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Should ‘Impartial’ Advice be a Priority of European Agricultural and Rural Policies?

Le conseil ‘impartial’ doit-il être une priorité des politiques agricoles et rurales européennes ?

Sollte eine ‘unabhängige’ Beratung eine Priorität der europäischen Agrarpolitik und der Politik für den ländlichen Raum sein?

Lee-Ann Sutherland and Pierre Labarthe

Recent EU legislation has encouraged Member States to ensure that advice provided to farmers utilising EU funding is ‘impartial’. According to the draft legislation from the European Commission (EC, 2018) for the new post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP):

Member States should set farm advisory services for the purpose of improving the sustainable management and overall performance of agricultural holdings and rural businesses ... These farm advisory services should help farmers and other beneficiaries of CAP support to become more aware of the relationship between farm management and

land management on the one hand, and certain standards, requirements and information, including environmental and climate ones, on the other hand ... Member States should integrate advisors within the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) in order to be able to deliver up-to-date technological and scientific



Farming organisations and cooperatives are often ‘linked’ to commercial companies: they undertake bulk buying of inputs in order to offer discounted prices to their membership; these farming organisations also offer advice on a range of topics.

*information developed by research and innovation ... [and] shall ensure that the farm advice given is impartial and that advisors have no conflict of interest'.
[Emphasis added]*

Measure 13 of the CAP (2023–2027) similarly identifies both ‘independent’ and ‘impartial’ advice as critical to the sustainability of agriculture. At a superficial level, this new requirement seems a reasonable and laudable aim: to ensure that farmers have access to advice which is unbiased, particularly by commercial interests. Farmers are key actors in addressing climate change and environmental degradation, and need access to information on the impact of their activities. However, in the context of a highly diverse agricultural knowledge and innovation system (AKIS) this directive is quite challenging to achieve in practice.

In this article we synthesise the results of an online workshop. The aim of this workshop was to engage international experts in critical appraisal of the issue of independent and impartial advice. It addressed which types of advisory provider

can – or should – deliver independent and impartial farm advisory services, and whether this is an appropriate objective for European policies. These results highlight major pitfalls for setting the boundaries of impartial and independent advice.

How the study was undertaken

The online workshop entitled “The ‘Quest for the Holy Grail’ of Independent and Impartial Advice for Farmers” was held in spring 2020 as part of the AgriLink project. AgriLink was a ‘multi-actor’ project involving academics, farming organisations, consultancies and agricultural advisory services from 15 European countries, who specialise in agricultural knowledge and innovation systems. An open invitation was disseminated widely to academics and advisory practitioners, particularly to the European Commission’s Standing Committee on Agricultural Research. In total, 24 people – primarily academics who had undertaken research into agricultural knowledge and innovation systems (AKIS) – took part. Just over

half of these participants were from the AgriLink project. Further participants were primarily scholars from Europe, but included academics from Australia, India and North America. The panel also included representatives of farmers’ unions, ministries of agriculture, NGOs and suppliers of advice. This panel represented a broad range of expertise but cannot be considered representative of all perspectives on the issues discussed.

“ Les participants à l’atelier en ligne ont contesté l’hypothèse selon laquelle l’accès à des conseils impartiaux était réellement une question importante. ”

Participants were invited to register and given access to a shared ‘Google Doc’ with questions to which they



Input and machinery suppliers are often the best source of up-to-date information on the products they sell.

could respond in writing. These questions were released gradually over a one-month period, to encourage participants to return to the shared document, read others' responses to their own statements, and make further remarks on earlier and newly released questions. An online webinar was organised for 4 June 2020 to share findings. For the purposes of the workshop, 'impartial advice' was defined as advice that was not biased towards a particular product or services, whereas 'independent advice' was defined as not associated with a commercial product supply company.

