collaborative skills development projects have been suggested:

- *Clarity of purpose*: Acting in members' interests involves **listening to members' views** but also offering **thought leadership.** The latter is necessary to explore and agree on how best to serve the collective ethos and **long-term interests**. Therefore good communication to agree and reinforce the purpose of skills development is essential. This can be challenging if membership is heterogenous, particularly with respect to time horizons.

- *Practicalities*: **Availability and accessibility** affect engagement. Therefore offering a **range of ways** for farmers to engage without incurring excessive cash or time costs is important. This may mean mixing one-to-one farm visits with physical and/or online events. However, service delivery will inevitably be resource-constrained (e.g. budgets, staff) and **priorities need to be agreed,** as does the degree of reliance upon other service providers.

- *Personnel and process*: Use a team of motivated and **appropriately skilled staff trusted by farmers** to provide relevant information, advice and training. This may entail a PO or IBO **recruiting and training** its own delivery staff, but equally all collaborative bodies should make use of **third-party expertise where relevant**. Any learning materials should be shared promptly along with simple take-home messages. **Follow-up contact** after a period of time should be made after any learning event, to seek feedback on whether the approach taken needs to be adjusted. In addition, **effective governance** also requires recruiting the right calibre of people to steer the strategic direction and to provide executive management. Without these, skill needs may not be identified correctly and/or not developed appropriately by a suitable collaborative body.



[6] https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/agri-food-supply-chain/producer-and-interbranch-organisations_en

6.3. Policy support

Policy support for farmer collaboration has been and remains available under the CAP. Indeed, the role of Producer Organisations and Interbranch Organisations has been strengthened. Support takes the form of operational funding but also exemptions from some market competition rules. The latter is important and reflects explicit recognition of the need to rebalance asymmetric market power across agri-food supply chains. [7]

6.4. Conclusions

Collaboration offers many benefits, including for both the demand and supply side of skills development. By understanding their members, collaborative bodies can help to identify and articulate skill needs. Moreover, they are well placed to provide information, advice and training perceived as relevant and credible by their members. Depending on the context, this can complement or substitute other providers. However, as with other approaches, care must be taken in the design and practical delivery of skills development, and not all POs or IBOs will necessarily have the resources or competences for this. Policy support has a role to play, partly in helping to fund collaborative bodies, but also, importantly, in exempting them from certain rules regarding market collusion.

6.5. An illustration: Signpost Farmers for Climate Action [8]

The Signpost Programme in Ireland is a collaborative partnership between co-ops, farmers and government to reduce agriculture's carbon footprint. It offers free, practical training and knowledge, with the aim of upskilling farmers and advisers to change their own practices, but also, crucially, influencing others to do so too.

The programme follows a cascading or pyramid model of information flows, with successful participants subsequently proactively passing knowledge onto multiple other farmers. For the programme pilot, 18 participants from one co-op were involved. This was then extended to 60 farmers and 38 advisers across 13 co-ops and is now being scaled-up to approximately 2 700 farmers. The ambition is for over 16 000 in total within five to nine years.

Participation involves lectures, cases studies, practical demonstrations, self-directed learning and a number of farm-based tasks. On successful completion of the programme, participants receive an industry-recognised certificate of completion from the Learning and Development Institute and the Irish Cooperative Organisation Society (ICOS) Skillnet.

The programme has been recognised as offering something different, winning an industry award for innovation in the transfer of learning. This partly reflects its collaborative design between all stakeholders, but also the motivation of co-ops to drive greenhouse gas emission reductions. Co-ops have embraced the challenge of government targets and committed themselves (and their members) to environmental, business and social sustainability. Improving attitudes about and confidence to engage in change is seen as essential.

Referring to the good practice criteria listed on page 2, the co-ops' sustainability commitments and trusted status help to **communicate the relevance and credibility of practical skills development.** Equally, the cascading model of information flows not only encourages **bottom-up empowerment** but also **trust**. Drawing upon a **range of knowledge sources** and a **variety of learning modes** strengthens the programme, and the **feedback is positive**. However, the programme is relatively **resource intensive** and its roll-out will depend on funding.

6.6. Useful sources of further information

Material presented here has been derived mainly from the following sources:

- https://www.g-fras.org/en/good-practice-notes/producer-organizations-roles-in-ras.html?showall=1
- https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/conference-pos-brochure-sept2018_en_0.pdf
- https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a9e96080-7d25-11ee-99ba-01aa75ed71a1/language-en
- https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Agricultural_extension_in_transition_wor/u3jgDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1 (Module 8)
- https://agrisustainability.ie/uploads/34-ICOS%20Case%20Study%2013.12.2023%20Final%20BGAp.pdf

[7] e.g. see producer-organisations-key-facts-and-finfings_en_0.pptx (live.com)
[8] See https://www.teagasc.ie/environment/climate-change--air-quality/signpost-programme/

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