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development.**

Reforming the agricultural/rural advisory service: experience from Poland

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This paper offers some observations about reforming the Agri-advisory Service for the agriculture and rural development based on Poland’s experience in the period of EU accession and EU membership. The observations and lessons learnt are based on personal experience gained first-hand as a practitioner who has been and continues to be involved in Poland’s the Agri-advisory Service that operates under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. .

It is important to note that the paper is not intended to be a comprehensive review of Poland’s Agri-advisory services, and the reforms currently under way, but rather an introduction to some of the key developments that appear to be ‘making a difference’ in the opinion of practitioners most directly involved. The paper is offered as background and inspiration for further discussion and investigation. References are included for those wishing to follow-up and understand in more detail the challenges of of reforming the Agri-Advisory Service in Poland in the context of European Union reforms in this area, and how these could be overcome.

The paper and opinions presented here are not the official position of Poland’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development nor of the Agricultural Advisory Center in Minikow.

INTRODUCTION

Agri-advisory services must be continually adapted to changing needs, opportunities and circumstances, if they are to be effective in supporting (rather than constraining) agricultural and rural development. Poland became member of the EU in May 2004. In the period preceding EU membership and over the years of EU membership, numerous attempts have been made by successive governments to reform the Agri-advisory services. The motivation has been twofold:



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- To enable Poland to take full advantage of EU-funds dedicated to agriculture in rural development in successive programming periods (pre-Accession, 2004-2006, 2007-2013 and 2012-2018, 2014-2020)
- To help Poland’s agricultural sector adapt to, and take advantage of, the changing market realities of the food sector, which must compete in an increasingly global economy.

The current Government has embarked on a new round of reforms targeting the Agri-advisory services. Their assumptions, purpose and aspirations are discussed in what follows.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT SITUATION WITH RESPECT TO POLAND’S AGRI-ADVISORY SERVICES?

The current agri-advisory system in Poland comprises 16 decentralised agri-advisory centres (*Ośrodki Doradztwa Rolniczego – ODR*), which operate at the level of each of Poland’s 16 Voivodeships¹ and also a Centre for Agri-Advising (*Centrum Doradztwa Rolniczego – CDR*), which acts to co-ordinate and continuously improve the system as a whole. The ODR centres implement their advisory activities via 312 Poviats² advisory teams, which employ over 3000 advisors who work directly with farmers and people living in rural areas.

Currently, the activities of the ODR centres are dominated with provision of support to farmers in relation to helping them make maximum use of EU support (Common Agricultural Policy), which in practical terms means drawing down annually approx. 4.5 billion euros of support for the Polish economy. This is the amount of money that will be transferred in the years 2014-2020, with support of the agri-advising centres, to farmers and rural residents in the form of direct payments and projects realized through the Program for Development of Rural Areas (*Program Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich – PROW*). This is an important success of the agri-advisory system as it operates today. But the consequence for agri-advisors has been a focus on helping with applications for funding support rather than advising on technological processes and agricultural production practices and methods, including helping to improve practice

¹ Constitutionally, Poland is divided into 16 self-governing regions called voivodeships, which have their own elected regional governments, and play a key operational role in programming and distributing EU structural funds in line with their regional priorities. These are reflected also with in national priorities, which in turn take into account regional priorities in national programmes. Creating national and regional development programmes, and subsequently implementing them, is a negotiated process, which is adjusted and reviewed on an ongoing basis.

² Administratively, Poland is divided also into 380 Poviats regions, which include 314 rural poviats and 66 cities implementing the responsibilities of the Poviats. The Poviats are also self-governing with elected governments. A further independent administrative subdivision is that of the local government (*gmina*). There are 2.479 of them.



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through application of the latest research results, which is the traditional focus of agri-advisory services³.

Poland’s agri-advisory system is in line with the aspirations articulated for this area in European Union reports, such as those produced by the Standing Committee of Agricultural Research (SCAR)⁴ and in-country research in this area.⁵ According to these reports agri-advisory services need to be providing support that is timely, adapted to needs, reliable and simple in form. This is important as in many situations, farms take advantage of advisory services only sporadically, without appreciating their value.