During this workshop, preliminary results of AgriLink's field work were shared with participants. AgriLink undertook the largest survey of European farmers' sources of advice in recent years, including interviews with 1,080 farmers and 170 advisory service suppliers. The farmers' sample was purposive – participants were selected who had adopted, dropped or not adopted specific innovations. Findings are thus indicative of trends rather than statistically representative. However, the methodology included measures to control for selection bias, by comparing the sample with official census through a set of variables (e.g. the Gross Standard Production of farms). The innovations studied emphasised potential sustainability transitions. Research began with a farmers' survey, to identify the types of advisory services they use when deciding to adopt (or not) an innovation, that is, the farmers' 'microAKIS' (Madureira *et al.*, forthcoming). MicroAKIS are knowledge systems that farmers personally assemble. A survey of these sources identified by farmers was then conducted in a subset of countries (Czechia, France, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom). We interviewed all of the types of advisors identified by farmer participants in the initial study as important sources (both advisors linked to commercial companies and independent advisors). This later data collection enabled analysis of the nature, organisational structure

and characteristics of services provided by these various actors.

“ Die Teilnehmenden des Online-Workshops stellten die Annahme in Frage, dass unparteiische Beratung tatsächlich ein wichtiges Thema sei. ”

Findings from the AgriLink project about the role of 'linked advisors' in innovation uptake

The article of the CAP 2023–2027 (Art. 13) on impartial advice could be interpreted as the most recent attempt to reinvest in farm advice in Europe, following a trend of privatisation and commercialisation (Labarthe and Beck, this issue). Since the mid-1980s, a growing number of governments and commentators have taken the view that professional advice: a) should be provided by the market on a commercial and competitive basis; and b) that this is the best way to provide the responsiveness and flexibility of service provision to address the rapidly changing needs of farmers (Kidd *et al.*, 2000). Most European countries have now switched from the direct provision of advice to farmers via government-funded organisations to various forms and degrees of commercialisation or privatisation (Table 1). However, these policies did not result in pure service markets where independent advisors would compete, but in much more complex configurations, using various combinations of public and privately funded services delivered by a diversity of public, private, farmer-based and other nongovernmental organisations. As demonstrated in Sutherland *et al.* (this issue), for many topics, particularly technological innovations but also new crop introduction and direct marketing, publicly funded bodies play very limited roles. With a

few exceptions, public private, farmer-based and other nongovernmental organisations offer advice to farmers in all EU Member States, but in different configurations. For example, Poland continues to have a strong, centralised publicly funded advisory service, whereas the public sector has completely withdrawn from agricultural advisory service provision in Denmark and the Netherlands (Knierim *et al.*, 2017). At European scale, privatisation has yielded an incredibly complex advisory landscape with a multiplicity of sources of information and advice for farmers to navigate, negotiate and potentially act upon. The shift to privatised advice has particular implications for the meaning of 'impartial and independent' advice.

An initial step in AgriLink was to develop an accurate typology of suppliers of advice.

As demonstrated in Table 1, many of these farm advice suppliers are not independent but 'linked': they provide professional advisory services jointly with other activities (including trade of inputs, outputs, machinery, digital solutions). Field research revealed a limited role and/or availability of truly 'independent' advisors in many of the contexts and case studies analysed (Madureira *et al.*, forthcoming). In contrast, in many cases, 'occasional' advisors (who do not have an official remit for advice provision, but do so on an *ad hoc* basis upon farmer request) and 'linked' advisors play a very important role in the knowledge sources assembled by farmers to support their innovation processes (their 'microAKIS'). Examples include: input suppliers, nurseries and seeds suppliers, machinery dealers, high-tech companies, bookkeepers, etc. Figure 1 below reveals the diversity of suppliers interviewed in AgriLink. It is not possible to claim our sample is representative as there is no official census of advisors in Europe. However, we selected advisory suppliers based on farmers' interviews and aimed at covering the

Table 1: A typology of farm advice suppliers based on the commodity (service and product)

