



Recommendations for an higher quality of agronomic advisory

WP3 – Improve the methods - Outcome n°11

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**LEONARDO DA VINCI TRANSFER OF INNOVATION
CONVENTION: 2011-FR1-LE005-24388**



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IMPORTANT MENTION

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SUMMARY OF THE DOCUMENT

English

Increasingly and often under time constraints, agronomic advisers must ensure a variety of tasks related to technical, economic, regulatory, environmental or social fields. They should be up to date on the basic knowledge and technological innovations, but also be in control of their relations with farmers and other stakeholders. Finally, they must manage their time and maintain their 'internal support' system.

This document sets out the main results that we have learned from surveys, experiment and workshops conducted during the New Advisers Leonardo project. We propose to enhance the training of agricultural advisers in making maximum use of existing resources and educating advisers according to their training needs. Beyond the differences between countries, the development of professional skills comes through enriching existing training, applying systematically 'learning by doing', strengthening the support provided to each adviser by his/her team and his/her manager, integrating advisers into networks of expertise, using the opportunities offered by different European initiatives and transnational projects.

French

De plus en plus, un conseiller agronomique doit assurer, assez souvent dans l'urgence, une diversité de tâches relevant des champs technique, économique, réglementaire, environnemental ou social. Il doit être à jour sur les connaissances de base et les innovations technologiques, mais aussi maîtriser ses relations avec les agriculteurs et autres parties prenantes. Il doit enfin gérer son temps et entretenir son 'support interne'.

Ce document formule les principaux résultats que nous avons tirés des enquêtes, expérimentations et ateliers conduits dans le projet Leonardo New Advisers. Nous y proposons de renforcer la formation des conseillers agronomiques en utilisant au maximum les ressources existantes et en sensibilisant les conseillers à leurs besoins de formation. Au-delà des différences entre pays, le développement des compétences professionnelles passe par l'enrichissement de l'offre de formation existante, la systématisation du learning by doing, le renforcement du support apporté à chaque conseiller par son équipe et son manager, l'insertion des conseillers dans des réseaux de compétence, l'exploitation des opportunités offertes par les dispositifs européens et les projets transnationaux.

German

Ein landwirtschaftlicher Berater muss heutzutage viele Aufgaben im Zusammenhang mit anbautechnischen, wirtschaftlichen, rechtlichen, ökologischen oder sozialen Fragen gleichzeitig bewältigen. Er/sie soll ein solides Grundlagenwissen und eine profunde Kenntnis der anbautechnischen Innovationen mitbringen, aber auch Beziehungen mit Landwirten und anderen Beteiligten gestalten können. Schließlich muss er/sie die eigene Arbeitszeit einteilen können und seinen/ihren "internen Support" mobilisieren und pflegen.

Dieses Dokument beschreibt die wichtigsten Ergebnisse, die wir aus Untersuchungen, Experimenten und Workshops im „New Advisers“ Leonardo-Projekt erarbeitet haben. Wir schlagen vor, für die Bildung von landwirtschaftlichen Beratern die vorhandenen Ressourcen maximal zu nutzen und die Berater für ihre Ausbildungsbedürfnisse zu sensibilisieren. Unabhängig von den Unterschieden zwischen den Ländern kann die Entwicklung der beruflichen Fähigkeiten über die Verbreiterung des bestehenden Bildungsangebots, die systematische Anwendung von "learning by doing", die verstärkte Unterstützung für jeden Berater/jede Beraterin durch sein/ihr Team und seinen/ihren Vorgesetzten, die Einbindung in Kompetenz-Netzwerke sowie die Nutzung der Chancen welche die Europäischen Einrichtungen und transnationalen Projekte bieten, vorangetrieben werden.

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Introduction

The Leonardo project "New Advisers" ran for two years in eight member countries of the European Union: surveys and observations, experimentation on advisory tools, testimonies and meetings involving partners and stakeholders from different countries, etc.. Through these many activities, we approached the internal and external supports that need advisers and trainers in agronomy.