Agri-advisory services are defined as ‘deliberate interventions aimed at creating better conditions for introducing changes’ which are carried out by entities that have the means and the competencies in this regard’. Farmers have many opportunities to receive significant, and often valuable, advice and support from agri-business. But they need also to have access to independent advice and support, which is not packaged as part of product sales.

A consequence of low agricultural profitability is that for many farmers paying for agri-advisory services is low on their list of priorities. The issue of payment is further complicated by the requirement to pay for agri-advisory services in accordance with regulations, which demands filling out forms. As filling out forms requires a great deal of time, time and resources for advising on improving what farmers actually practice is inevitably limited.

In Poland, as in many other EU member states, the education profile of EU farm managers is improving. In fact, the trend indicates that there will be fewer farmers but they will have higher qualifications. In 2005, 79, 5% of European farm managers relied on practical experience as their main qualification, while in 2013 this percentage had decreased to 69%. In countries like Germany, France and the Netherlands, this percentage was around 30% in 2013. In Ireland, in this same period (2005-2013), the percentage of farm managers relying on knowledge based practical experience only, decreased from 69% to 50%. Farms that are managed by better skilled professionals, achieve higher yields and profits.⁶

To date in Poland, as in most EU member states, agri-advising has focused on helping farmers become business managers and the emphasis has been on larger forms geared to increasing the scale of their

³ Wiatrak A. (2013), Doradztwo rolnicze w literaturze – stan badań krajowych i europejskich [w:] Publiczne doradztwo rolnicze wobec wyzwań przyszłości i oczekiwań mieszkańców wsi, pr. zb. pod red. J. Kani, L. Leśniaka, Kraków [in Polish – Agricultural advising according to the literature – research on Poland and other European countries].

⁴ “New approaches on Agricultural Education Systems”, Strategic Working Group (SWG) of the Standing Committee of Agricultural Research (SCAR) on Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems 2017. Download: https://ec.europa.eu/research/scar/pdf/akis-3_end_report.pdf

⁵ Publiczne doradztwo rolnicze wobec wyzwań przyszłości i oczekiwań mieszkańców wsi Podsumowanie wyników badań i dyskusji tematycznych w czasie konferencji w Krakowie (18-20.03.2013) [In Polish: Public Agri-advisory systems in the face of future challenges and expectations of rural residents – summary of research results]. Download: <http://www.cdr.gov.pl/krakow/2013/komunikat.pdf>

⁶ Heanue, K. and O’Donoghue, C. (2014) The Economic Returns to Formal Agricultural Education, Teagasc. Oakpark. ISBN: 978-1- 84170-613-9. The report is available at <http://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2014/3374/index.asp>



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production. Agri-advising for small or part time farming has been limited, and there have been no specialised programmes in this regard.

WHAT IS THE IDEAL OR DESIRED SITUATION WITH RESPECT TO AGRI-ADVISORY SERVICES?

The aspiration is to have in place an agri-advisory service that can offer comprehensive advice to farmers, while ensuring high quality advising on solving individualised problems. The advisor must take into account all aspects of operating a farm, from how modifications of individual production practices can affect overall profitability through to detailed technical advice. Advice on markets, marketing and on increasing profitability of the farm have always been in demand and this will continue to be the case in the future.

Private sector independent consultants or advisors associated with agri-business (sale of agricultural products, machinery, raw materials, fertiliser etc) have been the main providers of advice on technology and technological processes. Public advisors need to fill this gap, which means increasing the technical and technological competencies of the agri-advisory service.

As the challenges for farmers become more complex and more complicated, agri-advisors must also be sensitive to the way agri-systems are evolving and prepare for the changes that will inevitably arise with respect to what they are offering in terms of advisory services and also in relation to changing relationships with farmers, who are their clients. Linear advising based on providing information to the farmer will always be important, but it is important to note that farmers do not react well to consultants or advisors telling them what they should be doing.