		Who owns/controls the advisory supplier?			
		<i>Public sector</i>	<i>Farmers</i>	<i>Civil society</i> (NGO not controlled by farmers or by private firms)	<i>Private capital</i>
What do the suppliers provide (or sell) to farmers?	Only advice and training	Extension organisations	Chambers of agriculture, rings, associations	NGOs, charities	Private independent consultants/firms
	Advice and Higher education or research	Universities, vocational schools	Applied research institutes	Charities	Private research institutes, R&D companies
	Advice and Digital Tech	Extension organisations	Chambers of agriculture, rings, associations	NGOs, charities	Private independent consultants/firms, SMEs, start-ups...
	Advice and Bookkeeping or other services	Extension organisations	Chambers of agriculture, rings, associations		Bookkeepers, banks
	Advice and machinery		Rings, cooperatives		Private companies
	Advice and supply of inputs or purchase of outputs		Farmers' cooperatives		Private firms and retailers

Source: AgriLink Deliverable D4.2 available at: <https://www.agrilink2020.eu/work-packages/wp4>. (Labarthe *et al.*, 2021).

diversity of suppliers identified by farmers. The figure reveals the huge diversity of types of suppliers, and the important share of 'linked' advisors (bars in orange shades) compared to 'independent' advice suppliers (bars in blue shades).

Some of these actors were integrated into former CAP measures (e.g. accredited within the Farm Advisory System regulation) but it can be very difficult to assess how far they could be identified as 'independent', because of their multiple roles (e.g. farmers' cooperatives that sell inputs to farmers and/or own a consultancy subsidiary company). Moreover, AgriLink research found that in some of the focus regions where the survey was implemented, there was a critical shortage of organisations which solely provided advisory services. Organisations providing advice typically had multiple, often commercial roles.

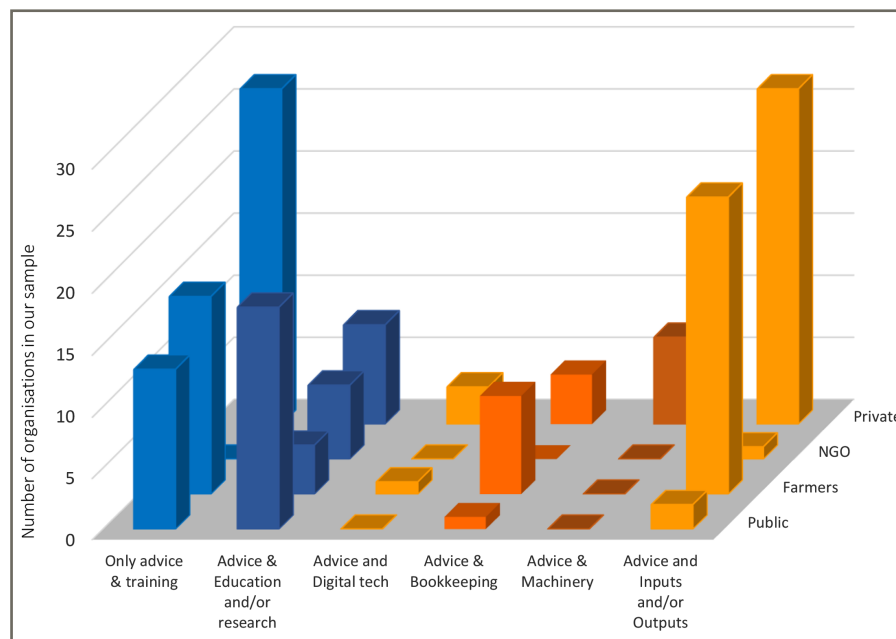
AgriLink results show that 'linked' advisors provide services that have very comparable features with services of 'independent' advisors. These similarities include the main method used (with a preference for one-to-one advice,

Figure 2) and proportion of staff engaged in back-office activities (Figure 3).

In other words, it is very difficult to differentiate between 'linked' and 'independent' advisory services based

on the features of the services they deliver. We presented these perspectives to the international experts who participated in the online workshop to open the debate on 'independent and impartial' advice.

Figure 1: A typology of farm advice suppliers interviewed in AgriLink based on who controls suppliers and the services or inputs they provide



Note: X-Axis distinguishes the types of services or inputs provided to farmers. Y-Axis distinguishes between who controls the organisation. Z-Axis indicates the number of organisations surveyed in each type. Source: AgriLink advisory survey, n = 170.

