



New knowledge networks of small-scale farmers in Europe's periphery[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 October 2016

Received in revised form 14 January 2017

Accepted 22 January 2017

Available online 20 April 2017

Keywords:

AKIS

Farm advisory services

Networks

New entrants

PRO AKIS

ABSTRACT

In this paper we assess the types of knowledge networks utilised by small-scale farmers in four case studies (located in Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom). We focus on knowledge acquired to inform three new activities being undertaken by study participants: agricultural production, subsidy access and regulatory compliance, and farm diversification (specifically agritourism). Findings demonstrate that the new knowledge networks are dominated by different forms of expertise: formal 'agricultural advisors' identified in the case studies primarily offer codified managerial knowledge through centralised networks, suggesting that state-funded services for small-scale farmers are largely embedded in traditional, linear models of knowledge transfer. Production and diversification knowledge is exchanged through 'distributed' and 'decentralised' networks, where a range of actors are involved across varying geographical distances. Findings highlight issues associated with the quality and independence of both 'free' and paid advice, as well as the importance of combining tacit and codified knowledge for credibility. In all four cases, we found that small-scale farmers utilise formal advisory services primarily for accessing subsidies (e.g. completing application forms), rather than acquiring production knowledge. The authors argue that by utilising the state funding allocated to advisory services for small-scale farmers primarily to enable these farmers to access subsidies, important opportunities for innovation by both advisors or farmers can be lost.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, small-scale farming has received increased attention in academic and political debates. The United Nations 2014 International Year of Family Farming in particular drew attention to family farms, including smallholder farming.

UNGA Resolution 66/222 affirmed that Family Farming and smallholder farming are important bases for sustainable food production aimed at achieving food security, and recognized their important contribution in providing food security and eradicating poverty in the attainment of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. (IFAD, 2014, p. 1)

La Via Campesina (2013) similarly maintains that small and medium-sized 'peasant' farms represent the economic and social backbone of European agriculture, basing their argument on research findings that the average European farm size is just 14 ha. Davidova et al. (2013) argue that there is an important

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 12th European IFSA Symposium, Harper Adams University, UK, July, 2016.

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role for small-scale farms in rural areas, alleviating poverty, supplying speciality foods to short or direct food supply chains, as well as contributing to biodiversity and other gainful activities in the wider rural economy. A [European Parliament resolution \(2014\)](#) similarly states that small farms play key roles relating to nature (such as maintenance of the countryside and biodiversity), society (through providing employment and reserve workforce for other sectors) and culture (through the preservation of traditions, and manufacturing traditional products), as well as creating favourable conditions for animal welfare. These contentions are supported by special provisions within the European Union's Rural Development Programme (RDP) to promote farm development and business diversification ([Wilkin, 2009](#)). These provisions include the Small Farmer Scheme and RDP funding to provide economic development advice to small-scale farmers ([European Commission, 2013](#)), in order to increase their commercial viability. The [European Parliamentary Research Service \(2014\)](#) estimated that enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007 tripled the number of small-scale and semi-subsistence farms in the EU, substantially increasing the impetus to address small-scale farming specifically in European policy.

Despite this recognised importance of small-scale farming, structural changes in European agriculture favour larger-scale farms ([Zegar, 2012](#); [European Commission, 2011](#)). Smaller scale farms not only lack economies of scale, they are more likely to be occupied by older, less business-oriented farmers ([Zagata and Sutherland, 2015](#)) and frequently represent semi-subsistence farms ([Davidova et al., 2013](#)), which function primarily as a buffers against poverty rather than as productive commercial businesses. Small-scale farms also lack the land base necessary to secure substantive loans for investment in farm development, an important barrier for new entrants (see [Sutherland, 2015](#)). Widespread privatisation of agricultural advisory services across Europe in recent decades has further disadvantaged small-scale farms: as [Kidd et al. \(2000\)](#) point out, private advisory services may disproportionately serve those who can afford them (i.e. larger scale farms). In line with this, [Labarthe and Laurent \(2013\)](#) argue that the dismantling of public extension services in Europe has disproportionately impacted on small-scale farms, making these farms less visible as clients for privatised advisory services, and advisors in general less responsive to small-scale farming needs. The obligation introduced by the European Commission for member states to establish Farm Advisory Systems (FAS) in 2003 (see [European Commission, 2015](#)), has not changed that emphasis, even amongst publically funded advisory services. A review of the FAS in 2009 found that the main beneficiaries were large-scale farms ([European Commission, 2009](#)).