Obviously this project is not enough for a comprehensive view of various situations, needs, resources, range of responses, which exist in Europe. However, we can point out some available levers for advisers, trainers and managers to continuously improve the quality of advisory services. Given the diversity of national situations, it is probably not appropriate to define a single standard of quality. However in every country, there are coping opportunities, useful to face new economic, sociological, regulatory, context.

In the following pages, we will discuss how to carry out suitable training for agronomic advisers and trainers. We will base on the needs and gaps expressed by the advisers themselves, and look for the best efficiency of training. That is to say, the best results by mobilizing the resources already in place: the motivation and experience of the learners, the support by advisory team, and the training organizations at national and transnational level.

I - The context of depth changes in agricultural advice

Basically, one farmer demands for technical reinsurance in order to solve immediately one difficulty encountered in one production phase, which may have a negative impact on the final result: e.g. a parasitic infection of the crop, or an emergence of weeds resistant to commonly used pesticides. This advice situation is relatively simple, on the mode:

Precise an urgent question	=>	Answer directly operational
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However, **the advice situation may be disturbed by a variety of external factors** related to the regulation (chemicals approved or not, cross-compliance, etc.), the economic logic (chemicals not approved for minor productions, etc.), societal concerns (food and environmental contamination, etc.).

For advisers themselves, diversity and even contradictions between requests can confuse their ability to know what to do, while they also may have to face budget cuts, lack of time, dual function (advice and control), lack of cooperation between colleagues and institutions. To manage more contradictions; advisers must show empathy, diplomacy, anticipation, etc.

Technical skills are the basis to work on, but relational/attitude skills deliver the tools to move forward and to induce change. These considerations explain that **advisers willingly express needs for support and training that go beyond the technical and regulatory knowledge.**

II - The needs of advisers and trainers

We will resume the answers of participants in workshops held in April 2013 in the different countries involved in the New Advisers Leonardo project.

To the question on the needs, they said:

Using a systemic approach

- Importance of putting things in a greater context to analyse and understand themselves*
- The adviser should take into account the complex environment of farmers*
- Holistic view and ability to carry on change*

- Help farmer to look at bigger picture and engage whole family*

Reconsidering personal qualities

- Importance of being positive and open-minded*
- Importance of own curiosity*
- Importance of ability to structure*
- Importance of being engaged*

Developing communication skills

- Importance of expressing oneself clearly*
- Importance of networking and exchanging personal experiences*
- Importance of communication*
- Paying attention to non-verbal signals*
- Need for greater assertiveness*

Assessing one's attitude to others

- Importance of being kind and of not judging*
- Importance of encouraging, reassuring and pointing out positive aspects/achievements*
- Importance of empowering farmers to be independent,*
- Accompany farmers but let them take decisions independently*
- Importance of trust between farmer/group and adviser*
- Collaborative work*
- Importance of transparency and simplicity*

Analysing one's position

- Need to work on the own posture, methodology etc.*
- Importance of developing an own way of reasoning*
- I realised that other advisers struggle with the same problems as me*

Giving weight to human dimension

- Awareness for the importance of "human relations" in advisory*
- Personal support is more important than technical expertise*
- Importance of empathy*
- Technical knowledge sometimes sets limits to work with some people*

Being innovative in terms of methodology

- Problem based learning*
- Importance of adoption of advisory approach to problem and situations*
- Formal approach to analysing a problem and finding a solution with the client*
- Ability to listen and empower*
- identify real long term issues as some farmers focus too much on present difficulties*
- Importance of change management*
- Possibility of doing unexpected things*

Keeping up-to-date

- We emphasised the importance for further training*
- Networking and continuous progress ability- the importance of incremental change*

III - Advisers' umbrella competencies

We have defined advisers' umbrella competencies as competencies which are ubiquitous for all agronomic advisers and which do not depend on the advisers' technical focus and which can be applied in all advisory situations, may it be adult education, advisory on integrated pest management or on cross compliance.