The advisory of the future will be geared more to listening, with an ability to work out compromise solutions that support the farmer in applying those solutions in ways that take into account the specific needs, circumstances and opportunities of a given farm and also the aspirations of the farmer. This is important as farmers develop their own capability to find technical information and to exchange and share information and experience with each other on a B2B basis. This development does not devalue the role of the agri-advisor. On the contrary, agri-advisors are needed to provide a wider perspective on possible solutions. They must be able to respond to questions such as – how does this solution play out in other farms? What is the best strategic approach to reorganising farm operations? Is this technological solution the most appropriate for my farm?

The agri-advisor of the future will be more of a coach or mentor than a source of knowledge or information, who plays a key role in coordinating or enabling collaboration with others and helping to work out innovative solutions.



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Farmers are increasingly looking to learn from other farmers (rather than from agri-advisors), through the application of ICT technologies. It is important to note that farmers have always sought to learn from other farmers, but technology facilitates direct and ongoing contact in ways which do not require an intermediary (in the past this has been an important role for agri-advisors). Other farmers are seen as important learning resources, because they must deal with their farming operation as an integrated whole. Many agri-advisors are not able to provide this as they are focused on specific topics or technologies, and are often not farming practitioners themselves.

Given that both farmers and agri-advisors are using ICT tools in an increasing variety of ways and digital data collection, processing and exchange is growing in importance, a whole new area of concern has emerged – making the best use of ICT solutions that are available and also designing new solutions that are tailored or customised to the needs, circumstances and opportunities of individual farmers and their farming operations. The emergence of ICT opportunities leads to redefining agri-advising as a more ongoing and interactive process, which has little to do with the transfer of information or knowledge, and everything to do with co-creation and innovation that is driven by need and opportunity.

According to the European Commission, post-2020 agri-advisory services are to be based on partnerships for innovation that link together research & development, business, farmers and other stakeholders in the food system.

Adapting and developing the Polish agri-advisory system must take into account the specific nature of what is needed – a more multi-disciplinary approach, but also the current legislative framework, which defines agricultural advisors as those who provide advisory services in accordance with the 2004 law on agricultural advisory organizations in Poland (Dz. U. 14 czerwca 2017 poz 1149 – Journal of Laws 14th June 2017, item 1149)⁷ and in the Decree of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of 2nd May 2014⁸ relating to “accreditation of entities providing agri-advisory services” pursuant to “farmer and forest owners as beneficiaries of advisory services” covered by the Programme for Development of Rural Areas for the years 2013-2018. Pursuant to these regulations, the agri-advisory system does not include representative of dealers or commercial entities.

It is important to note that agri-advisory services provided pursuant to regulations differs from advisory services provided by commercial entities in that it provides advice in the public interest (as opposed to the private interest of commercial businesses) and in the interests of the farmer-clients. Advisors associated with business entities are driven by market realities, and so

⁷ Dz. U. 2017 poz 1149. Download: https://static1.money.pl/d/akty_prawne/pdf/DU/2017/0/DU20170001149.pdf

⁸ <http://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/du/2014/573/1>



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will always ensure the product or service they are selling is a priority, even when it is not in the direct interest of the farmer..

It is safe to assume that from the point of view of public policy on rural and agricultural development this differentiation between private and public interest is significant. This is especially the case, when it comes to small and medium farms, which are in a weaker position when it comes to competing in the market place as they are less able to make use of new technologies and production methods than large commercial farm operations. This imbalance is further exacerbated by the way the agri-advisory system is organised. In small and medium farms, it the farmer who manages operations, and in the market place, the small or medium farm is *de facto* a small enterprise, which depends on the skills and knowledge of the farmer acting as manager. But in such cases, the focus is seldom on some form of specialised productions, which is not the case in larger commercial farms, which have specialist staff at their disposal and management systems for identifying, implementing and evaluating tasks. Thus, aside from market barriers (linked primarily to lack of access to capital), small and medium farms are the weaker partner when it comes to working out new solutions with commercial and trading firms. They require special support from the public agri-advisory system.

