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OUTLOOK ON ROMANIAN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION

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ABSTRACT

Establishing and developing extension services in Romania represents a necessity in order to increase performance of agricultural exploitations. Low level of farmers' professional knowledge, lack of any information system and requirements for research results' application into practice, contributed to the decision to establish extension activities by involving available agricultural experts.

Specific actions to extension activities were organized: training courses, meetings with farmers in order to debate the problems they are confronted with, establishment of demonstrative plots and exhibitions, group discussions and individual consulting.

Frequent reorganization of state agricultural institutions affected the efficiency of extension activity. It is hoped that the planned setting up of Agricultural Chambers with extension departments will ensure efficiency of this activity for farmers' benefit.

Key words: agricultural extension, consultancy, professional training, knowledge dissemination.

INTRODUCTION

After 1989, political, economic and social changes in Romania remodelled agriculture regarding structure of property, types of exploitations and market-driven production.
The agricultural producer (the farmer) stands in the middle of these transformations, affected by different economic, social, physical and infrastructure factors. He is now required to assume full responsibility of his exploitation viability by making optimal decisions.

Decisions' improvement depends on levels of economic and technical knowledge and availability of information regarding the problems farmers are confronted with. For its support, a service to ensure information for farmers' needs, should contribute to a more profitable management of farms.

Consulting public services were set up during the last century; in the '80s there were 207 extension services in 115 countries (Van der Ban and Hawkins, 1988).

Agricultural knowledge spreading activities in Romania appeared at the end of XVIIIth century. They continued during the following century by publications consisting of practical advice for agricultural works, knowledge on climate, agronomy, animal husbandry and agricultural machinery. Within this period of time, the activity of the outstanding agronomist Ion Ionescu de la Brad is worth mentioning. He was remarked as a hard-working militant for promoting progress in agriculture by numerous papers and for his perseverance for agricultural education's development (Sin, 1998).

Setting up the Zootechnical National Institute (1926) and the Agronomic Research Institute of Romania (1927), as well as the development of high agricultural education, contributed to accumulation of extensive knowledge, necessary for progress in agriculture. This knowledge began to be disseminated among farmers by the above mentioned institutions and specialists of Agricultural Chambers.

For example, extension actions annually carried out by the Arad County Agricultural Chamber, consisted of:

- delivery of 7,000 different publications;
- 170 courses (and 42 practical activities), with participation of over 3,530 farmers,
- establishment of 35 demonstrative plots;
- an Agricultural Bulletin was published twice per month, in 3,000 copies, sent free of charge to farmers;
- delivery of selected seeds, organization of fairs, exhibitions and competitions with prizes.

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Farmers benefited of such diversified activity and their interest for such actions has grown year by year (Mihalca, 2001).

During the communist regime, the network of research units was extended by setting up new agricultural research institutes and units, their number reaching 120. Their activity generated new technological knowledge; highly productive cultivars, adapted to Romanian environmental conditions, were created.

Creation of large cooperative units and state farms, as well as the centralized decision-making system, facilitated the transfer of research results into agricultural production, which contributed to important increases in crop and animal production.

The extension activities were carried out by administrative procedures. For members of agricultural production cooperatives and workers of state agricultural enterprises, various courses were organized during winter time. During those courses, researchers and university lecturers taught them by using handbooks printed for this purpose. The purely theoretical character of lessons and the lack of motivation of participants for improving their efficiency, determined the courses to be formal and without the desired results.

The transfer of technical knowledge, especially the results of research, was better organized in some courses in special training centres (The Agronomist's Houses) for agronomists from cooperatives and state farms. The participants were tested on the received knowledge, representing a way to disseminate new information and knowledge, necessary for improving agricultural practices. Demonstrative plots and meetings with farmers were also organized, where different problems of crop production were discussed.

After 1989, the change of political regime determined major changes in agriculture, the most important one being returning agricultural land to former owners.

As a result of this change, a large number of 1-50 ha farms were established. Agricultural land was divided into millions of plots and, as a result, setting up profitable exploitation activities was very difficult.

Slowly, land merging has begun, especially in plain areas, by association of small owners or by land lease and sale, so that now, half of the arable land belongs to some large farms and the other half to 1-20 ha small farms.

Change of agrarian structure and transition to market economy were sources of serious problems for farmers, especially for the small ones, with poor technical endowment. Most of their production is aimed for self-consumption and very little, if any, for market. Such small farms are not competitive and not profitable and, therefore, need know-how, inputs and credits (Sin & Jones, 1998). Although large farms also need know-how, they have larger capital resources, helping them to implement new approaches and to produce more and cheaper.