We divide the umbrella competencies into two main categories: technical and relational/attitude competencies which are linked one to another. Whereas the technical umbrella competencies comprise all aspects of advisory for which pure agronomic background knowledge is required, the relational/attitude skills comprise what is often referred to as “soft skills”: communicational, organisational, personal, social, pedagogic and methodological competencies:

Table 1: Adviser’s umbrella competencies

Technical competencies	Relational/Attitude competencies
1. Agronomic reasoning	1. Holistic view and carrying on change
2. Discerning what is at stake	2. Listening to and empower
3. Access to resources	3. Networking and continuous progress
4. Self-organisation and company interests	4. Autonomy, cooperation and foresight

From this very simplified table, according to specific situations, countries or organizations, it is possible to derive a list of assessable knowledge, skills and competencies, which should base training programs.

IV – Vocational training and further education of advisers should mobilize other resources

In a profession steeped in complexity, training actions alone cannot produce real change if they don’t work in synergy, i.e. they mobilize other resources (the learner him/herself, his/her organization, networks and stakeholders, etc..), which will prescribe, enrich, multiply the effects of training themselves. Some principles below can increase efficiency in a long time:

1. **Make that advisers and trainers are the first players of their own professional development.** The awareness of advisers on their need for training can collectively start through a workshop on skills such as those we held in April 2013 in the New Advisers project (see Outcome 9). Use as much as possible the pedagogy of "learning by doing", the "co-construction" (see Outcome 16b), the concrete problems from ground (see Outcome 1), the implementation without delay in the daily activity, the interweaving between technical learning and personal development (congruence of action - see Outcome 16a)
2. **Think the advisory team as an effective player in the training process,** the manager as a facilitator in the daily activities or in exchange of practices (periodic debriefing is widely practiced in some medical or social professions). To prolong its effects, the training may be effectively extended by a local tutoring, when tutors are recognized in their function (time, training and other supports).
3. **Promote integration of advisers and trainers in networking** concerning knowledge, tools and practices in advisory. Use existing networks (e.g. IALB, Endure, EUFRAS etc.) or create a new one (when local specificities or language barriers hinder too much).
4. **Embed transnational and trans-linguistic exchanges in training courses.** Existing training organizations (CECRA), and recognitions (ECVET - APL) must be a very positive factor. Otherwise, develop alternatives to existing formats, such as a master opened for experienced advisers (after 3-5 years of practice).

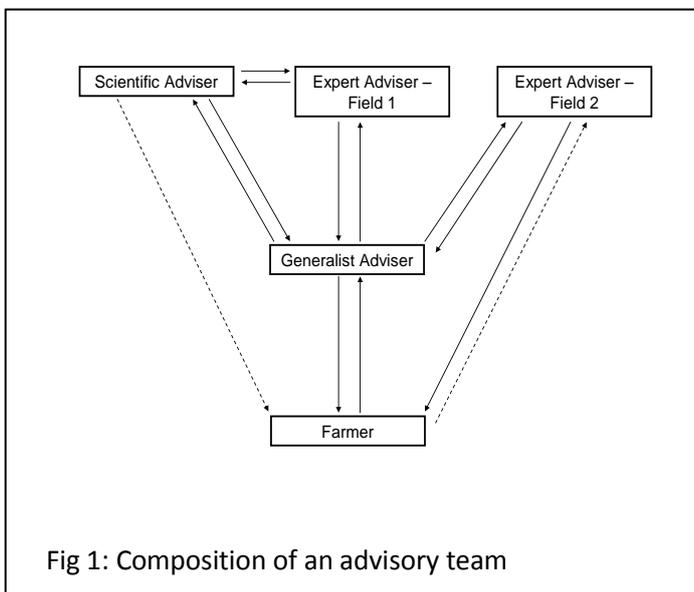
V - Provide personalized training to develop skills

The process of developing the skills and competencies which are required involves several subsequent steps:

- The first step to develop relational/attitude competencies is to become **aware of their importance in the daily advisory work**. The adviser must be offered the possibility to realise, in which aspects of his daily work relational competencies are involved, which skills are required to gain these competencies and in which aspects he could benefit from further developing them.
- In a second step it is crucial to offer **training on relational/attitude skills and competencies**, which takes into consideration both the personal need of the individual adviser and the background of his actual tasks.
- In the third step, advisers should be given the possibility to refine and deepen the skills they acquired according to their personality and to their personal needs. Moreover, the third step should involve a **continuous reflection on the personal competencies** and the possibility to adapt skills according to new or changing demands.
- The following steps take place in a **continuous process of strengthening internal support** (see Outcome 16a). The person aware of his/her own expectations, his/her gaps and margins of adjustment, can adjust his/her training strategy to the context, his/her team, his/her company, his/her customers, etc.

VI – An efficient team consumes and produces competences

In several advisory organizations, team-type uses different and complementary skills. Under the responsibility of a General Manager are grouped together:



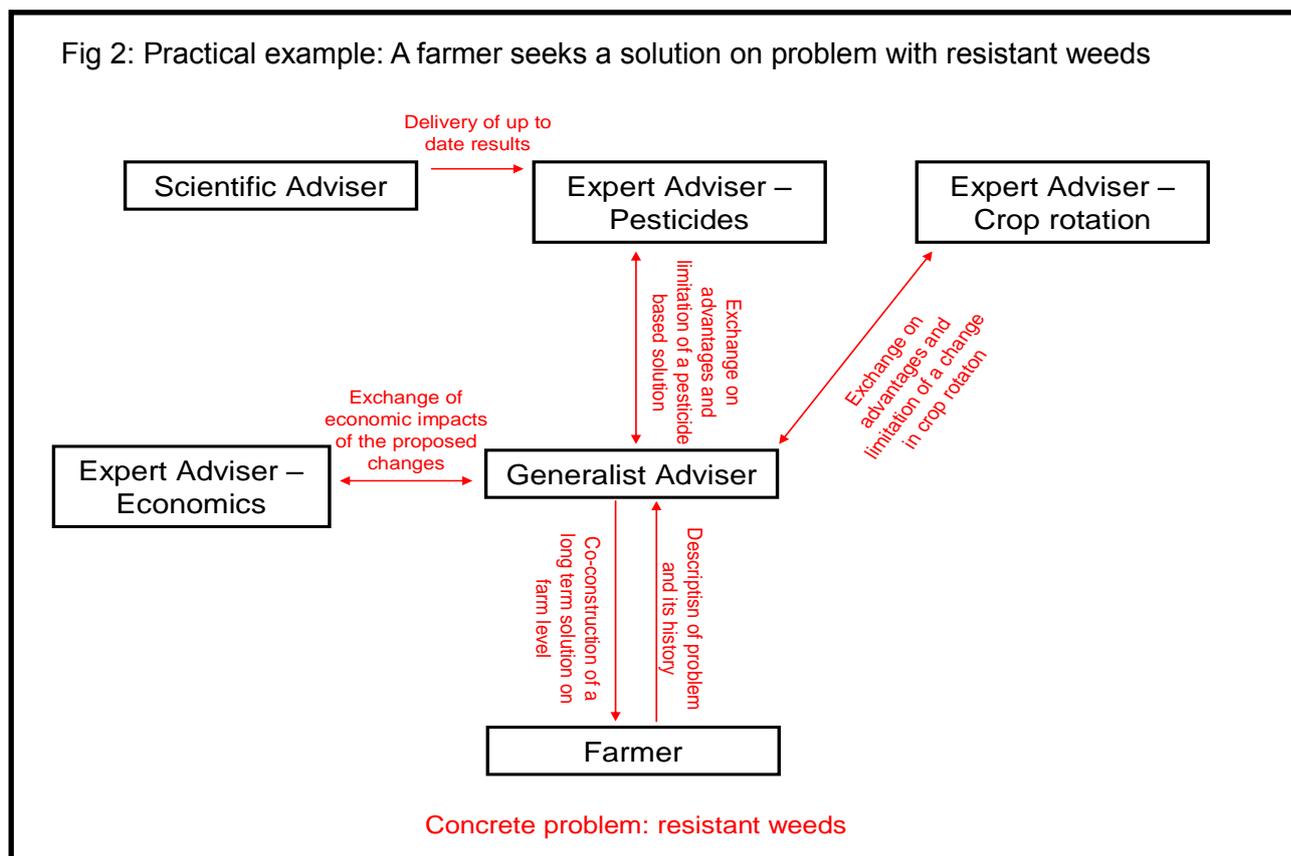
- **Scientific advisers** who are in charge of experimentations, field trials, management of on-farm trails, connection to science and industry, project management