HOW TO MOVE FROM THE CURRENT TO THE DESIRED SITUATION WITH RESPECT TO THE AGRI-ADVISORY SERVICE?

Moving from the current to the desired situation requires dealing with the following issues:

- Addressing completely new needs that have little or no precedent, that require innovation and market response.
- Adapting to new types of farmers (new farmers, urban farmers, part-time farmers), who are not easily accessible
- Increased use of digital information, including collection, processing, sharing, and deployment of ICT tools and applications.
- Merging R&D with agri-advisory services.
- Providing holistic or system-wide agri-advice that is comprehensive in nature, i.e. links together technological processes, agri-practices, organizational with market issues, but at the same time providing individualised problem-solving



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- Accessing wider competencies, knowledge and skills from agri-advisors in Poland and internationally, via international networks, IT and other platforms.

From an EU perspective, the key instrument for addressing the issues listed above and others that will have to be faced in moving to a new form of agri-advising is the *European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI)*⁹ and the *European Innovation Partnership on Water*¹⁰, which according to the European Commission have already proven their value in mobilising the agricultural sector for innovation.

EIP-Agri has funded, and continues to fund, multi-stakeholder projects and is networking across Europe to make new knowledge and competencies more widely available, inspiring and enabling technological, organizational and market innovations.

A key part of the process of moving agri-advisory services in EU member states into a new role demands not only that different actors or stakeholders collaborate with one another more effectively, but also that their own individual performance and competencies improves significantly as agri-advisors, technologists, agricultural training specialists, educators, researchers, farming organizations educational systems, researchers and farmer organisations. This new form of collaboration is to be in place in all member states, and is often referred to as the *Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS)*. Different member states are approaching the challenge in this regard – there is no ‘one-size fits all’ model that his being promoted. Each Member State must develop its own approach, which is matched to in-country needs, circumstances and opportunities.

According to a recent Communication of the European Commission on the Future of Food and Farming:

“A modern CAP should support the strengthening of farm advisory services within the AKIS systems. This should become a condition for the approval of CAP Strategic Plans. This should be facilitated by strengthening the support for peer-to-peer exchange, networking and cooperation amongst farmers including through Producer Organisations ("POs"), as these can be important vehicles of knowledge sharing, innovation as well as cost savings for the farmers on a very regular basis”.¹¹

⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture/>

¹⁰ <https://www.eip-water.eu/>

¹¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, The Future of Food and Farming, Brussels, 29.11.2017 COM(2017) 713 final, https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/future-of-cap/future_of_food_and_farming_communication_en.pdf



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WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO MOVE FROM THE CURRENT TO THE DESIRED SITUATION?

The new challenges facing the agri-advisory service mean that there must be increasingly differentiation of the diversity of actors now involved in agricultural and rural development. Advisory activities will be increasingly complex and multi-layered, requiring additional knowledge, skills and competencies. Such skills and competencies are insufficient today. To deal with this, the task for the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is to:

- redefine agricultural advising,
- change the profile and skill set of agri-advisors,
- provide additional training
- recruit new advisors with new perspectives.

From the point of view of long term strategy for the country, the re-orientation of agri-advising is of crucial importance not just in relation to rural development. Agri-advisory services need to be seen as opportunities for overcoming barriers to development that divide the centre and periphery. The orientation must increasingly be linked to small towns, which at one time played the role of economic development centres. In such situations, where rural incomes are low, supporting entrepreneurs and business development based on resources available from local farms provides an important mechanism or instrument for working out innovative solutions to increasing rural incomes, and so, combat depopulation and out-migration of people from rural areas.

Moving forward, the main beneficiaries of agri-advisory services will be farmers and farming entrepreneurs, who are seen increasingly as opportunities for innovation on themes, which are seen today by many in Poland as being outside the scope of mainstream of agricultural production. Challenges related to working with farmers to respond to climate change, assure environmental protection, improve biodiversity conservation and other challenges are becoming public policy priorities, and are also of increasing importance to consumers.

