

*A European project
funded by Leonardo da Vinci
Transfer of Innovation*

Professional Farm advisers adapting to changes

Summary and Recommendations

European policies following 2013 could strengthen cross-compliance regulation and may substantially change Farm Advisory Services (FAS). From this perspective, some work on a transnational level was needed on adapting the skills deployed by agricultural advisory. New Advisers is a project which combines the goal of reducing pesticides, updating agronomic advice and training, and connects this to other disciplines such as ergonomics, agro-economy, sociology of organisations, etc.

The project explored the 'state of art' of pesticide reduction information and advisory resources across Europe. It identified advisory tools which could be transferred between partner countries, and evaluated the effectiveness of the tools in terms of resources, skills and competencies employed. The project also looked at the current skills base of advisers and ways to improve these skills in the future. The main findings are as follows:

Advisory systems across Europe

- *The EU should adequately resource national advisory systems.*
- *The EU should provide a pesticide reduction information repository.*
- *The EU should provide dedicated funding for regular knowledge exchange between advisory systems.*

National advisory systems

- *Access to relevant pesticide reduction information should be made freely available.*
- *A limit of a farmer to adviser ratio is necessary, as face to face advice encourages greater adaption and change in farming practices.*
- *Advisers need continuous professional development (technical skills and competencies related to attitude).*

Advisers

- *Effective advisory tools may require a shift in thinking from 'the expert' to 'the facilitator' of the solution*
- *Complex advisory requires constant improvement of relational/attitude skills and competencies*

Introduction

For farmers to maintain economic competitiveness, constant innovation and adaptation is needed. The role of an "efficient adviser" is to add value to a farming business by encouraging

change while linking the complex demands placed on farmers today such as: regulatory, environmental, food safety, financial, etc.

Farmers cannot successfully negotiate these demands by passively accessing information on these topics or accessing information from one perspective (agricultural retailer, agro chemical rep, or cross compliance adviser). A farm adviser (and farm advisory systems) must be more holistic and be willing to engage in all of these topics to help create a sustainable future for farmers, their environment and the food they produce. In the coming years, if farm advisory systems are to succeed they need to take an active role in each country to help farming businesses sustainably contribute to the overall economy.



Field visits can be a time for confrontation of different points of view and for learning agronomic reasoning

The *New Advisers* project looked at these complex areas and focused on better use of pesticides, and pesticide reduction where possible. The project collated relevant pesticide reduction information, tested a number of advisory tools which help capitalise on this information and assessed the skills and competencies used during advisory work.

The partner countries were selected to represent a geographic spread of the EU member states: Northern Europe (Germany, Sweden), Western Europe (Ireland, France), Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal) and Eastern Europe (Slovenia, Hungary). The range of

advisory services available across Europe was also represented: state funded services (France), private services (Sweden), established services (Ireland) and newly founded services (Slovenia). Large differences are evident in each advisory service where some are fully privatised, others are a mixture of state and private funding, others are mostly involved with education and others are only involved with fulfilling the requirements under cross compliance.

The project focused on three areas:

- A - Survey of pesticide reduction information and advisory resources
- B - Select and test advisory tools across all European partners ('learning by doing')
- C - Assessing and developing advisory skills

A - Survey of pesticide reduction information and advisory resources in Europe

The first part of this Leonardo project was to ascertain the 'state of art' of pesticide reduction information and advisory resources across Europe. The survey had a dual focus:

- *Collate a number of 'advisory problems' common across the partner countries*
- *Describe 'available resources' associated with these advisory problems such as: technical knowledge, accessible databases and research, alternative crop protection strategies etc...*

The results of the survey can be summarised as follows:

1. Pesticide reduction problems in the partner countries

The pesticide reduction problems identified can be expressed under the following headings:

- A lack of credible alternatives to pesticide use and a lack of information on existing alternatives to pesticide use
- A lack of information by pesticide users resulting in over-use and over-reliance of pesticides
- Over-simplification of cropping systems due to scale for economic and organisational issues
- Insufficient involvement of farmers in implementing regulations

- Insufficient involvement of advisers in the search for alternatives to pesticides

2. Pesticide reduction information/advisory resources in the partner countries

Over twenty online resources were identified and collated into a repository. Both technical (e.g. HGCA, Inra websites) and attitudinal (e.g. Resolia, Stephy, Endure websites) resources were identified. These resources should help advisers who have little or no technical support and managers who are designing advisory training programs. The results of the survey demonstrate that there is sufficient agronomic information available and that there is also attitudinal information available. However, it is clear that these resources are not well known to all advisers or that they may be difficult to translate or to use (e.g. may be in hard copy or copyrighted by the authors).