Outcomes of the online workshop

Is 'partial' advice a problem? Online workshop participants discussed the assumption embedded in EU policies that impartial advice was actually an important issue. Negative experiences with partial and linked advice were primarily attributed to input supply companies, who typically do not receive state supports.

Input companies often manipulate/influence farmers to boost sales of their own products. In fact, they have a range of activities to promote their products. While it is good for them, they need to do it, but it is not necessarily in the interest of farmers.

Workshop participant, India

Even so, some participants argued that long term relationships between advisory suppliers and their customers built trust:

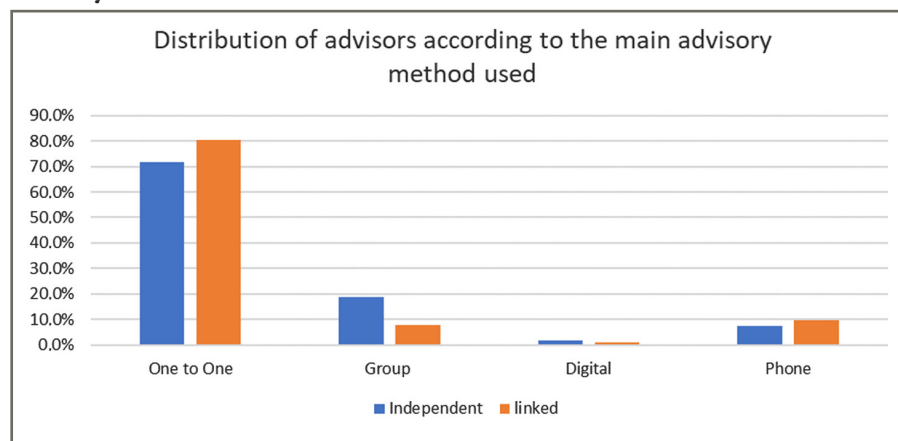
The most important advice for a farmer is often not impartial, but it is from a trustworthy source where there is a relationship that has been built over several years. ... they may be selling something but if the advice is unreliable the farmer will not return. Someone with a piece of paper indicating a certificate, might be independent but will the advice be reliable? The simple reality is that they will need to gain the trust and build the relationship with a farmer first before they are accepted as a legitimate and reliable source of advice.

Workshop participant, UK

Input suppliers are often the best experts on their particular products or technologies, and how these products can be expected to work in different situations. Some input suppliers are able to offer 'guarantees' or compensation if products do not work as expected, offering a form of insurance for their advice:

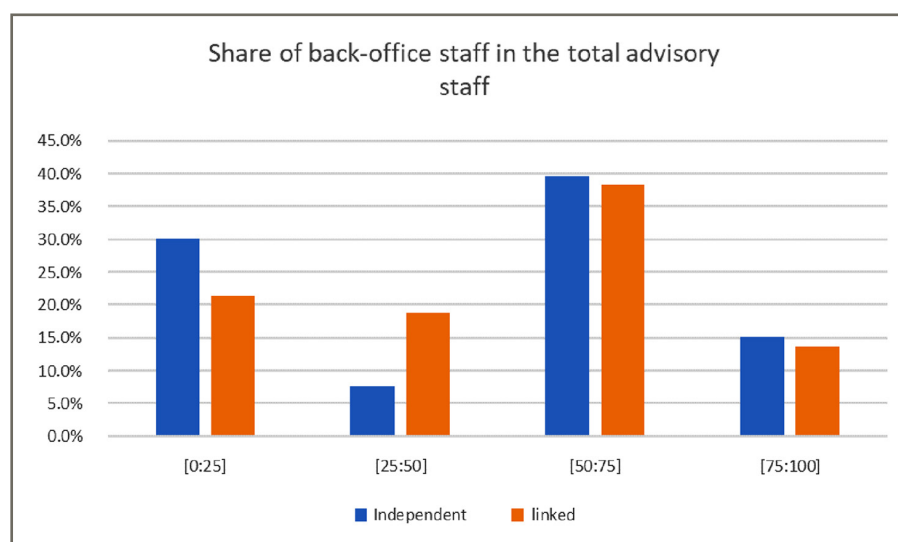
For example, farmers were purchasing 'bundled' services. The amount of nitrogen that was prescribed for a given corn seed in a given location was linked to

Figure 2: Distribution of advisory suppliers according to their preferred advisory method



Source: AgriLink advisory survey, n = 170.