The reforms and restructuring now being proposed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development will affect over 3000 who work in the public agri-advisory service, who are also of key importance for delivery of public policy results in the field of agriculture and rural development. The current organizational structures and processes are not sufficient and must be changed in the following ways:



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- **Reorienting institutions** – introducing new structures and processes that will enable advisors to play more of a broker role when it comes to working out and implementing effective solutions, especially in operations at the interface of research & development and practical on-farm advisory services.
- **Building new capabilities** – introducing new and more interactive forms of advising based on co-creation, that involve working with beneficiaries or clients as active partners in working out solutions that respond to local, differentiated and individualized needs, opportunities and constraints.
- **Providing new learning opportunities** – introducing new forms of learning that build up knowledge, skills and competencies of agri-advisors on an ongoing basis through the use, for example, of ICT platforms for accessing specialist advice or for diagnosing problems and working out possible solutions with other agri-advisors

LESSONS LEARNT

Analysing the past and future of the CAP from the perspective of knowledge transfer and innovation related to the changing role of agri-advising services, it is important to note that Poland has not operated in isolation. There is close collaboration with the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic) and some states of the EU-13 (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania and Latvia)¹².

A key development in 2017 was the formulation of a common position that underscored the importance of supporting the transfer of knowledge and innovation to the agricultural sector in order to help farmers deal more effectively with the challenges they must now face. The position is that:

“the absorption of knowledge and innovation, especially in Central and East Europe, requires much improvement. As a consequence, activities in the II Pillar in this area need to be significantly strengthened to expand, deepen and accelerate implementation of new knowledge in practice, especially in relation to innovative system and technological solutions”

The key lessons are as follows:

- **Charge fee for service** – to the extent possible, it is important to build a market for public agri-advisory services as this builds value in the eyes of the client. In most EU countries,

¹² Personal communication with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development 2017



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agricultural advisory services are today fully or partly commercial. Prior to EU accession, the primary advisory system was free of charge - financed from the state budget. On accession in 2004, the system was modified to allow fees to be paid for advisory services. Fees were payable on results, where a farmer (client) secured a grant or subsidy from EU or public funds. The level of fees was determined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and set at a level significantly lower than commercial options in this area. The fee for service system proved an effective way of drawing down UE funds in agricultural and rural development sectors.

- **Profile advisory services in response to needs and opportunities** – in Poland, the agri-advisory system became skewed towards drawing down EU funding, neglecting the growing need for advisory services on agri-practices, technological processes, organizational matters, marketing strategies, financial services and other areas of interest. The need is to move to a more comprehensive approach that focuses on filling the gaps in the agri-advisory landscape rather than duplicating what is available from the private sector. This is not easy, but the advent of new ICT technologies and capabilities on the part of both advisors and clients to use them, offers new opportunities in profiling public agri-advisory services. A key role is to identify and prepare also for future opportunities based on trends and changes that are taking place in food systems in Poland, in the European Union and internationally. One such opportunity is that of local food systems, based on shortening food supply chains, which define new opportunities and roles for subsistence smallholders, as well as small and part-time farmers.
- **Standardise services** where possible – A good example is Post-registration testing (PDO) for seed varieties is an example of a very successful system that has been functioning in Poland for several years. PDO is the variety testing system operating on regional level to help Polish farmers to select the most adapted varieties, suitable for different agricultural conditions and for requirements the processing industry. The PDO system was officially introduced in 2000 (Seed Act, 2000) and operates in all the regions of Poland under the guidance and co-ordination of the State Crop Research Institute (*Centralny Ośrodek Badania Odpian Roślin Uprawnych - COBORU*)¹³.
- **Invest in ICT – ICT platforms**, applications and other services are growing in importance. To take full advantage of new opportunities, it is of key importance to invest in building capability for digital data collection, processing, sharing and using among agri-advisors, farmers and other actors involved in creating and strengthening food systems.

¹³ http://www.coboru.pl/English/Badania_PDO_eng/badania_pdo_eng.aspx , <http://seedtest.org/en/about-ista-content--1-1011.html>