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The agricultural advisory system in Romania

Public policies versus farmers' needs

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Introduction

The public agricultural advisory system in Romania has gone through a series of changes, stages (attempts) of reform and legislative amendments post-1989[1], most of which were not completed and lacked coherence. What has resulted is a **fragmented** system - a multitude of institutions providing various atomized services to farmers, **non-integrated** - these institutions do not communicate with each other and do not coordinate their activities in relation to farmers and **insufficiently** responsive to the multiple needs of the hundreds of thousands of small and medium farmers, family farms and micro-enterprises they target. At the moment, one agricultural consultant serves more than 4000 farmers, while the experience of European countries shows that an optimal ratio would be one consultant to 65-100 farmers.

In reality small farmers get their information in an ad hoc way from the media, the internet or the community, as the research carried out in the project supporting the publication of this report shows, and the more than 360 private consultancy providers on the market support mainly large farms, businesses, associations or strong cooperatives on a fee basis. The public advisory system currently consists of only 479 advisors working under the 41 County Agricultural Directorates (DAJs), working in the offices of the county seats of the DAJs (approx. 200 advisors) and at local level through the local centers (approx. 7-9 municipalities in each county belonging to the local center have agricultural advisors; a total of 279 advisors are distributed across all local centers).

Thus, this report has 3 major objectives, detailed below.

1. Analysis of how the agricultural advisory system has evolved in Romania post-1989, focusing on a more recent period: 2016-2023.

We started with an overview of the current architecture of the advisory system and how agricultural advisors can support farmers. We continued with a brief overview of legislative changes in recent years that have had a major impact on the agricultural advisory sector.

The winding road of agricultural consultancy starts from the establishment of the National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (ANCA) in 1998, which had 41 County Offices for Agricultural Consultancy (OJCA) and 546 Local Agricultural Consultancy Centers at commune level and Agronomists' Houses; it goes through the establishment of County Agricultural Chambers (CAJ) in 2009, the Law on Agricultural Chambers No. 283/2010, to stabilize in 2017 with the abolition of the Agricultural Chambers and **the transfer of their staff and assets to the County Agricultural Directorates**.

In 2019 a Bill is initiated that aims to re-establish the Chambers of Agriculture and, throughout the legislative process, receives cross-party support. The MADR aims, during this period, that the re-establishment of the Agricultural Chambers is a first step towards the long-term withdrawal of the state from the agricultural advisory ecosystem. However, the initiative is declared unconstitutional in 2021 due to the ambiguity of the legal status of the Chambers of Agriculture as defined in the draft law. In 2019 an attempt to supplement the human resource in the system by introducing a post of consultant in the local government concerned - to be paid from an additional tax levied on agricultural land in the respective administrative-territorial unit - is stuck in the legislative circuit until today.

1 For more details on the evolution of the consultancy system in Romania between 1989 and 2019, you can access the CRPE report: "Agricultural consultancy in Romania. Evolution and public policy proposals"

2. Analysis of the training and advisory measures of the NRDP 2014-2020 - measure 1 "Knowledge transfer and information actions" and measure 2 "Advisory services, farm management services and on-farm replacement services": what they aimed at, what were the main lines of support and to whom they were addressed, and how they were actually implemented.

Sub-measures 1.1 ("Support for vocational training and skills acquisition"), 1.2 ("Support for demonstration and information activities") and 2.1 ("Support for help to benefit from the use of advisory services") were classified by MADR as poorly accessed measures under the 2014-2020 NDPDR. **According to the latest NRDP (National Rural Development Program) 2014-2020 implementation report of 09.03.2023, only approx. 5.9 million EUR of the initially allocated amount of 21 million EUR on sub-measure 1.1 (28%) and 360 000 of 1.6 million EUR on sub-measure 1.2 (23%) have been absorbed. The same report shows that for sub-measure 2.1 only 3.67 million EUR have been absorbed, although the initially allocated amount was over 60 million EUR and later (2018) reduced to 9.265 million EUR.** According to the report, among the most important reasons for the low uptake of the sub-measures is the low level of training supply required/of specialists on the Romanian market to implement activities such as those requested under sub-measures 1.1 and 2. 1, the burden on the submission of supporting documents to the payment application file for these sub-measures, the requirements on the technical capacity of the bidders and the lack of interest of the economic operators for sub-measure 2.1. The "performance" of these measures is also reflected in the fact that during the transition period to the new multi-annual financial framework no amounts were allocated to these measures at all.

3. Analysis of the provisions of the current National Strategic Plan 2023-2027 concerning the training, information and advisory services for farmers that the NSP will support from the European funds for agriculture and rural development, and the program's vision for AKIS (Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System).

Following the model of the NDP 2014-2020, the new NSP includes two interventions relevant to this theme: **(1) Farm Business Advisory and (2) Knowledge Transfer - short trainings**. The only novelty in terms of approach would be the inclusion in the NSP funding of a digital platform acting as a hub for the dissemination of research results, a database for counsellors and trainers included in AKIS, but also for the partners of specialized practice for pupils and students in agricultural education.

