

TRAINING CENTERS NETWORK FOR AGRICULTURAL ADVICE IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

Looking to develop the national institutional capacity for implementing the new requirements and to improve the flow of information on EU standards related to production, a joint World Bank and Romanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development Project successfully set up Training and Information Centers in the main regions in Romania, as knowledge resource bases for improvement and updating the professional capacity of the research, extension and food safety specialists. Positive effects at farmer level are expected to appear towards the end of the Project, due to receiving up-to date information/advice from the agricultural consultants, better technologies available from the research institutes and improved practices regarding food safety. A strategy document has been developed, aiming to back up the sustainable development of the Centers. The document recommended that the training programs should be addressed in the future also to other target groups. Training and Information Centers would continue to meet the training needs with further expected Governmental employed trainings, applications on EU funded projects as well as training to private sector on fee basis.

Key words: agricultural extension, agricultural consultancy, vocational training, post-graduate agricultural studies.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, farming turns into a more and more complicated business that requires in-depth technological knowledge, as well as certain management skills and continuously updated market information. A relatively recent report concluded that short before EU accession, the overwhelming majority of Romanian farmers lacked awareness and knowledge on the consequences, both positive (i.e. access to subsidies) and negative (e.g. strict compliance norms in a range of fields) of integration process (Doorman and Eissen, 2006). In addition, a large majority lacked the business and technical skills to effectively develop their farms into viable businesses, able to compete in the European and world market. Moreover, beyond the well known inadequate number of professional staff to cover even a minor proportion of Romania's farms, overall the National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (ANCA) and especially its former county and local offices network staff (OJCA and CLCA, now decentralized to local administration), lacked expertise in such issues as farm-business management, consulting-communication skills, project design and monitoring, law, marketing, and facilities (notably, with regard to compliance with EU standards).

Recognizing the need for high quality agricultural services to facilitate compliance with the obligations of EU membership, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was involved in continuation of assisting Romania to set up a modern agricultural knowledge and information system, the aim being not only to establish an EU compliant system, but also to develop national institutional capacity for implementing the new requirements and to improve the flow of information on EU standards related to production. The Modernizing of Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (MAKIS) Project, financed through the World Bank Loan no. 4758-Ro, had, through the component "Support for Advisory and Information

Systems” (Official Monitor, 2005), the objective to set up Training and Information Centers (TIC) in the main regions in Romania, as knowledge resource bases for improvement and updating the professional capacity of the research, extension and food safety specialists to better serve the needs of farmers’ knowledge and technologies related to production, quality control, food safety processing and marketing, in order to permanently know, adapt and meet EU requirements.

MAKIS’ set TICs were established and are functional and fully integrated to, and hosted by i) the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences-USAMV Bucharest (for the South and part of the South East region of Romania training needs), ii) the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences-USAMV Cluj (North-West Region and the Central Region), iii) the University of Agricultural Sciences Banat - USA Banat Timișoara (West Region, part of the South-West Region and part of the North-West Region) and iv) the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences “Ion Ionescu de la Brad”-USAMV Iași (North-East Region and part of the South-East Region). All four TICs have proved good capacity of accommodation and training facilities and qualified training staff and can provide, at the end of each of the training courses, formal Romanian MEC legally recognized post-university certificates/diplomas for participants, upon successful completion of the training.

The Centers are acting on one hand like regional focal points and on the other as a common national level agricultural knowledge resource base network, able to serve the need for regular or ad hoc training under continuously updating broad topics of EU requirements.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The original design of the Project foresaw that the TIC would be located at the University of Agricultural and Veterinary Sciences (USAMV) in Bucharest and would have linkages with the agricultural universities in Cluj, Iași and Timișoara.