The FAS review also identified an important trend in the type of information that is provided; it found that in 14 member states, advice on Cross Compliance was the sole focus of the FAS ([European Commission, 2009](#)). The review recommended that FAS advisors should go beyond helping farmers meet their practical obligations under cross compliance and explain how these obligations contribute to sustainable agriculture, provide access to advice on a broader range of topics, and enable establishment of new information networks ([European Commission, 2009](#)). These recommendations imply that the advice available through these services is primarily oriented towards regulatory adherence, rather than increasing understanding of the principles of sustainable land management and animal husbandry. There is thus a marked contrast between the FAS assessed in the report, and the historic role of state-funded agricultural advisory services in many European countries, of transferring knowledge on new scientific advances and technologies.

The FAS review implies a transition towards advisory services focused on 'managerial knowledge' (i.e. the knowledge and skills to manage resources, grants, legislation and bureaucracy, [Koutsouris,](#)

[2008](#)), rather than adoption of new technologies. This transition is one of a number of changes occurring in the advisory sector. In addition to privatisation, changes include the broadening range of knowledge topics in demand, reflecting the increasing diversity in products and specialisation of producers ([Klerkx and Leeuwis, 2008](#)). Numerous studies have also pointed to the growing disconnection between agricultural advisory services and scientific research (e.g. [Kania et al., 2014](#); [EU SCAR, 2013](#); [Van Crowder and Anderson, 1997](#)). A key issue is that privately funded advisory organisations cannot afford to undertake research directly, leaving advisors to provide standardised, potentially out-of-date information to small-scale farmers ([Labarthe and Laurent, 2013](#)). This disconnection is problematized as representing an important loss of innovation potential and up-take in the agricultural sector.

Although important, access to formal advice (through public, private or charitably funded professional advisors) represents only one aspect of contemporary agricultural knowledge systems. Social scientists have long since rejected the notion that linear knowledge flows from scientists to extension agents to farmers are the best way to ensure innovation in the sector ([Van Crowder and Anderson, 1997](#); [Chambers et al., 1989](#); [Dockés et al., 2011](#), [Röling and Wagemakers, 1998](#)). Indeed, [Garforth et al. \(2003, p. 324\)](#) points out that "an almost universal finding from studies of farmers' sources of information and influence is that 'other farmers' are their most frequently reported source". Recent research has emphasised that both local knowledge and scientific knowledge are important for achieving sustainability in agricultural systems ([Curry and Kirwan, 2014](#); [Kania and Kapłan, 2014](#); [Labarthe and Laurent, 2013](#); [Tovey, 2008](#)). Instead, innovation and up-take of new farming technologies or practices are widely accepted as resulting from iterative engagement in non-linear knowledge networks or systems. In line with this, recent literature emphasises the importance of advisors as facilitators of knowledge exchange within these systems ([Österle et al., 2016](#); [Cristóvão et al., 2012](#)).

In this paper, we focus on newly established knowledge networks of small-scale farmers. Integration into new networks for the purpose of gaining knowledge suggests active intentions to change farming practices, adopting new or established innovations. To ensure the assessment of new knowledge networks, the research focused primarily on new entrants to small-scale farming. Sustaining a cohort of new entrants is widely recognised as critical to the ongoing vitality and competitiveness of Europe's agricultural sector ([Sutherland, 2015](#)). New entrants in particular are expected to bring with them new ideas and skills which can be operationalised on their farms ([Regidor, 2012](#)). CAP measure 112 (2007–2013) specifically focused on establishing new farms, drawing on a budget of €2.84 billion from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development ([ENRD, 2014](#)).

The research is structured to address three primary research questions:

- What types of knowledge do small-scale farmers access when undertaking new activities?
- What types of network characterise different topics of knowledge?
- What is the role of formal advisory services in these new knowledge networks?

We also focus on three major knowledge topics: commodity production; access to subsidies and regulatory compliance knowledge; and business diversification knowledge (specifically agritourism). The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a conceptualisation of knowledge acquisition amongst small-scale farmers. We then present the methods underpinning the research, including an overview of the agricultural knowledge systems addressed in the study sites. We present findings in relation to

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