The last part of the report is dedicated to the conclusions of the most comprehensive study on farmers' access to agricultural information, training and advisory services in Romania, **reflecting the opinions and experiences of more than 310 farmers from all over the country, as well as more than 50 actors directly involved in the knowledge and innovation system in agriculture:** representatives of county agricultural directorates, agricultural universities, agricultural colleges, research institutes and civil society active in the field of rural development. **All categories of actors interviewed in the project express the need for closer collaboration between public and private advisory providers, the educational and research spheres, with concrete and tangible results:** a more territorially spread physical network of advisory offices and demonstration farms, specialists travelling to the farm, easily accessible online platforms with scientifically validated practical information delivered in a way that is accessible to farmers.

The public agricultural advisory system today: architecture and relevant numbers

Structure of the advisory system today

The public advisory system in Romania currently comprises 479 advisors working under the 41 County Agricultural Directorates (DAJs), distributed both at county level (approx. 200 advisors) and at local level through local centers (approx. 7-9 communes in each county belonging to the local center have agricultural advisors; a total of 279 advisors are distributed to all local centers).

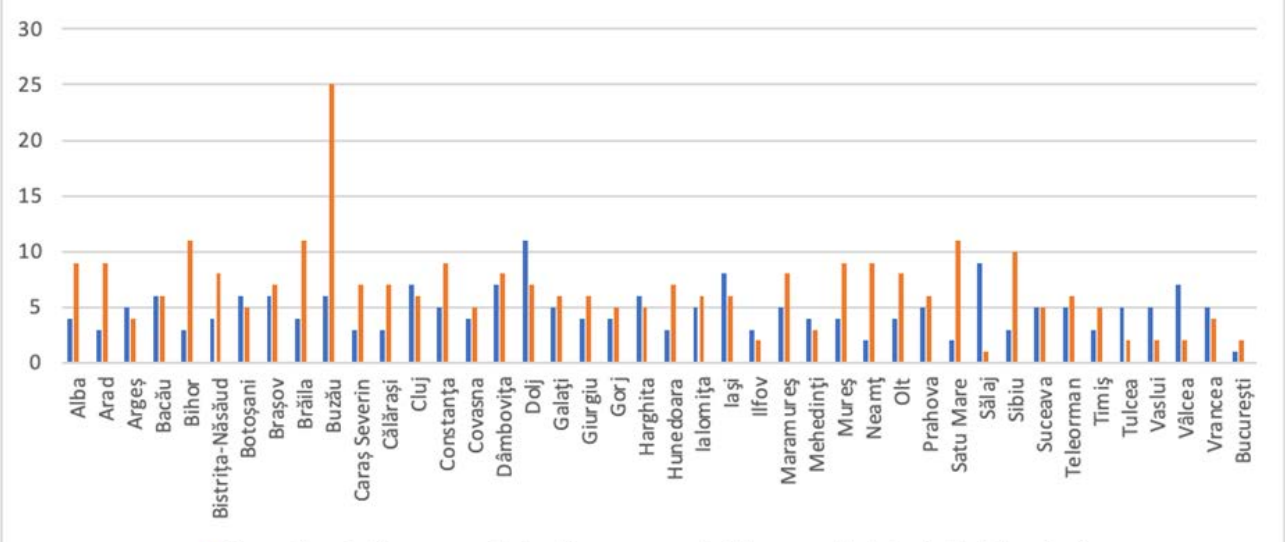
Moreover, consultants are assigned to two relevant departments in the **field at the level of the DAJs**, as follows:

- 199 of them are part of the "County Training, Promotion and Project Development Compartment", each county having between 1 and 11 consultants allocated;

- 280 are part of the "Zonal Technical Assistance Department and the Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) at zonal level", each county having between 1 and 11 consultants assigned, working at local level.

Thus, each county brings together between 3 and 31 local consultants (on average) from the DAJs (both Compartments). The figure below details the distribution of local consultants in each county in each of the two compartments:

Number of consultants in DAJ - breakdown by county



- County training, promotion and project development department (no.)
- Zonal technical assistance and FADN department at zonal level (no.)

Sursă grafic: MADR (prelucrare)

How do the 479 consultants support the activity of farmers?

According to MADR, on the one hand, farmers receive advisory and consultancy services in technical areas - agronomy, animal husbandry, access to new technologies in the field. On the other hand, the consultants provide technical assistance to farmers in drawing up business plans and project proposals for accessing European funds. From this last point of view, the advisers offer support to farmers, especially in the preparation of the necessary files for payments in the case of projects in the funding period.

In addition to consultancy and technical assistance services, farmers also benefit from training and education courses tailored to their needs:

- vocational training courses lasting 360 and/or 720 hours;

- training courses lasting 40 hours.