After several meetings with the parties involved in the Project, based on the most feasible developed scenario according to the existing legislation, the option to set-up one independent TIC in each region was accepted and specified in a General Agreement, prepared and signed on May 8th 2006 between the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development (MARD), National Agency for Agricultural Consultancy (ANCA), National Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Authority (ANSVSA), Agricultural and Forestry Science Academy (ASAS), the agricultural universities from Bucharest, Iași, Cluj and Timișoara and the MAKIS Project Management Unit (MAKIS PMU). A Training and Information Center Consultative Council was set comprising 11 members (one representative of each institution/organization listed above, Romanian Farmer Association and the private sector). The main responsibility of the Consultative Council is to annually approve the training programs (curricula) to be delivered in the Training and Information Centers based on information regarding the training needs identified by the extension personnel who is in touch with farmers at the local level, special needs assessments carried out in order to determine gaps in farmers’ knowledge on specific matters, priorities set up by the MARD in order to meet the EU requirements as well as training programs developed for the extension and food safety specialists by ANSVSA or ANCA with funds from other sources.

Teams from the agricultural universities, ANCA, MARD’s Euro-Counselors Bureau and PMU MAKIS worked together and identified the training sub-domains for the agricultural consultants according to the *acquis communautaire* and to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The curricula for the general topics common to all TICs (topics established in a participatory process which ensured its relevance to the current needs of the agricultural sector), was approved by the Consultative Council in April 2007 and a proposed team of trainers for agricultural consultants were trained for two weeks by the Danish Agricultural Advisory Service (DAAS) in Horsens, Bygholm College.

The first step of training program implementation was the pilot contract (later on, extended) signed with USAMV Bucharest and covering the training needs for the entire South Region and

part of the South-East Region (counties Dolj, Vâlcea, Argeș, Olt, Teleorman, Giurgiu, Dâmbovița, Brașov, Covasna, Prahova, Ilfov, Călărași, Ialomița, Buzău, Brăila, Constanța, Tulcea).

Following the launch of an international bid, the other three agricultural universities prepared technical and financial proposals for the training needs in the main regions of Romania, as the World Bank considered that the training providers for all regional TICs (Cluj, Timișoara and Iași) should be selected following a competitive selection process. The Quality and Cost Based Selection process started in September 2007. Reputed international consultancy bodies and training providers (from Finland, France, Romania, Germany, Canada, Israel) submitted to the MAKIS-PMU the documents of expression of interest for bid participation. The evaluation process was finalized and concluded that:

- i) for the North-West and Central Region of Romania (counties Alba, Bistrița, Cluj, Harghita, Maramureș, Mureș, Satu Mare, Sălaj), the best proposal was submitted by USAMV Cluj in association with ADT Projekt from Bonn, Germany (as sub consultant);
- ii) for the West Region, part of the South-West Region and part of the North-West Region (counties Arad, Bihor, Caraș Severin, Gorj, Hunedoara, Mehedinți, Sibiu, Timiș), the best proposal was submitted by USA Banat Timișoara in association with ADT Projekt from Bonn, Germany (as sub consultant) and iii) for the North-East Region and part of the South-East Region (counties Bacău, Botoșani, Galați, Iași, Neamț, Suceava, Vaslui, Vrancea), the best proposal was submitted by USAMV Iași in association with Consorzio Sviluppo e Impresa from Verona, Italy (as sub consultant). Separate contracts were signed with each of the three Universities.

RESULTS

The TICs were planned as a permanent training and information centers with wider and structured curricula as well as information providers for topics of regional importance that are readily accessible and applicable for the agricultural/rural population. The main TICs' tasks are to: i) gather knowledge on agricultural technologies from within the country and abroad in order to meet both the farmers needs as well as EU requirements, ii) develop relevant extension packages and training modules for selected topics for each agro-farming area; iii) train trainers and providers of agricultural extension and advisory services and provide them accreditation, iv) train trainers and inspectors within the food safety system and provide them accreditation and v) train researchers on how to develop research proposals and integrate within the European Research area.

The training activity started in September 2006 in Bucharest, October 2008 in Cluj and Timisoara and February 2010 in Iași and is ongoing. Each training session was organized for 20 participants and lasted between 1 (for researchers) to 4 weeks (for consultants).

At the end of 2010, the overall number (Pilot Contract plus Contract Amendment) of specialists trained in TIC Bucharest reached 1000 agricultural consultants, 200 food safety inspectors and 127 researchers. In September 2010 CPI Cluj completed the training of 420 agricultural consultants, 120 food safety inspectors and 40 researchers. Similarly, CPI Timisoara successfully finalized the Contract by completing the training for 420 agricultural consultants, 100 food safety inspectors and 40 researchers. CPI Iași trained 200 agricultural consultants, 40 food safety inspectors and 40 researchers and additionally, at MARD request, 8 food safety inspectors and 5 researchers from Republic of Moldavia.