- **Expert advisers** who are specialised in different technical fields and have “basic” relational/attitude skills, give answers on technical questions to farmers and colleagues

- **Generalist advisers** who are experts in long-term farm co-development and who have expert relational/attitude skills, analysis, process facilitating and networking competencies, strong connection to practice

□ Every team member has at least basic skills in management, networking, relational aspects, and a basic technical background, every member can rely on the others specific competencies in his/her expert fields.

□ For the team’s operation to be effective and the advice to the farmer to be good, one of the main adviser’s competencies is to **mobilise supports, his/her own resource, the internal network or external network**.



The adviser accompanies the farmer in his decisions, in the setting of focus etc., but lets him be the man behind the wheel. To do the work, he/she may have to **shift from technical short term questions to strategic issues** which influence the long-term development of the farm

The team operating requires a careful management of skills to:

- Prepare departures or absences, and anticipate future needs (new productions, new regulations, new audiences, new stakeholders, etc.)
- Maintain a sufficient core of common activities for the flow of information can be done on shared experiences.
- Use every opportunity to debrief (start or end of a project, unforeseen difficulty, back from training, etc.) to enrich the knowledge of each team member.
- Organize periodically (one or several times per year) a working session released of the daily pressure and let people talk about the job (presentation of an original experience, meeting with another team, change in environment, etc.)
- Encourage sharing of documentation, exchange of best practices, networks, etc..

VII - The construction of professional competence throughout the career

Regarding the standard requirements in an agronomic adviser's job profile, the standard education an adviser should have is based on a final degree in agronomy or related subjects. Some advisers have a more expert profile in one field, such as plant protection, dairy farming etc., whereas others have a more generalist technical knowledge. Nevertheless, all agronomic advisers have a technical background, which leaves them very well prepared for the tasks ahead and the technical questions that will arise in advisory situations. But a technical degree does not provide them the knowledge and the competencies to deal with all the advisory situations apart from mere technical questions. As the pure technical advisory is declining in

importance, whereas new forms of advisory such as group advisory and co-development are more and more implied, it is most important for agronomic advisers to be equipped with the abilities and competencies to deal with these forms of advisory. Moreover, non-technical skills become more important as not only advisory methods and tools are changing, but the role of the adviser is undergoing a change altogether. Coming from a person who provides expert knowledge, an adviser nowadays is more a manager, process facilitator, networker and communicator. Therefore, he should be equipped with “advisory” knowledge beyond of his technical knowledge. As there is a broad variety of different advisers and advisory services which have different tasks and thus different demands on specific advisory knowledge, a training on the job seems much more productive and useful than a mere theoretical training. When training on the job, the adviser can bring in his/her own experience in different advice situations, his/her needs, strengths and weaknesses and s/he can improve in the fields which are most challenging for his personal tasks.

As the training needs strongly depend on the experience an adviser already has, we propose three steps:

The first step is to set up a **tutor program especially for inexperienced advisers**. The idea is to provide inexperienced advisers with a tutor, thus an experienced adviser, for assistance and guidance. There should be different aspects to be considered related to this tutoring: The bases are regular meetings in which the inexperienced adviser can discuss and reflect situations and problems with his tutor(s). Moreover the tutor should have the opportunity to accompany the adviser on several occasions and at different steps in the advisory process to be able to show fields of development. At the same time, the inexperienced adviser should be given the opportunity to witness the tutor's approach in different advisory situations to receive new ideas and ways of thinking and managing. This tutoring should be provided to every new adviser for the first year. As the demands on this kind of training highly vary with the job profile and the professional and personal background of the new adviser, the tutoring should be set up locally, at best in the own company/institution.