According to public information published on the DAJ websites, the main tasks of the County Training, Promotion and Project Development Department are[2]:

• to draw up the annual program of measures concerning training, induction and continuing vocational training activities;

• preparation of the necessary documentation for authorization as a training provider for induction and continuing vocational training courses;

• collaboration with specialized educational and research institutions at county level, as well as with the Mountain Area Agency for the development of training programs and course materials necessary for the transmission of basic knowledge according to the training themes;

• organizing training, induction and continuing vocational training courses in collaboration with educational institutions, agricultural research institutions, economic agents in agriculture or other fields;

• drawing up the necessary documentation for the courses and assessment examinations;

• carrying out information activities for potential beneficiaries on the opportunities for accessing support measures under the 2014-2020 RDP, direct payment schemes and transitional national aid applicable to agriculture;

• providing advice and technical assistance for drawing up business plans and projects for accessing European and national funds;

• providing expert advice and technical assistance for the preparation of payment files for projects in the funding period;

• monitoring of projects during the implementation period until their completion

According to the DAJs, the main tasks of the Zonal and FADN Technical Assistance Department are[3]:

• to carry out technical assistance activities for beneficiaries of national and European forms of support in order to comply with the requirements, cross-compliance rules under support schemes and measures for farmers and the code of good agricultural practice for the protection of water against nitrate pollution from agricultural sources and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions;

• technical assistance and advice to beneficiaries of agri-environmental, climate and organic farming measures

2 Summary of tasks as found on DAJ websites (e.g. Buzău County Agricultural Directorate - http://www.dadrbuzau.ro/).
3 Ibid

under the 2014-2020 NDP for the implementation of commitments made;

• providing support to farmers through information and expert technical assistance for the correct completion of single payment applications in order to obtain subsidies from APIA, including for mountain areas;

• providing specialist technical assistance to all persons working in the agricultural and related fields in the application of modern agricultural technologies and new methods of farm management;

• providing technical, economic, managerial and legal advice and assistance for setting up and running agricultural associations, including those in mountain areas;

• providing advice on national and Community legislation in this field, and guiding farmers to comply with these rules;

• working with representatives of farmers', trade and inter-trade associations to identify farmers participating in the FADN;

• providing expert advice to staff on farms selected to participate in the FADN survey;

• identifying the need for local advice and training for the preparation of the annual program of activities, including for the mountain area;

• organizing, implementing and evaluating vocational training and qualification programs;

• identifying potential beneficiaries of agricultural development programs;

• technical assistance activities for drawing up business plans and projects for accessing European and national funds;

• providing expert assistance to farmers, owners/managers of agricultural holdings with livestock, in the preparation of the Action Plan at farm level on the implementation of measures provided for in the Action Program for the protection of water against nitrate pollution from agricultural sources, deadlines for their implementation and sources of funding.

Initiatives to reform the farm advisory system after 2016

The public advisory system in Romania has gone through a series of changes, stages of reform and legislative amendments post-1989[4]: from the establishment of the National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (ANCA) in 1998, which had 41 County Offices for Agricultural Consultancy (OJCA) (which had 546 Local Agricultural Consultancy Centers at commune level) and Agronomists' Houses; to the establishment of the County Agricultural Chambers (CAJ) in 2009 and the Agricultural Chambers Law no. 283/2010, while undergoing a series of subsequent amendments and additions.

The period 2017-2019 saw a number of major legislative changes to the agricultural advisory and consultancy system in Romania: the abolition of the CAJs and the DAJs taking over their duties (in 2017), the re-establishment of the agricultural chambers in 2019 and the declaration of the law as unconstitutional the following year, and the launch in 2019 of an initiative to establish specialist posts at commune level to provide advisory services to farmers. We will present these reform initiatives below.

4 For more details on the evolution of the consultancy system in Romania between 1989 and 2019, see the CRPE report: "Agricultural consultancy in Romania. Evolution and public policy proposals"

Disbanding the Chambers of Agriculture

The last major change in Romania's agricultural advisory ecosystem took place in 2016, during the technocrat government. By Law 157/2016[5] and HG 860/2016[6], the Government orders the dismantling of the County Agricultural Chambers (present in 19 counties at the time, according to the annex of the Government Decision), their activities, assets and staff being taken over by the DAJs. During the following year, the decision is implemented by the County Councils under which the Agricultural Chambers were operating (see the case of CJ Brasov[7]). Thus, by the end of 2017, a new configuration of the agricultural advisory ecosystem is established, which will continue until today. This configuration includes: (1) the DAJs (the only public component of the ecosystem), (2) the various forms of local farmers' associations (which, however, lack the structured, standardized and highly institutionalized character of the now abolished Chambers of Agriculture) and (3) private consultancy firms.

Re-establishment of the Chambers of Agriculture

In December 2019, the subject of the Chambers of Agriculture comes to the fore again with a legislative initiative to regulate the establishment and functioning of the Chambers of Agriculture (PL-x 183/2020[8]). In February 2020, the initiative receives a favorable opinion (with some recommended amendments) from the Economic and Social Council, and in March 2020 from the Legislative Council. It is tacitly adopted by the Senate in March 2020 and registered in the Chamber of Deputies for debate. In October 2020, the initiative receives a favorable report from the Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, Food Industry and Specific Services of the Chamber of Deputies, after 39 of the 47 proposed amendments are accepted. Also in October 2020, the bill is adopted by the Chamber of Deputies[9]. Thus, the re-establishment of the Chambers of Agriculture becomes the subject of a broad cross-party consensus, while gaining the support of the Economic and Social Council and the Legislative Council.