The core of the curricula for food inspectors included topics as food and feed law, different stages of production, processing and distribution, possible risks for human, animal and plant health and for the environment, the assessment of non-compliance with food and feed law, HACCP procedures, management and official certification systems, contingency arrangements for emergencies and control techniques and procedures. The one for researchers focused on EU's

Seventh Framework Program and National Programs for Research and Development: structures, priorities, mechanisms and procedures in funds accessing.

The curricula for agricultural consultants comprised general interest topics (standard training modules, common to all MAKIS set TICs), including:

- the CAP general framework: rural development policies, key elements of the reformed CAP, SAPS, CNDP and RD choices;
- the institutional framework for implementing the CAP in Romania;
- agriculture and food: food quality schemes, general food safety issues, traceability, animal health and welfare, plant health;
- agri-food certification and control systems in Romania;
- agriculture and environment: good agricultural practices, cross-compliance, organic farming, agri-environmental schemes;
- marketing of agri-food products: EU regulatory framework and specific methods and techniques;
- farm financial management: basics of accounting and assessment of farm profitability, finding resources, business plans;
- communication techniques and modern methods in agricultural consultancy.

TICs from Cluj, Timișoara and Iași prepared tailor-made training courses for agricultural extension and advisory specialists, in accordance with regional specifics and needs (TIC Cluj for beekeeping, cattle production, fodder farming and sheep and goats, USAMV Timișoara for grain farming, swine production, floriculture and decorative plants, USAMV Iași for viticulture, fruit-tree growing and fruit shrubs). The tailor-made courses cover half of the total time allocated for the training of consultants.

The agricultural extension and advisory specialists were drawn in an earlier stage, mainly from the staff of the county and local structures of the public agricultural advisory system (formerly under ANCA), at present decentralized and in transition to Agricultural Chambers.

In a later stage, the courses for extension and advisory specialists were attended by the staff of the local Rural Development and Agriculture Departments (DADR) and other local institutional structures of MARD, as well as university graduated representatives of farmers' association and recent graduates of the agricultural universities, seen as further specialists to be included within the technical staff of the Romanian public and/or private agricultural consultancy network.

The food inspectors were drawn mainly from the ANSVA county network staff and the researchers from the young staff of the research and development institutes and regional stations.

Based on developing guidelines for preparation of training materials and training methodology, on the continuous assessing and updating the specific training needs of the different target groups, adaption and fine tuning of training content and materials as well as experience exchange between all four TICs in Romania on regular basis, the MAKIS Project component succeeded to reach all the targets within the frame of the prior agreed contractual schedule.

Questionnaires filled up by the graduates at the end of the courses provide a complex data base including information on age, genre, education, background of trainees, as well as completed inquiries regarding each subject, such as the usefulness of the topic, the trainer's performance, the degree of interactivity, views on the quality of the content of training modules, trainers, course administration etc. The processed data are updated within the progress reports of the TIC monitoring department and the feedback received from trainees is being incorporated to improve the training continuously. Websites developed by each TIC are interconnected and effectively used by trainees, professionals in the field and students.

Based on the practical experience and achievements during the first year of implementation of the MAKIS training programme for updating the professional capacity of extension and advisory specialists, food inspectors and agricultural researchers in the region, on experience in other EU member states, as well as on the assessment of efficiency and sustainability of the agricultural

“knowledge and information transfer“ system in accordance with the future needs, a strategy document has been developed, aiming to back up the sustainable development of the centers (ADT, 2009). The document was prepared by ADT Consultants in dialog with TICs’ management staff and several trainers in Cluj and Timișoara, as well as in cooperation with the project MAKIS PMU.

For submission to potential financing bodies, the TICs prepared a comprehensive training programme that could bridge the year 2011. It includes a system of demand-driven courses with differentiated focuses and course length, addressing various target groups (Figure 1). One of the common conclusions of the strategy papers is that on the need and demand side of training there are no bottlenecks for sustainable operation of the TICs. Beyond introductory courses, there is a huge need and demand for further training through specialized single issue courses in likewise dimension.

