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Rethinking the Dimensions of Farm Advice

Repenser les dimensions du conseil agricole

Die Dimensionen der landwirtschaftlichen Beratung noch einmal neu denken

Pierre Labarthe,
Lee-Ann Sutherland,
Christina Noble and
Heloise LeLoup

Agriculture and rural areas are central to the policy objectives of the European Green Deal. The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) encourages farmers and other actors to step up their efforts to enable and accelerate the necessary transition to a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system by 2030. The new CAP contains a number of policy reforms to support this transition including a new cross-cutting objective that calls for the intensification of knowledge exchange and the speeding-up of innovation in order to help farmers, foresters and other rural businesses to meet the

growing economic, environmental and social challenges they face. Functional and effective farm advisory services are a central element of this objective. All farm advisors are not only expected to play a key role in sharing new knowledge and ideas with farmers, foresters and other rural businesses, but also to engage much more directly with the co-creation, dissemination and embedding of innovation.

“ AgriLink a permis de repenser la définition même et les conceptions du conseil agricole. ”

This Special Issue presents findings from the H2020 research project AgriLink (Agricultural Knowledge: Linking farmers, advisors and researchers to boost innovation). The aim of AgriLink (2017–2021) was (a) to better understand the role of advisory services in farmers' decisions regarding various

innovation areas (technological, process, marketing and social); and (b) thereby enhance the contribution of farm advice to the sustainable development of European agriculture. The project was implemented in a specific policy context that was greatly influenced by i) the transition to the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the obligations upon EU Member States to 'more deeply integrate all advisers' within their strengthened Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKISs) (see Labarthe and Beck), and ii) the high expectations of the European Commission for H2020 projects to make tangible contributions to this process.

“ AgriLink hat es möglich gemacht, die Definition und die Ideen der landwirtschaftlichen Beratung zu überdenken. ”



The AgriLink consortium gathered researchers, innovation brokers and advisors working for public, private and farmer-based organisations. This multi-actor dimension was key to fine-tuning dissemination activities with the agenda of policymakers and of the wider farm advisory community.

AgriLink made it possible to rethink the very definition and conceptions of farm advice. In so doing, our ambition was to support a renewed understanding of farm advice, starting from farmers' perspectives. Our project had three main achievements:

1. New insights into the role of advice in farmers' decision-making on innovation adoption, based on our concept of microAKIS, that is knowledge systems that farmers personally assemble, including the range of individuals and organisations from whom they seek services and with whom they exchange knowledge.
2. A new perspective on the diversity of suppliers, with a focus on 'independent' versus 'linked' suppliers and how they contribute to hidden changes in AKIS, for instance through the back-office of farm advice.
3. Practical insights about where co-design methods can be applied to enhance the contribution of advice to achieving sustainability issues.

In this context, the aim of this Special Issue is to disseminate key findings of our work and thus contribute to evidence-based advisory policies that best fit the conditions for the sustainable development of agriculture. The first set of articles critically assess European farm advisory policies (Labarthe and Beck) in a context of increased pluralism of suppliers (see Sutherland and Labarthe, with a focus on 'independent' vs. 'linked' suppliers). The second set address the role of participatory methods in the design of advisory policies in this context (Potters *et al.* and Leloup *et al.*, on Living Labs and Transition Scenario workshops, respectively). A third set



Functional and effective farm advisory services are central to achieving the objectives in the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) that calls for the intensification of knowledge exchange and the speeding-up of innovation in order to help farmers and other actors meet growing economic, environmental and social challenges.

of papers presents findings about the transformations of farmers' needs and practices (and how they are met or not by advisory services), based on our concept of microAKIS (see the

“ AgriLink made it possible to rethink the very definition and conceptions of farm advice. ”

Parlons Graphiques by Madureira *et al.* for illustrations). These articles rely on evidence from field work implemented in 13 countries (Belgium, Czechia, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the UK). More than 1,000 farmers were

interviewed, making this the largest dataset on the relations of farmers to advisors recently collected in Europe. Articles highlight the microAKIS of different social categories with specific profiles: career changers (Zabko and Tisenkopfs), farm workers (Laurent and Nguyen) and droppers of innovation (Sutherland *et al.*). Overall, we argue that there is a need to learn from hard-to-reach farmers and workers and deploy innovative public policies and actors to engage with them (see the Point de Vue by Labarthe *et al.*). As a whole, the papers demonstrate the critical importance of making better use of advances in social sciences to advance policy design, particularly understanding the role of advice within social interactions, and to strengthen the inclusiveness of public policies dealing with farm advisory services.

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