By setting up the Chambers of Agriculture, they would have taken over all the tasks of the DAJs. The Ministry would also have supported the establishment of the agricultural chambers from its own budget, and then, as they were consolidated, in 5-10 years, they would gradually become self-supporting through membership fees "[10]. The MADR's plan was therefore to establish a transitional period during which the Chambers of Agriculture and the DAJs would coexist and the state would support the development of the former financially and institutionally. Although it is unclear what the criteria for measuring the level of "consolidation" of the Chambers of Agriculture would be (possible criteria could have included the number of members or the degree of financial self-sustainability), it is clear that the intention of the MADR was to privatize the advisory ecosystem in the long term, leaving entirely private Chambers of Agriculture to take over all the responsibilities previously assumed by the state.

At the end of 2020, a complaint of unconstitutionality is lodged on PL-x 183/2020, and the law will be declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court (January 2021)[11].

The main arguments put forward by the CCR against this law are:

• The powers of the agricultural chambers provided for in the legislation are not correlated with the powers

5 https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/180221#id_artA13
6 https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/183844
7 https://agrointel.ro/70713/camera-agricola-desfiintata/
8 http://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/upl_pck2015.proiect?idp=18274
9 Ibid
10 Ibid
11 http://www.cdep.ro/pls/proiecte/upl_pck2015.proiect?idp=18274

deriving from the public utility status of the agricultural chambers, which are national networks of private autonomous structures promoting the general public interest, through action at local level and by integrating local specificities into the process of drawing up differentiated policies by agricultural sector. It should be noted that in the original form of Law 283/2010, Article 2(1) read as follows: "Agricultural chambers are private institutions of public interest, non-profit, with legal personality, created for the purpose of: (...)".

• According to Government Ordinance No 26/2000 on associations and foundations, all non-governmental organizations, including those that have acquired the status of public utility, are entered in the Register of Associations and Foundations. As such, the use of the term 'private organizations of public interest' and not 'non-governmental organizations with public utility status', in conjunction with the obligation to be entered in the Register of Associations and Foundations, does not make it clear what the legal nature of the agricultural chambers to be set up will be.

• The rule that 'agricultural chambers must be consulted in all matters relating to their field of activity', including by central government authorities and institutions, is too general, which creates uncertainty in application. Moreover, the rule does not specify the legal sanction in the event of failure to comply with the obligation to consult.

• It is considered inadmissible for a private entity to take over powers and staff from some public institutions and subrogate itself to their rights and obligations. Moreover, the law at issue does not specify the public institutions from which the agricultural chambers are to take over certain tasks, nor does it interfere with the regulatory acts governing the activities of those institutions.

Following the rejection by the CCR, the law returns to Parliament and receives a rejection report from the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Forestry, Food Industry and Specific Services and the Senate Committee on Constitutionality. Thus, so far, the concrete situation of the agricultural advisory ecosystem in Romania remains the same as in 2017.

Supplementing posts at commune level

Another legislative initiative was launched in 2019 (PL-x 150/2019) with the aim of creating the post of administrative policy specialist for agriculture and rural development in local public administration. Basically, this law would allow local public administrations that wish to do so to have their own agricultural consultant, but without this post being mandatory.

Currently, the law is blocked in Parliament, with the draft law being sent to the standing committees of the Chamber of Deputies on 04.09.2019 for a supplementary report. With the dissolution of the 2017-2020 legislature, the bill disappeared from the parliamentary agenda.

Among the main tasks foreseen in the draft legislation for the local consultant are:

- To provide advisory services to farmers when applying for support for the Single Area Payment Scheme to APIA;

- To provide technical assistance and advice to farmers for the submission and implementation of projects under European programs with non-reimbursable funding and national programs financed from the state budget;

- To provide technical assistance and advice to farmers in their relations with representatives of county agricultural directorates, county health and food safety directorates and county phytosanitary offices;

- To provide expert technical, economic and managerial assistance to persons engaged in agricultural and related activities in the application of modern technologies and new methods of farm management in order

to make farm-level activities more efficient;

- To collaborate with relevant entities in the field: with central public administration institutions with tasks in the field to identify the needs for continuing vocational training and with institutes, stations or companies active in basic/applied agricultural research and innovation;

- Organize activities to promote local products and provide technical assistance for the organization of seminars, information sessions, debates and round tables.

In practice, this legislative proposal would have supported farmers' access to agricultural advice and consultancy by facilitating the provision of these services in local communities - a need also validated by the EPRC study[12] and explained below. Consultants would have been remunerated from an additional levy on agricultural land, following the French model, with the levy collected at the town hall and payment going to the consultant.

Implementation of training and advisory measures under the 2014-2020 RDP

One of the stated priorities of the 2014-2020 RDP was the provision of **advisory and consultancy services for farmers, tailored to real market requirements, as well as training, knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture.**

This approach also comes against the background of the results of the previous programming period of EU funds, 2007-2013, in which the system was considered "insufficiently adapted in terms of CAP requirements, quality and farmers' access to agricultural advisory services "[13]. Over the 2007-2013 programming period only 15,717 farmers received support under Measure 143 "Provision of advisory and advisory services to farmers".

According to the 2014-2020 RDP SWOT analysis, the low implementation rate of only 31.4% at the end of 2013 can be attributed to the high complexity of the contracting procedure as well as to the poor correlation of measures whose beneficiaries were targeted for advice[14].