Figure 3: Distribution of advisory suppliers according to the share or resources allocated to back-office activities



Source: AgriLink advisory survey, n = 170.

weed control prescriptions. Purchase of this suite of inputs carried an informal warranty provided to the farmer by the agrichemical dealer and/or the sales representative of the input firms. If the crop was disappointing, the farmer would receive some credit in the form of discounted inputs in the following year. These were long-term relationships and risk was shared through these relations.

Workshop participant, USA

Overall, the online workshop participants agreed that the trust held between farmers and suppliers was more important in farmers' choices than the apparent independence or impartiality of the advice. This is

supported by academic literature (e.g. Sutherland *et al.*, 2013), and by empirical research in AgriLink showing how trust relations between farmers and 'linked' advisors developed.

What is impartial advice? Does it exist?

Input suppliers and other commercial companies have a clear emphasis on product sales. Online workshop participants stated that the supply of advisory services has become so complex and fragmented in many European countries that it can be difficult to accurately identify the affiliations and links between advisors and commercial interests.

The heterogeneous development of advisory services across Europe has led to fragmented availability of advice on particular topics. Participants in the

online workshop argued that public advisors providing or selling only advice, who might typically be considered as more impartial, are very rare in many contexts:

In France, this is the debate at the moment. There will be a new law to have a strict separation between the commercial activity of pesticide trade and the activity of advising on plant protection. Whereas this law can be seen as going in the good direction, it raises many issues and debates. First, in certain French areas, it's not easy to find such advice, as, due to a decrease in public investments, most advice is provided by firms or farmers' cooperatives which incorporate pesticide sales in their activity. Moreover, many other actors might have an indirect interest in farmers' using pesticides or inputs (e.g. agri-food industry for technological quality of commodities).

Workshop participant, France

Key organisations providing farm advice in many European countries, such as farmers' cooperatives, are very hard to position in terms of 'impartial' or 'independent' advice. Farming organisations and cooperatives undertake bulk buying of inputs in order to offer discounted prices to their members; that is, there is a direct commercial relationship between these agricultural advisory organisations and commercial companies. These farming organisations also offer advice on the use of the products offered by commercial input supply companies. Advice is also supplied directly to farmers by purchasers of their commodities, in order to ensure adherence to procurement standards.

In addition, as one participant pointed out, all advice suppliers have an agenda of some form. 'Independent advisors' still need to meet their company's business objectives in order to stay in business;

charities have agendas for the advice they offer (e.g. improving agri-environmental actions), as do publicly funded advisory services, which have a mandate to address particular societal interests:

I would argue that [advice suppliers] should be separate and unaffiliated from their own financial interests, whatever these may be. This isn't limited to their attachment to commercial companies. One of the big issues with agri-environmental grants in the UK is that farmers pay advisors to write the grants [applications] for them – this gives the advisors a strong incentive to put in applications which are likely to be successful, but are as little work for the farmer as possible i.e. these are not necessarily best for achieving the desired environmental outcomes. Particularly when we're looking at public goods, we need to look at how the advisor is incentivised.

Workshop participant, UK

Independent advisors may not be impartial; they often have a vested interest in particular outcomes. In addition, being apparently independent from industry does not necessarily ensure that advisors will emphasise public benefits and societal issues in the advice they provide. Moreover, some cases were reported where private independent consultants relied heavily on pesticide and seed companies to renew their back-office (e.g. to provide information and training on new inputs and standards).