Extension activities are required by Romanian agriculture by the following facts:

- Low level of small farmers' professional education; now, they are either ex-members of former agricultural cooperatives during the communist regime, where they were only simple workers, without the need to take decisions, either younger or older persons without any agronomic education. All these people do not have the necessary technological knowledge to ensure efficient use of land, so that consulting activities will represent their support by providing the needed knowledge and information.
- Deficiency or lack of necessary knowledge about market economy is a specific phenomenon for ex-communist countries. Educating farmers in this regard is essential in order to achieve a market oriented production, with respect to quantity, quality and cost.
- Farmers need to be informed and to understand the message of state institutions, like he Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, regarding regulations, subsidies, EU financing opportunities, credits, etc. Such very useful information for farmers are provided by the Extension Service;
- The transfer of scientific results from research institutes and units is facilitated by the Extension Service, spreading new information to the users (farmers).

These requirements contributed to the decision to organize extension activities, beginning in 1994 in the framework of PHARE programme, aiming to train future extensionists by help provided by Extension Services from United Kingdom, Austria, France and Denmark (Sin, 1998).

According to the Government Decision no. 676/1998, the National Agency for Agricultural Consulting (ANCA) was set up in 1998, coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture. ANCA was structured on 3 levels: central level (central management), district level (county offices) and communal level (local centres). The newly created organization represented the employment opportunity for experts of former agricultural cooperatives and state farms, such people having a very good professional education and

practical skills. ANCA began its activity with a staff of 1.200 experts with specific extension activities for farmers and also for training extensionists.

After 2005, extension activities were affected by several reorganizations related to the setting up of Agricultural Chambers. Law no. 283/2010, regarding Agricultural Chambers, was adopted but it was continuously re-debated until today. Anyway, consulting services should be included as an independent department of Agricultural Chambers.

For example, in Teleorman County in 2008, 27 experts were working as employees at County Office and Local Extension Centres. During that year, 4.071 individual consultations were granted, 55% of them for subsidies, 19% for agricultural legislation, 11% for vegetables crops and the rest for field crops, animal breeding and horticulture.

Twelve demonstrative fields and 14 practical demonstrations were organized, and 172 farmers attended. In these meetings people discussed issues regarding subsidies, European funds, ecological agriculture, associative farms set-up, vegetable dripping irrigation, etc. Two to four months training courses on cereals, vegetables and animal breeding were also organized, with the attendance of 370 farmers, while other training activities included no less than 1.570 participants. At the same time, 17 radio broadcastings were carried out on various agricultural themes and a monthly Agricultural Consulting newspaper was printed in 1.000 copies each month, freely distributed to farmers.

Important extension activities are carried out by agricultural research institutes and units, whose purpose is to transfer scientific results to farms. Such activities include organization of demonstrative fields with varieties and crop technologies, short education courses and delivery of high biologic quality seeds of new Romanian cultivars.

As examples, the National Agricultural Research-Development Institute Fundulea and the Institute for Pomiculture Pitesti (Maracineni) established extension departments, developing intense activities for farmers. Also some research units, like Turda (Cluj), Secuieni (Neamt), Lovrin (Timis), Simnic and Dabuleni (Dolj), Iasi (Iasi), Bistrita (Bistrita-Nasaud), Buzau (Buzau) and Teleorman (Teleorman), carried out similar activities.

At the National Agricultural Research-Development Institute Fundulea, the extension activities consist in:

- annual organization of special (open) days concerning wheat and barley, sunflower and soybeans, maize and sorghum, forage plants, occasions when over 150 farmers participate and are informed about crop behaviour in the respective year. They visit demonstrative fields with new cultivars, cropping methods (period of sowing, plant densities, soil tillage, fertilization) and plant protection. After discussions, the farmers have the possibility to decide themselves about the varieties they will cultivate and the crop management practices they will apply the following year;
- organization of meetings with farmers to debate problems they are confronted with (varieties selection and seeds acquisition, agricultural works efficiency, weeds, diseases and pests control, fertilization and crop irrigation);
- individual consulting, where any farmer may come to the research institute or units to receive technical and marketing information and advice;
- delivery of Romanian varieties seeds obtained at research institute/units. This contributed to the extension of new genetic creations to farms. Annually, the institute offers 15-20 thousand tons of wheat, barley, triticale, maize, sunflower, soybeans, alfalfa seeds, etc. As the areas administrated by the institute has been much reduced (75%), the seeds produced do not entirely cover the quantities required by farmers, who demand more and more Romanian varieties seeds, which proved to be better adapted to Romanian environment conditions (Verzea, 2007).
- participation at radio and television broadcasting, as well as publications' production and distribution for farmers.

Within the latest years, farmers have become more and more interested in research results and they have been involved in more contacts with institutes/units, demanding individual consultancy and seeds produced by research organizations.

These facts justify the necessity to develop extension activities, carried out by both extension specialized departments and technical innovation generators, namely research institutes and units.

Agricultural universities organizing regional centres for consulting and companies distributing inputs in agriculture also develop extension activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Intensification and diversification of extension activities are imperatively necessary for Romanian agricultural production development.

Good results and increased farmers' interest in consulting activities represent a stimulus for improving extension departments and increasing staff number. This should represent a priority activity for Agricultural Chambers.

As agricultural research institutes and units have extensive knowledge, useful for farmers, it is necessary to develop and diversify information and know-how transfer.

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