

Policy Brief EU Access



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This is the fourth issue of the Policy Brief of the EU Access programme, a co-operation programme on sustainable agricultural supply chains in pre- and post-European Union accession countries. This programme started at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality of the Netherlands and is now running in co-operation with partners from Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Cyprus.

This quarterly Policy Brief intends to inform you about a specific theme that follows from the EU Access programme. A Newsletter is also published and informs you about new developments around the various projects of the programme.

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Transfer

The Transfer Project Network has been set up to make advisory systems more relevant and effective for small market-oriented farmers in the fruit and vegetable sector.

This Policy Brief is based on workshops and literature search. The purpose of Transfer is to explore and test alternative models for improving extension effectiveness for small farmers in the fruit and vegetable sector.

Which types of advisory systems are needed?

Basically, three categories of farmers can be distinguished in all countries: semi-subsistence farm households, very competitive big individual and corporate farms, and numerous small household farms with a market orientation. Advisory systems that support the last category of farmers in becoming more competitive should enable them to:

- Collaborate with other farmers in order to decrease costs of advisory services. A fundamental issue is that farmers have to build mutual trust to share information and experiences.
- Get access to good advice at a reasonable price. Good advice consists of a high quality solution that is appreciated by farmers and increases agricultural income. Advisors should also assist farmers in formulating their problems and offer them alternative solutions for solving their problems, rather than telling farmers what they should do.

- Fully participate and interact in the 'formal' agricultural knowledge and information systems in place. Relations between advisors, researchers, policy makers and farmers should be based upon equality and trust.

How are agricultural knowledge and information systems currently functioning?

The first year of the Transfer project shows that:

- Most frequently used knowledge transfer models for agricultural innovation are based upon one-way communication of information from research stations and policy makers to farmers. Some pilot projects organized small farmers in advisory circles or in study clubs, aiming at sharing and creating knowledge amongst farmers and with other stakeholders. In the Dutch context, only 20 per cent of all agricultural innovations are derived directly from formal agricultural research. The rest is derived from suppliers, agricultural magazines, internet and - most importantly - farmers themselves.
- Some non-market reforms and market-reforms aim at getting institutions right for improved advisory performance. Examples of non-market reforms are the decentralization of advisory services in Poland, the establishment of multi stakeholder platforms in charge of advisory policy formulation or monitoring their effectiveness (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic). Examples of market reforms are the introduction of the user-pay principle

for some advisory products (Poland) and cost-sharing principles, such as in the advisory circle project in Czech Republic. Most often, however, efforts are concentrating on training of advisors and setting up advisory accreditation and registration systems that give advisors access to public funds for advisory activities. Little learning takes place on the effects of the introduced reforms in terms of increased responsiveness to small farmers.

- National policies and advisory systems are being adjusted in order to comply with EU regulations. They do not consider the diverse information and knowledge needs that result from diversity in farm structure and livelihood strategies in each region. They are aiming at assisting farmers to get access to EU subsidies and do not have an answer to technological and marketing problems. Two parallel advisory systems are in place with very weak mutual linkages. The first one is the 'informal' system used by small farmers, the second one is the 'formal' system put in place by governments and EU.

Increasing the relevance and effectiveness of advisory systems for small farmers

The findings above do question the effectiveness of the existing 'formal' systems.

Advisors, researchers, policy makers in the 'formal' system should engage in a dialogue with small farmers, their organizations and other actors in the market chain. Relations should be based upon trust and upon recognition of the importance to share knowledge. This can be achieved in the following ways:

1. *Assess small farmers' access to advisory services.* Small farmers themselves cannot afford to pay for good quality advice. Free of charge advice often is not tailor-made. Assessing the accessibility of advisory services – both in financial and in quality terms - could be the first step. This requires participatory and interactive evaluation methodologies such as social audits.
2. *Experiment with participatory models for agricultural innovation.* Ongoing experiments with advisors who are facilitating farmer-to-farmer learning in groups should be encouraged in all countries. Other initiatives should focus on establishing a



dialogue between different stakeholders, starting with concrete problems that require joint analysis and problem resolution.

3. *Strengthen the facilitation skills of advisors.* Apart from training advisors on agro-technological issues, the accreditation programmes should focus on advisory skills and facilitation skills that enable the dialogue between stakeholders rather than one-way communication.
4. *Experiment with cost-sharing approaches.* The major challenge is to find the right match between free of charge services and full cost recovery services. Cost-sharing approaches do increase the influence of small farmers on the type and quality of advisory services provided.

Background reading material

- Dieuwke Klaver: Knowledge circulation and generation for small farmers in EU countries. Synthesis document, IAC, November 2005.
- CD-Rom: Knowledge generation and circulation: Innovative advisory approaches for small farmers in EU countries. IAC & FAO, Budapest, December 4-7, 2005.

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