How can we manage the inevitability of 'partial' advice? A need for public policy to ensure the transparency of farm advice

Farmers can and will continue to seek advice from whom they see fit. Nevertheless, several participants suggested that a step that governments could take to

promote trust and boost impartiality amongst recipients of EU funding for advisory service provision was to increase the transparency of advice. Some countries achieve this by requiring advisors to sign declarations, or restricting employees of private companies from providing publicly funded advisory services.

In Estonia, the publicly funded individual advisory services cannot be provided by advisors who are employed by companies selling farm inputs (fertilisers etc.). The [legitimate] advisors have personal certificates, that they are competent. The forestry advisors are encouraged to sign the independence declaration that they work according to the needs of the client.

Workshop participant, Estonia

This is the approach that further countries (e.g. France) are aiming to take, but the entanglement of input suppliers with the farming organisations which provide advice make this problematic. Options for addressing this included maintaining or launching registers of accredited advisors and a clear monitoring of suppliers of services, not only at the level of individual advisors but also at the organisation level. In that respect, the European Regulation about 'Farm Advisory Systems' (see EC, 2010), which required all Member States to establish and maintain a Farm Advisory Service was seen as an important first step. Requiring advisors to demonstrate their professional competencies through certification was also an option, as was ensuring life-long learning of advisors through ongoing accreditation processes. Advisory services could also be made accountable for the solutions offered to their clients – a relationship already in action for some.

The lack of 'back office' support for advisory services is well established in the academic literature (Prager *et al.*, 2016). This is particularly true for public goods, where there is limited research funding available to conduct

applied research to underpin academic practice, and to transform scientific findings into practical actions. Investment in this area was thus considered important by workshop participants:

There should also be public investments in back-office activities to guarantee the production of reliable and relevant evidence, through the maintenance of a database about results of field experiments, networks of demonstration farms, knowledge engineering to synthesise and translate academic knowledge into practice, etc.

Workshop participant, Greece

Well evidenced advice and transparency

Examining the issue of impartial advice demonstrates the heterogeneity and complexity of agricultural advisory service

“ Online workshop participants challenged the assumption that impartial advice was actually an important issue. ”

provision in the European Union. New EU policies to address issues of impartial advice are well-meaning and address a legitimate issue. It seems reasonable to prioritise independent advisors in allocations of public funding. However, it is clear that mandates to enable impartial advice are not straightforward. Independent advisors are not available in some regions; neither are apparently independent advisors necessarily impartial. In certain contexts, restricting policy measures to

‘independent advisors’ can even risk disrupting the provision of useful advice through farming organisations and other trusted providers who seek to offer multiple benefits to farmers. However, there is still an important role for public policies. The online workshop participants agreed that improving the quality of advice offered to farmers is an important policy aim. As described in the Parlons Graphiques article (Madureira *et al.*, forthcoming), privatisation has not led to a noticeable fee-for-service market for independent advice. Workshop participants suggested that policy attention is better placed supporting well-evidenced advice, increased transparency, and ensuring qualified professionals are available to the full range of EU farmers, rather than on independence *per se*. How best to achieve ideals of impartial advice remains an important topic for debate.

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Summary

Should 'Impartial' Advice be a Priority of European Agricultural and Rural Policies?

 Recent EU legislation will require Member States to ensure that farm advice which is supported by EU funding is impartial. In this article we present the findings of an online workshop which asked whether this should be a priority for European advisory supports within the Common Agricultural Policy. The answer was 'no'. At the workshop, results of AgriLink were presented for discussion with international experts. These results highlighted major pitfalls for setting the boundaries of independent advice. Participants from Europe and North America agreed that 'impartial' advisors providing or selling only advice are rare in many contexts. Key organisations offering farm advice in many European countries, such as farmers' cooperatives, often have established relationships with commercial suppliers. Being apparently independent from industry is also not sufficient for ensuring that advice addresses societal issues. Farmers' choice for advice is more likely to reflect established trusted relationships than the 'impartiality' of the advisor. Workshop participants instead argued that policies should focus on increasing transparency (revealing vested interests); investing in 'back office' activities to ensure that advisors have access to reliable and relevant evidence; and ensuring that the full range of EU farmers have access to professional advice.