The second step, which ideally should follow the tutoring as a second step to complete the formation as an adviser, is taking a **“master degree” in agronomic advisory**. The idea behind is, that this master training is based on a similar concept as the master degree of craftsmen. Thus, the master degree would be open just for advisers who have practical experience on the job. Within two years of training time parallel to the job, the advisers should gain refined competencies and deepened knowledge, mostly in mere “advisory aspects” such as communication, facilitation, conflict management, networking, co-construction, time management, new advisory tools etc. Thus, this master training could provide all advisers with a common standard on their competencies as advisers, independent of their technical specialisation and background. The advantages of such a master degree would be that the advisers are trained on the job and can improve their skills according to their day-to-day challenges instead of in mere theoretical studies. Based on their own experience, they can improve focused the fields in which they feel most insecure or which are most important for their individual job profile. The master training would thus ensure that each adviser personally benefits from the training. As this would significantly improve the quality of advisory itself, employers and farmers do benefit from a “master” adviser as well.

The third step is the setting up of **improvement peers’ groups**. Beyond tutorship, which opens to a kick and efficient start in the adviser’s career, and traditional training, experienced advisers need new training approaches to adapt their practices. Improvement groups are a powerful answer. Similar to what has been experienced by many consulting professionals, like business or life coaches, groups of peers bring a framework for advisors to share and exchange about their professional practices. Set on a regular basis (monthly if possible, quarterly at least), groups offer an opportunity to get feedback from peers regarding advising methods, change management, relationship with the farmers. Thus paves the way for efficient

improvement in actual advising situations. This community approach is still largely unconventional. Nevertheless, it appears the right answer to a need for experienced advisers to develop non agronomical skills. Indeed, many of them are reluctant to enter academic training sessions, which they feel too far from the field situations, or slightly insulting as regard to their advising backgrounds. In peer groups, one isn't in a "pupil" position: he brings to the other as much as he gets, and he feels comfortable to share difficult situations within the circle of experienced colleagues, thus developing non-technical skills.

VIII - The usefulness of a common European standard

To receive a high degree of comparability, we propose to set up master trainings in each European country, but to fit the trainings into a common European standard, which would not only ensure comparability but also an easier exchange of experts between the countries.

How could the common European standard be ensured while the training is set up and passed in the respective countries? The Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas (CECRA) provides a promising concept for this idea. (See Outcome 14). Within the CECRA framework, there are both compulsory and optional modules with defined contents, learning goals and a defined proof of competence. These standards had been set by a committee of IALB. Advisers who want to attain the CECRA certificate must proof competence in the compulsory modules, a set of the optional modules and they must submit a final thesis. The modules and thus the training are provided by certified module providers, which guarantee a common standard, even if the training is held in different countries.

This approach could be an interesting option for a European advisory master degree. Moreover, this approach is closely connected to the ECVET approach. ECVET aims to facilitate the validation, recognition and accumulation of work-related skills and knowledge acquired during a stay in another country or in different situations.

Conclusion

Adapting skills of advisers and trainers in agronomy will be different depending on the countries and organizations, but everywhere in Europe, it is possible to move forward thanks to new offers of training, awareness of the persons concerned, mobilization of existing resources, involvement of managers, etc.

The New Advisers Leonardo project showed the value of a transnational approach that allows going further and faster at lower cost. Other similar initiatives should be taken in the coming years by public or private collective actors for implementing new joint trainings, transferring methods and tools, sharing experiences. That will allow to partners reduce the impact of trial and errors, and develop with confidence methodological innovations and suitable professional skills.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

- ⇒ AP(E)L: Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning - in French: VA(E)= Valorisation des Acquis (de l'Expérience)
- ⇒ CECRA: Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas
- ⇒ ECVET: European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training
- ⇒ IALB: Internationale Akademie land- und hauswirtschaftlicher Beraterinnen und Berater