Specifically, in the area of agricultural advice and consultancy, the 2014-2020 RDP aimed at modernizing farms, strengthening competitiveness, sectoral integration, partnership and short supply chains, innovation, market orientation and promotion of entrepreneurship in rural areas, as well as the implementation of commitments made for environmental and climate measures (agri-environment, organic farming)[15]. In practice, these objectives were to be implemented through two measures:

• **Measure 1 - "Knowledge transfer and information actions"** (training and skills acquisition and information actions and demonstration activities).

• **Measure 2 - "Advisory services, farm management services and farm relief services"** (advisory services for farmers, young farmers, micro-enterprises and small enterprises in rural areas).

Measure 1 - "Transfer of knowledge and information actions "[16] included sub-measures 1.1 "Support for vocational training and skills acquisition" and 1.2 "Support for demonstration and information activities" and

12 https://www.crpe.ro/ro/accesul-fermierilor-la-servicii-de-consultanta-agricola/
13 PNDR 2014-2020, p. 60
14 Ibid
15 PNDR 2014-2020, p. 142
16 Fișa măsurii – Acțiuni pentru transferul de cunoștințe și acțiuni de informare (Measure Sheet - Knowledge transfer and information actions)

aimed to:

- accompany measures to increase competitiveness and diversification in agriculture and the need to restructure and modernize the agricultural sector, encourage market-oriented businesses;

- the processing and marketing of agricultural products, the increased requirements for a wide and diversified range of economic, financial and management skills, as well as those related to sustainable land management and environmental protection;

- the application of environmentally friendly technologies and practices, good agricultural production practices and the use of renewable energy, the application of technological solutions and agricultural practices that provide alternatives to drought control through irrigation methods.

Support directions	Beneficiaries
Training and skills acquisition	Public or private entities working in the field of adult vocational training
Information and demonstration activities	Public and/or private entities whose activity is information/demonstration and/or dissemination activities

Measure 2 - "Advisory services, farm management services and on-farm replacement services"[17] included sub-measure 2.1 "Support for help to benefit from the use of advisory services" and aimed to:

- providing tailored advisory services to encourage association and improve economic and environmental performance; emphasizing the need to establish/consolidate/develop cooperatives and producer groups;

- advice on starting and developing rural businesses to help stimulate entrepreneurship and economic development in rural areas.

Support directions	Beneficiaries
Advisory services for farmers, young farmers, micro-enterprises and small businesses / support for the use of advisory services	Providers of counselling services who are public and/or private entities established under the legislation in force

Evaluation of sub-measures 1.1, 1.2 and 2.1 in the context of NDP 2014-2020

The sub-measures related to Measures 1 and 2 appear in the evaluation study of poorly accessed measures published by MADR[18] in 2020.

According to the evaluation report, the reasons for the underperformance of the 2014-2020 RDP in the implementation of these measures are varied and complex: from the way in which the specifications were drawn up, the financial and technical conditions imposed on trainers/advisers, the lack of clarity of the guidelines, to the late launch schedule, which is not in line with the rest of the measures in the program.

Thus, in the case of sub-measure 1.1 - "Support for vocational training and skills acquisition", among the factors that led to the low uptake of the sub-measure, according to the evaluation, were:

17 Fișa măsurii – Servicii de consiliere, servicii de gestionare a fermei și servicii de înlocuire în cadrul fermei (Measure Sheet - Advisory services, farm management services and farm replacement services)
18 Studiu final de evaluare a măsurilor slab accesate din cadrul PNDR 2014-2020 (2019), Final evaluation study of poorly accessed measures under NDP 2014-2020 (2019)

- difficulties in identifying the target group (lack of updated information in AFIR databases);

- keeping the target group in the project throughout the training sessions;

- the length of the evaluation - selection - contracting period;

- failure to respect the deadline for submitting documents according to the Applicant's Guide;

- the request in the Applicant Guide to submit in the system (on the platform), within 30 days of the posting of the selection report, the list of persons proposed to be trained in the projects;

- certain eligibility criteria for support could not be met by training providers who applied under Call 1 and 2;

- the low involvement of teachers is mainly due to the unattractive/low cost in terms of trainers' salaries in relation to the offer made by the trainer to implement the project;

- the principle of efficient and accelerated project implementation;

- the (heavy) documentation required to prove the qualification requirements, especially in the case of public educational institutions, which submitted projects either as project leader or in partnership with other companies;

- the additional burden of submitting all supporting documents to the payment claims file;

- lack of pre-financing;

- technical problems with the online platform[19]; and

In the case of sub-measure 1.2 - "Support for demonstration activities and outreach actions", the factors that led to the low uptake of the sub-measure, according to the evaluation, included:

- Unclarity of the applicant guidelines;

- selection criteria and principles difficult to meet;

- the principle of efficient and accelerated project implementation;

- the principle of efficient use of funds (no more than 60 euro per participant - call 1 and 3; no more than 100 euro per participant - call 2);

- the additional burden on the submission of all supporting documents to the payment claim file;

- too high cost of auditing the project;

- lack of pre-financing;

- late launch of the call[20]

Sub measure 2.1 - "Support for the use of counselling services"

According to the MADR assessment, despite the fact that this sub-measure would have responded to a large extent to the needs of potential beneficiaries/target group - young farmers, small farms, farmers with agri-environmental commitments, the late launch of procedures (the first procedure was launched on 09.10.2017) has massively affected the attractiveness of this sub-measure.