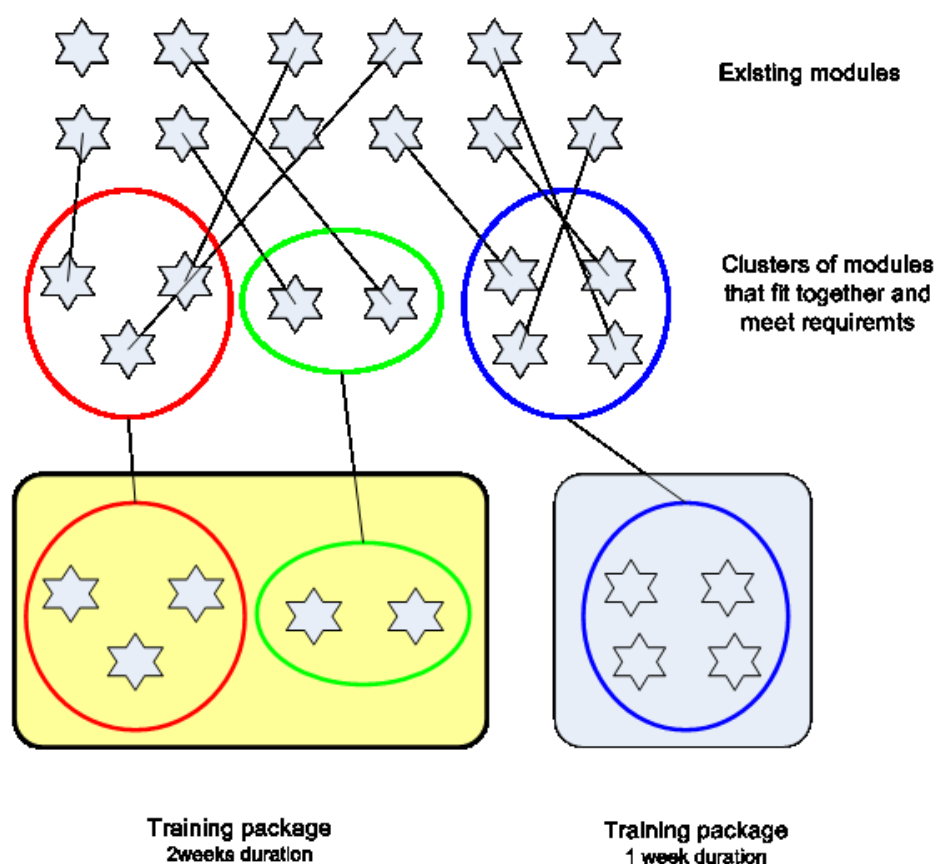


Figure 1. From existing to demand driven seminars

CONCLUSIONS

The training courses for researchers mainly contributed to developing the capacity of competing for research projects and the courses for food-safety inspectors were particularly important for ANSVSA and the connected county network, since its inspection staff is required to participate to periodic refresher training courses. The former ANCA network was trained to better address the farmer’s consultancy needs regarding EU/CAP environment and farm marketing and management. Positive effects at farmer level are expected to appear towards the end of the MAKIS project, due to receiving up-to date information/advice from the agricultural consultants, better technologies available from the research institutes and improved practices regarding food safety.

The training program is considered to be a success by all parties involved in the project and is likely that this type of activities can be self-sustainable in the future (once the funding from MAKIS project ends). Also, the consultants that developed the TICs' strategy recommended that the training programs should be addressed in the future to other target groups as well. The TICs would continue to meet the training needs, as already is foreseen, with further expected Governmental employed trainings, applications on EU funded projects as well training to private sector on fee basis. Moreover, careful preparations are needed since the Common Agricultural Policy is due to be reformed by 2013 and formal public consultation on the CAP post-2013 have already been recently undertaken (EC, 2010).

To date, TICs national network has capacity for continuously updating relevant technical and administrative information and knowledge through the university scientific body, institutional stability and good training infrastructure (as being embedded in the structure of reputed agricultural universities), proven capabilities in training and project management and the regional knowledge and networks to be an attractive partner for cooperation with national and international partners for joint project applications and implementation.

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