B - Select and test advisory tools across all European partners.

The second part of the project was to evaluate the 'transferability' of selected advisory tools across different European countries. The hypothesis of the test was that advisory tools could be effectively adapted by advisers (concerned with pesticide reduction/use) if:

1. adequate supporting material accompanied each tool; and
2. advisers were prepared to devote time and effort to understanding, learning and adapting the tool to their own situations

Three tools were selected; Discussion Groups, Clear Vision, and Problem Based Learning.

- **Clear Vision** tool (developed in France): face-to-face advice to take in account issues of the farmer and co-build with him an operational map for change
- **Problem Based Learning** (presented by the Swedish partner): collective and individual research for a better understanding of any problem-situation.
- **Discussion Group** (implemented on a large scale by the Irish partner): With groups of farmers who are able to co-build operational solutions and to practice the solutions in the field

A comprehensive manual was developed to accompany each tool with background material, working examples and supporting material. A methodology was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of a number of tools.

The test was designed for advisers (Trainers) to practically test the tools ("learning by doing") in a real-life situation and to assess their effectiveness to help farmers and students (Learners) cope with changes in pesticide regulations both nationally and at an EU level. To negate the effects of the differences between partner countries, it was important to have some commonality on which to base the tests. The Sustainable Use Directive of Pesticides 2009/128/EC provided a common base and allowed for the diversity within the partners in that the Directive contains elements of regulation, training and advisory.



[4 free video-tutorials are available on the web, explaining co-construction of advice with farmers \(See Endure website below\)](#)

Common difficulties emerged during the test and many revolved, in part, on the structure (and funding) of the advisory organisation:

- In several partner organisations, advisers and trainers found it difficult to include the tests in their daily activities and many attempts were necessary to succeed in testing the tools.
- Work habits and resistance to change: the systemic and participatory tools we tested require a change of the adviser's perspective. It took time and several explanations to achieve sufficient understanding of the tools and the test procedure.
- This behavioural change also happens when an adviser adopts a new tool or new logic. The adviser must re-evaluate their role. For example, being less of an "expert" and more of a "facilitator" in close contact with a group of peers may be a cultural and ideological challenge!

The main results can be summarised in the following:

- The three advisory tools transfer successfully across language, cultural and social barriers as all tools received favourable ratings from the learners;
- Face to face trainer to learner scored highest for trainer engagement/proficiency and is the most likely to bring about a change of practice on their farms. This has implications for the numbers of farmers per adviser and the adviser's ability to interact on different levels with the farmer.
 - Learners rated the one-to-one method (Clear Vision) as the one with the highest score for trainer engagement/proficiency.
 - Learners rated Discussion Groups as good and said the experience would bring about a change of practice on their farms
- Despite their favourable opinion on the tools tested, 40% of advisers and trainers say they would not re-use the tools, due to a lack of support in their own organisation. This surprisingly high percentage emphasizes the feeling of professional solitude expressed: absence of a real team, inadequate reassurance by managers, and limited training opportunities. Therefore this project recommends more support for advisers in their daily work; furthermore, support of farm advisory systems in public policies is required.
- The test was not uniformly applied in each partner country. This is crucial in our understanding of how advisory systems operate in the various EU countries. Reasons such as core purpose of the advisory service, funding model, adviser-client ratio, expertise within the service, training and support of advisers, etc. all played their part as to why more tests were not completed. It is therefore important for policy makers to recognise that advisory organisations must be supported adequately, since advisory systems are key for successfully reaching pesticides reduction targets.
- Partner countries repeatedly referred to a stronger adoption of tools if advisers received training and support. Partner countries also referred to difficulties of learning new skills directly from the internet without support. Policy makers should take note that countries with well-developed national advisory system e.g. France, Ireland etc., have a dedicated training/specialist/back-up function which appears to be very important when new tools/systems are being adapted by an advisory system.