The information gathered by the authors of the evaluation report also indicates that potential bidders **have**

19 Studiu final de evaluare a măsurilor slab accesate din cadrul PNDR 2014-2020 (2019), p. 23-25, Final evaluation study of poorly accessed measures under NDP 2014-2020 (2019), p. 23-25
20 Ibid

little capacity to meet the technical and financial capacity requirements without the involvement of a project partner(s)."

The technical capacity requirements of the bidders also constituted an additional obstacle, requiring the demonstration of "consultancy services in the last 3 years at the level of one or more contracts, indicating values, dates and public or private beneficiaries", with the minimum amount of these services also specified for each lot. For example, for the procedure for the Purchase of Advisory Services for Farmers working on farms, the services provided in the past by the tenderers had to be worth a cumulative amount of 1.364.100,00 lei for LOT 1, 909.400,00 lei for LOT 2, 909.400,00 lei for LOT 3, 909.400,00 lei for LOT 4, 909.400,00 lei for LOT 5, 909.400,00 lei for LOT 6 and 909.400,00 lei for LOT 7.

Two other factors that negatively influenced the attractiveness of this measure were the conditions imposed on the required value deposits and guarantees, the requirements for the experts proposed in the technical offer (including the submission of supporting documents), the relatively low budget available for the implementation of the projects and the long period for the completion of the contracting procedure[21].

Agricultural information, training and advice in the National Strategic Plan 2023-2027

The new framework for public policy and financing of agriculture and rural development through European funds in Romania is the National Strategic Plan 2023-2027, which was approved at the end of 2022. In its current form, the NSP aims to create bridges between farmers and institutions and organizations specialized in knowledge and innovation in agriculture (central and local public institutions, the National Rural Development Network, agricultural universities, research institutes, farmers' representative associations, local action groups, NGOs).

According to the NFP, efforts are needed to establish close links between farmers and different types of institutions and organizations, such as:

- institutions/organizations generating and using technologies applied in agriculture;

- institutions/organizations promoting mutual learning;

- institutions/organizations providing research/innovation services (digital innovation hubs);

- institutions/organizations providing knowledge and disseminating information.

All these actors will operate under the umbrella of MADR through the AKIS Coordination Unit and there will also be an AKIS Support Unit (bringing together relevant and representative actors for the field from ministries, agricultural universities and colleges, research institutes, innovative research SMEs and digital solution providers, digital innovation hubs, farmer representative associations, Local Action Groups, relevant NGOs, etc.).

According to the NFP, a digital platform will be created as a hub, integrating the relevant agricultural stakeholders. This online platform will have the following functions:

- **Support different research areas, including support for dissemination of results.** This function involves connecting to various national and European platforms for research partnerships and providing information

21 Studiu final de evaluare a măsurilor slab accesate din cadrul PNDR 2014-2020 (2019), p. 28-31, Final evaluation study of poorly accessed measures under NDP 2014-2020 (2019), p. 28-31

on research, development and innovation activities and their results;

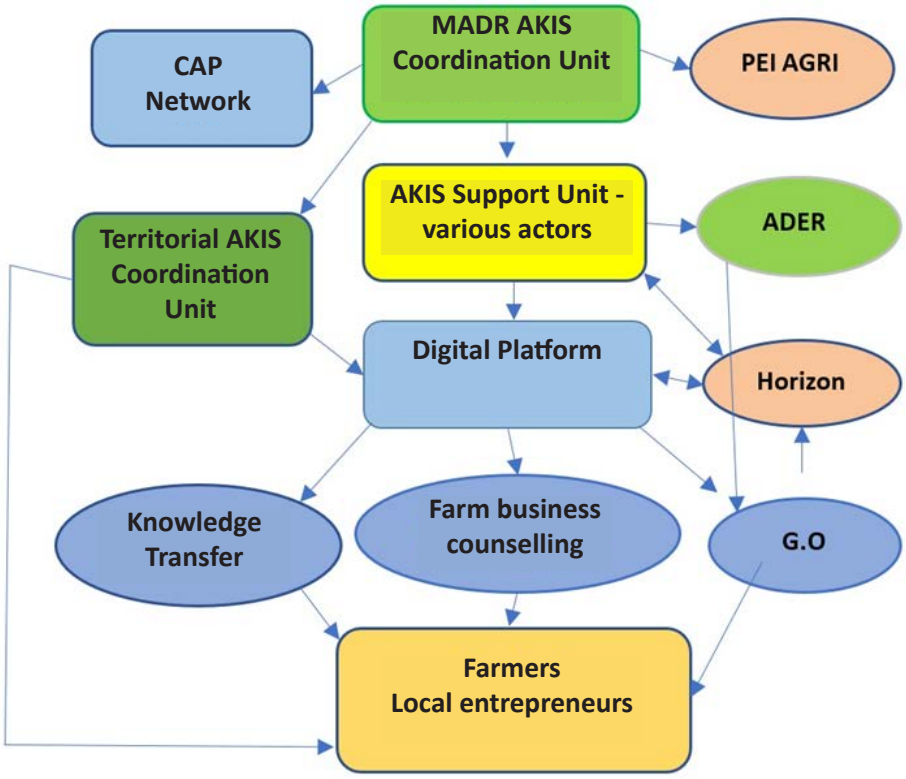
- Management of advisory services funded by the intervention NFP DR-38 - Farm Business Advisory. The platform will serve as a database of selected AKIS advisors, with specializations and service delivery territory;