Le conseil 'impartial' doit-il être une priorité des politiques agricoles et rurales européennes ?

 La récente législation de l'Union européenne exigera des États membres qu'ils veillent à ce que les conseils aux agriculteurs soutenus par un financement de l'Union européenne soient impartiaux. Dans cet article, nous présentons les conclusions d'un atelier en ligne qui demandait si cela devait être une priorité pour les aides européennes au conseil dans le cadre de la politique agricole commune. La réponse a été négative. Lors de l'atelier, les résultats d'AgriLink ont été présentés pour discussion avec des experts internationaux. Ces résultats ont mis en évidence des écueils majeurs pour fixer les limites d'un conseil indépendant. Les participants d'Europe et d'Amérique du Nord ont convenu que les conseillers « impartiaux » fournissant ou vendant uniquement des conseils sont rares dans de nombreux contextes. Les principales organisations offrant des conseils agricoles dans de nombreux pays européens, telles que les coopératives agricoles, ont souvent établi des relations avec des fournisseurs commerciaux. Être apparemment indépendant de l'industrie n'est pas non plus suffisant pour s'assurer que les conseils abordent les questions sociétales. Le choix des agriculteurs en matière de conseils est plus susceptible de refléter des relations de confiance établies que 'l'impartialité' du conseiller. Les participants à l'atelier ont plutôt fait valoir que les politiques devraient se concentrer sur l'augmentation de la transparence (révéler les intérêts acquis); investir dans des activités de « back office » pour garantir que les conseillers ont accès à des informations fiables et pertinentes; et veiller à ce que l'ensemble des agriculteurs de l'Union européenne aient accès à des conseils professionnels.

Sollte eine 'unabhängige' Beratung eine Priorität der europäischen Agrarpolitik und der Politik für den ländlichen Raum sein?

 Die jüngste EU-Gesetzgebung verpflichtet die Mitgliedstaaten, sicherzustellen, dass die mit EU-Mitteln geförderte landwirtschaftliche Beratung unabhängig ist. In diesem Artikel stellen wir die Ergebnisse eines Online-Workshops vor, bei dem die Frage gestellt wurde, ob dies eine Priorität für die europäische Beratungsförderung im Rahmen der Gemeinsamen Agrarpolitik sein sollte. Die Antwort lautete "Nein". Auf dem Workshop wurden die Ergebnisse von AgriLink zur Diskussion mit internationalen Experten vorgestellt. Diese Ergebnisse zeigten wichtige Fallstricke für die Festlegung der Grenzen der unabhängigen Beratung auf. Die Teilnehmenden aus Europa und Nordamerika waren sich einig, dass "unabhängig" Beratende, die nur Beratung anbieten oder verkaufen, in vielen Kontexten selten sind. Die wichtigsten Organisationen, die in vielen europäischen Ländern landwirtschaftliche Beratung anbieten, wie z. B. landwirtschaftliche Genossenschaften, haben oft Beziehungen zu kommerziellen Anbietern. Auch die scheinbare Unabhängigkeit von der Industrie reicht nicht aus, um sicherzustellen, dass die Beratung auf gesellschaftliche Fragen eingeht. Die Entscheidung der Landwirte und Landwirtinnen für eine Beratung spiegelt eher etablierte, vertrauensvolle Beziehungen wider als die "Unabhängigkeit" des Beratenden. Die Workshop-Teilnehmenden sprachen sich stattdessen dafür aus, dass sich die Politik auf die Erhöhung der Transparenz (Aufdeckung von Eigeninteressen) und auf Investitionen in "Backoffice"-Tätigkeiten konzentrieren sollte. Letzteres soll sicherstellen, dass die Beratenden Zugang zu verlässlichen und relevanten Erkenntnissen haben. Des Weiteren soll die Politik sich darauf konzentrieren, dass allen EU-Landwirten und Landwirtinnen ein Zugang zu professioneller Beratung gewährleistet wird.

summary