Transnational exchanges in a farmyard during the project

C - Assessing and developing advisory skills

The third part of the *New Advisers* project was to assess the skills and competencies of advisers in partner countries. The new role of advisers must take into account economic, environmental and social sustainability when assessing the overall performance of the farm. The advisory role



Two advisers and a farmer explain the "Water Quality" actions led in their local area

becomes more important as innovation is not only technological but it requires the formulation of new practices for the farmer to suit local circumstances. Given these challenges, the advisers self-confidence, ability to connect, openness to change and behavioural plasticity become major assets.

The three tools selected and transferred to the participating countries were different and complementary with respect to the question of an approach to agronomic advice and training. Their synergistic effect resulted in the use of co-construction, the need for a systematic and

holistic approach of farming (Clear Vision), the redistribution of cognitive resources between partners (Discussion Groups) and the development of a proactive and participatory behaviour vis-à-vis the technical information (Problem Based Learning).

A study into the skills and competencies framework developed by CECRA (Certificate for European consultants in Rural Areas) was also undertaken and found that the structured approach of skills was consistent with findings in the survey as carried out by the *New Advisers* Project.

A survey and workshop was conducted in each participating country using a focused workshop gathering and collating the information. The following issues about agronomic and advisory training were explored:

- current training offered to agronomic advisers and trainers
- the importance of relational skills and competencies in advisory and training
- the importance that managers and employers should attach to the development of the skills and competencies of employees.

The survey also focussed on the range of tasks and the fundamental skills and competencies advisers must use in order to be effective and summarised them into three main fields:

- **Self-organisation:** Administration, Work / time management, Personal development and ability to give internal support;
- **Technical skills and competencies:** Technical / agronomic reasoning, knowledge of what is at stake and access to resources;
- **Relational attitude skills and competencies:** holistic vision, adaptability, listening to and to enabling others, networking and continuous self-progression.

CECRA

"Certificate for European Consultants in Rural Areas" is a competence development series, initiated by IALB (International Academy of rural Advisers) and implemented by the partner institutions for training of advisers in different countries. The certificate focuses on soft skills and competences needed in advisory work in agriculture and for rural development. At the same time it gives the possibility to follow the standardised modules on the job in different countries and fosters the transnational contact. There are nine accredited implementing partners, several hundreds of participants in the modules but not many certificates granted so far.

After a three-year pilot phase, CECRA becomes official in 2014.

www.CECRA.net

Survey and Workshop Findings:

- All advisers must have “umbrella” skills and competencies. These were divided into two main categories,
 1. Technical, and;
 2. Attitude (attitude being the soft skills) communication, organisation, personal, social, pedagogical and methodological skills.
- 90% of advisers rated working with groups, self and time management as important or most important. 80% rated solving complex problems on the farm as an important part of their role and 70% reported that they needed training in non-technical areas i.e. soft skills.
- Adviser training in Europe varies widely, some advisers do not get on the job training, some get occasional training while advisers from other countries receive regular on the job training.
- Advisers who received on the job training in soft skills useful, however sometimes the training was not connected well to the actual task of the advisers

Conclusions and Recommendations of survey & workshop

The job of adviser has become more complex, as budgets for agronomic advisory become tighter, less time is available to handle issues for the individual adviser, and additional tasks, mainly due to new regulations come into effect.

- **Advisers face complex decisions** where parts of technical and organizational responses are not known in advance. Advisers must rely on personal resources or “internal support” to help farmers to co-construct new cropping processes or cropping systems. This internal support helps in uncertain situations, by combining short and medium term, agronomic experience and human relations. Internal support is enriched by interaction with peers. This is why it is necessary to facilitate adviser networking and team activities.
- At the local or national level, **advisory organisations** should continually provide ‘foundations’ for their advisers. This support includes not only technical training, but also necessary soft skills training and resourcing in developing efficient work methods. Clearly defined objectives from the management of the advisory service are also essential.
- At **European level, a common standard of agriculture adviser training** is desirable to ensure quality training. We must continue to develop methods and organisations to share knowledge, concerns and experiences between advisers. The *New Advisers* project itself showed us how each participant was professionally and personally enriched by **contacts with peers** from other countries and other cultures.

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

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P03 Teagasc Agricultural and Food Development – Ireland

P04 Bayerische Bauernverband LandSiedlung bbv-LandSiedlung – Germany

P05 Hushallningssällskapet Väst – Sweden

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