- Management of training services in agriculture and rural development financed by the intervention NFP DR-37 - Knowledge Transfer. The platform will integrate the training activities of the database providers;

- Centralization of potential partners for the implementation of traineeships. Thus, agricultural educational establishments would be assisted in establishing partnerships in this regard.

The digital platform is planned to be interactive and nationally accessible and data will be collected through the AKIS Territorial Coordination Unit from the various AKIS actors. The AKIS Coordination Unit will also administer this platform, which will also contain the monitoring and evaluation components of the specific activities of the AKIS advisors, but this data will not be made public.

The digital platform also includes a social networking component, where information on topics of interest can be requested and answered by AKIS partners.



Source: National Rural Development Network (RNDR)[22]

Interventions in the National Strategic Program (NSP) 2023-2027 linked to AKIS are:

1.Knowledge transfer (DR-37), with a total allocation of €6 million

Through this NSP rural development intervention, an attempt will be made to **respond to the knowledge and information needs of farmers**, helping them to make informed decisions regarding the management of their farms, households and communities. In other words, **it aims to modernize the agricultural sector by improving knowledge sharing.**

[22] https://www.rndr.ro/akis/despre-akis.html

Support for this intervention will be provided for the organization of short vocational training courses, following which a certificate of attendance will be issued. These courses will cover topics such as the environment, climate and resource efficiency, sustainable development, digitization, innovation, biodiversity, animal welfare, renewable energy sources or increasing efficiency and competitiveness in agriculture, among others. For the livestock sector, training and awareness-raising programs will also be organized for pig farmers to adopt measures to prevent the spread of African swine fever.

The direct beneficiaries of this intervention will be public or private entities or consortia specialized in training. In proportion to the size of the target group, these entities will receive grants to cover the cost of the training. Indirect beneficiaries, the persons trained, in other words, may be farmers, including producer associations, with priority for young farmers and those with small farms. Farm advisers will also be able to participate in such training courses.

Depending on the form of organization of the course, support through this intervention ranges from €21/day/beneficiary - for an online course, to €94/day/beneficiary - for a face-to-face course with accommodation.

2. Advice on agricultural affairs (DR-38), with an allocation of €4 040 715

According to the NFP, this intervention will cover advisory activities tailored to farmers' individual needs and their implementation. The intervention aims at providing information through individual counselling services of 3 or 4 hours of counselling, depending on the complexity of the issues.

The implementation of the intervention will initially consider the selection of individual counsellors, public or private, and their integration into the AKIS system. They will then be trained annually through intervention DR-37 "Knowledge Transfer".

The main areas for which counselling will be provided are:

• Farm management requirements, conditions and commitments (including cross-compliance);

• Farming practices that prevent the development of antimicrobial resistance;

• Risk prevention and management;

• Digitization of the agricultural sector and rural areas;

• Employment conditions, employers' obligations, occupational safety and health and social support in farming communities.

The direct beneficiaries of this intervention would be authorized individuals or representatives of public/private entities specialized in agricultural advisory services. The support consists of covering counselling activities and the final beneficiaries of the measure will be the farmers, who will receive individual counselling services. **According to the NFP, at least 50% of the intervention budget must be used for counselling young farmers and those with small farms.**

Needs of Romanian farmers and other stake-holders for agricultural advice

All this institutional architecture, programs and funding dedicated to the transfer of knowledge and innovation in agriculture to farmers, described in the previous chapters, can only be assessed by juxtaposing it with the real needs of Romanian farmers. These needs must be correlated with the survey of the de facto state of the agricultural advisory system, its performance, as well as with the vision of the relevant actors who

have played, are playing or could play a more active role in the future in this sector - e.g. universities and agricultural colleges.

Thus, in the following we present the main conclusions drawn from the quantitative and qualitative research carried out in the framework of the project "Planning and exploration activities of an agricultural advisory system" on (1) farmers' needs regarding agricultural advisory and (2) perceptions of actors directly involved in the agricultural knowledge and innovation system.

The research reflects the opinions and experiences of more than 310 farmers from all over the country, as well as more than 50 actors directly involved in the agricultural knowledge and innovation system, such as representatives of county agricultural directorates, agricultural universities, agricultural colleges, research institutes and civil society active in the field of rural development.

The most important conclusions of the research are:

- Commercial farms, with legal personality, are more likely to say that they need advice than other forms of organization (PFA, family associations, etc.), the main reason being, most likely, a better awareness on their part of the need for development, which is closely linked to access to information and know-how. Most in this category are either young farmers taking over the business from their parents or farmers who have understood that the development of a competitive agricultural business depends on information support from outside.

- The state advisory system is in demand especially in the area of accessing subsidies and European funds, but both farmers and experts point to the shortcomings of this system in the technical field, innovations, marketing, farm management, business models or associations.

- Half of the respondents have high and very high trust in the internet and the media when it comes to agricultural information. But farmers recognize that technical information on informal social media groups can be of questionable quality as it is not validated by experts.

- Farmers are unhappy that they often receive information that is too general and non-specialized in a highly fragmented and unmonitored advice market in terms of the quality of services provided.

- An overwhelming majority of farmers (92%) prefer to access advisory services in person. Both farmers and experts see a need to strengthen a regional network of physical offices where farmers can access a wide range of information, advice and services on a "one-stop shop" basis. Furthermore, both DJAs, farmers and experts interviewed mention the need for a network of demonstration plots/farms where farmers can test various seeds, methods, innovations, etc. in practice.

- At the top of the list of farmers' needs in terms of the type of services they need is one-off advice on a given problem, cited by almost three quarters of those who identified a need for advisory services. Just over a quarter say they would need vocational training services - short or long courses.

- In reality, the range of DAJ services is narrower than presented in official documents by the MADR or on DAJ websites. According to the 10 DAJ representatives interviewed, it is limited to qualification courses, consultancy for obtaining non-reimbursable funds and project implementation, agri-environmental and organic farming courses, certification of traditional products, monitoring/technical inspections. Most services are offered in the office, face to face with the applicant, while farm visits are only made in cases of drought or serious crop diseases. **They blame staff shortages and overload as the determining factors. Among the solutions identified by them to improve the services offered are: increasing the number of consultants, setting up regional advisory centers, but also closer and more homogeneous collaboration with education and research institutions** - only two out of 10 DAJs mention that they have or have had projects with USAMVs, agricultural colleges or research institutes.

- At the same time, the perception of universities is that there is a certain fear of farmers to go to universities

and public institutions and that they prefer to go more to private advice because they trust it more. Moreover, there is a perceived need for a link between education-consulting institutions and farmers to facilitate the relationship between the two parties. Representatives of research institutes and agricultural universities express the importance of two-way communication with farmers on accessible platforms, where the results of research and technology transfer projects are presented and the needs of farmers are better understood, as well as partnerships with other actors in the system.

Thus, all categories of actors interviewed in the project express the need for closer collaboration between public, private, educational and research advice providers, with concrete and tangible results: a more territorially spread physical network of advice offices and demonstration farms, specialists travelling to the farm, easily accessible online platforms with scientifically validated practical information delivered in an accessible way to farmers.

Conclusions

As the legislative changes of recent years have shown, the public policy view of the philosophy, but also the institutional architecture, of the state agricultural advisory system is far from "settled". Attempts to reform it on the French model and to withdraw the state from this ecosystem have failed (unsurprisingly, considering the incipient level of associativity and development of social capital in rural areas and especially among farmers).

The reality is that, as the quantitative-qualitative research[23] carried out in support of this report shows, small and medium-sized commercial farms need relevant, accessible and easy-to-integrate information into their business in order to survive in the market and grow. And information, training and advisory services offered exclusively by the private (for-profit) system are not physically and financially accessible for this category of farms, which now get their scientifically unvalidated information on an ad hoc basis from neighbors, social media groups or the press. Many of these farmers still beat the path to county seats and access the few remaining experts in the DAJs for various cases, which they sometimes cannot/do not know/do not have the resources to address.

Farmers in Romania need information support from the state advisory system, which at the moment is massively underfunded and should be invested in - by increasing the number of advisors, but also by their continuous training, in order to keep pace with the rapid developments in contemporary, highly digitized agriculture.

However, this public system should be complemented by an effective, concerted and sustained integration of the agricultural education and research system (universities, high schools, research stations) into the "day-to-day" practice of knowledge acquisition by the Romanian farmer. The gap between the two worlds must be narrowed, and cutting-edge information and innovations must be brought "down to earth" by building, in partnership with the private and non-governmental sectors, physical spaces where farmers can access services or be directed to the entities best suited to their specific needs.

We welcome the inclusion of the creation of a digital knowledge repository platform in the plans for the coagulation of AKIS through the NSP 2023-2027, but this must be backed up by a consistent effort to constantly "translate" official/academic information into language and formats accessible to farmers, and to promote it in the media they access.

It is a certainty that improving the performance (qualitative and numerical) of agricultural advisory services in Romania is one of the key elements for the successful implementation of the future National Strategic

23 https://www.crpe.ro/ro/accesul-fermierilor-la-servicii-de-consultanta-agricola/, farmers'-access-to-farm-consultancy-services/

Plan 2023-2027. It is important to internalize the experience of the implementation of the two measures dedicated to training and advisory services in agriculture in the NDP 2014-2020. The guidelines of the two NSP interventions **- Knowledge Transfer (DR-37) and Farm Business Advisory (DR-38) should be made so that local entities with relevant expertise - from the educational sphere, civil society active in rural development etc. - have de facto access to the funding programs, in terms of the conditions of the implementation guidelines, bureaucracy, etc. Moreover, these should be launched at the beginning of the implementation of the NSP, in order to support the absorption of funds, but also the quality of the projects.**

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